Legal Explosions

Struck from the rear, the Ford Pinto’s gas tank ruptured, consuming the passenger compartment with flames which fatally injured the driver and spread burns over 90% of Richard Grimshaw’s body. Six years later, an explosive $128.5 million jury verdict in compensatory damages, shook Ford and the laws of product liability.

Before a Santa Anna, Calif. jury, Grimshaw charged that Ford’s own testing had revealed the Pinto gas tank’s inadequacies, Ford choosing instead to ignore the findings, thus avoiding the additional $10 per car necessary to correct the weaknesses. In the wake of the February decision, U.S. history’s largest personal injury award, Ford asserted that the 1972 Pinto, defective in neither design nor construction, met all federal safety standards.

Ford’s million dollar headache afforded many manufacturers and insurers a forum for complaints that the trend towards huge awards to victims has rendered the laws of product liability a lottery for both insurers and injured parties.

The collective protest has expanded rapidly with the aggressive campaigns of several large insurance firms, employing $10 million worth of advocacy advertising, stating that generous juries will eventually pay for their decisions in the form of higher premiums. But the economic pressures of higher medical costs, a greater willingness of Americans to bring suit, a social sensitivity to the disabled victim and a hostility to the corporate defendant, will require more than $10 million to substantially shift public opinion.

While insurers battle with barbs depicting lawyers as “hired gunslingers,” playing on jurors’ emotions, plaintiffs’ lawyers fire back with the altruistic concerns of society: “It really works,” stated one lawyer, believing large punitive charges mandate that shoddy business practices be improved. On the sidelines, academic umpires maintain their traditional cool, claiming both sides have overreacted to the problem. Some suggest that infrequent large settlements merely provide the occasion for a spotlight more accurately directed towards overpayment of small claims. But court attempts to clamp down on advertisements meet with First Amendment rejections against restricting the right to influence legislation. Consequently, the battlefield remains scattered with gunslingers and profit mongers, now each forced to direct more carefully their weapons toward the nature of the problem.

X-Mas Eve Tragedy

Approaching the height of Christmas spirit, with books and final exams almost behind, two holiday eve disasters stunned the students and families of the University of Evansville and Providence College.

Season tickets were so scarce, rumor had it that they were fought for in divorce settlements. The pride of Evansville, the Purple Aces basketball team, was flying high. Coach Bobby Watson had joined the team and sharp shooting freshmen had been recruited. As the team boarded the DC-3 for the 70 minute flight to Nashville, the game against Middle Tennessee State University was eagerly anticipated ... but the excitement and the lives of the team members were snuffed out just one minute after take-off, as the plane banked left into the foggy night, crashing to the ground in an explosion of flames.

The bodies of all 29 people aboard, including the 14 members of the Aces, Coach Watson, the Assistant Director of Athletics, and two student managers, lay strewn amongst fuselage debris.

Flight 216 was the sixth in history to claim the lives of athletic team members, and the second to have wiped out an entire team. Investigators for the National Transportation Safety Board stated that the aviation disaster was the result of either engine failure or improperly stored baggage which could have thrown the plane off balance.

On the morning following the crash, over 1500 students crowded the University Chapel to pray and on Sunday, paid their last respects to the team at a memorial service in Robert’s Stadium. The remainder of the basketball season had been cancelled.

Providence city regulations require sprinklers, outside fire escapes, or smoke detectors to be installed in the rooms of all new dormitories. But the rules exempt dormitories that were built before the code took effect last year ... dormitories like Aquinas Hall, the largest woman’s dormitory at Rhode Island’s Providence College.

Vying for a $100 prize awarded for the best decorated room, students on the top floor hung holiday posters, tissue and crepe paper throughout the 120 ft. long hallway.

About 3 a.m. the paper streamers caught fire. Students on the lower floors, awakened by the alarm, rushed to safety below. But others, in panic, fled their rooms seeking the stairs now blocked by the inferno. Five women lost their lives in the corridor, two more students jumped to their death 40 ft. below.

Final exams were cancelled. The Dominican priests who run the College made preparations to visit the dead students’ families. The cause of the blaze was determined as possibly the small lamp used to illuminate a cardboard creche.
A New King, A Glorious Past

“We all go down eventually and this makes us sad, but you always have, for the rest of your life, the knowledge that you were a winner to the last, I want to go out a winner, I really do.” Muhammed Ali

Across the ring was a young, strong, fast fighter, with a crown to win and nothing to lose; Ali was looking at his own shadow.


All but the first two words were drowned in the tumultuous greeting of a new king, just as the silence before the verdict spoke of the anticipation of the passing of “The Greatest.”

Ali was a unique athlete, his lifestyle penetrating far beyond the boxing ring; draft resister, black muslim convert, Olympic Gold Metalist, the Louisville Lip. In defeat, as in his many victories, he sought the microphone once more. “I lost fair and square to Spinks, I did everything right, and I lost. I lost simply because Spinks was better, that’s all. It’s just another experience in my life, nothing to cry about.”

As a youth, it was courage and stamina which won him the Title from Sonny Liston. He was a dazzling, dancing fighter then. Against Ken Norton, he was a thinking fighter. But in February, he was an old fighter, the 36 year old body executing actions too many seconds after impulse.

Spinks, 24, after an amateur career which ended with the winning of the Olympic Light Heavyweight Gold Metal, as had Ali, fought only seven times as a professional when he met Ali in the ring, never having fought more than ten rounds. The Title required 15, the last five rounds taking the true measure of the contenders. The odds against the newcomer were so great, that only one Las Vegas betting shop would cover wages.

Ali talked and taunted as he always had in the early days, but rested longer on the ropes and gradually, without apparent concern, gave rounds away to Spinks. In the tenth round, Ali’s trainer Angelo Dundee observed that Spinks’ posture had reverted to the bobbing of an amateur, and counseled the Heavyweight Champion to “Take him out now.”

With the snake-like jab and sharp rights to Spinks’ head, he tried, but failed, grasping the quick dodging opponent, or missing altogether. Swinging for the knockout in the 15th round, all that was left to save Ali his Championship, the power was gone, and was absorbed by an equally exhausted Spinks. Unable to fight any longer, battered, swollen and beaten, Ali, still standing, accepted the final bell.

The following day, he left on a global journey, this time to Bangladesh, where he was to dedicate a sports stadium named in his honor. He left behind a new king, a crown he had relinquished, and a glorious past.
A Tale of Two Cities: 27,10

Dallas and Denver; a tale of two cities that ended in a close encounter for the Super Bowl; 27,10.

Denver Bronco fans were long suffering fans, as they watched their team flattened to the door mat of football history for 13 years straight. But then, like their pioneer ancestors, they struck gold; Division title; American Conference Championship; a birth in the Super Bowl. Sold out home games throughout the '70's, the result of fans and players with true grit, patience and tenacity, had paid off at last.

Back in Dallas, the story was just the opposite. Formed the same year as the Broncos, the Cowboys had been the most successful team in football history; 11 playoffs in the last 12 years; five National Conference titles; a Super Bowl Championship.

At the head of each team stood a coach; Denver's Red Miller, emotional in his first year out of the ranks of "assistant coachdom," Tom Landry; Stoic, stubborn, the only coach Dallas has known.

With reactions that characteristically reflected their cities, the Broncos were ecstatic, nearly berserk with the A.F.C. title, washing their victory in champagne and cheers, while Denver joined in the raucous celebration. In Dallas, players wasted no bubbly after their N.F.C. title, Dallas fans taking the latest victory calmly in stride, while beginning to reserve rooms in New Orleans.

The outburst in Denver's Mile High stadium after the Super Bowl was assured, was the beginning of a monochrome mania in Denver. Cars, trucks and city buses were repainted orange, the team's color. Sweatshirts, scarves, pins, Christmas trees, and even hair on otherwise sane heads turned up vibrant orange. One season ticket holder whose company had a contract to demolish a building in downtown Denver, painted the three ton ball on his wrecking crane bright orange and hung a sign on the side of the building with OAKLAND painted in huge letters. Hundreds gathered to cheer the destruction.

The successful Bronco season catapulted Denver onto the national sports map. It was a Cinderella story for the Mets of the Mountains, capturing the fancy of underdog rooters all over the world. Though in the end the Orange Crush only flirted with a National Championship, excesses of emotion were instantly excused by those who looked on and by those who now recall. No matter how often it may recur, Denver fans will turn out for each home game, that gold glitter of triumph shining brighter than ever before.
A Record 21-Inch Snowfall, The Worst Storm In 100 Years To Hit New England

Babson students were among the fortunate minority who looked upon the storm as a welcomed holiday. But for the majority of New England, February’s Blizzard of the Century brought a nightmare of death and destruction.

For 40 hours, coastal residents lived in fear of their homes and their lives as winds up to 110 m.p.h. and waves of 50 ft. slammed the Northeast. And then the situation in Boston began to worsen. The four ft. of snow dumped in less than two days left main roads impassable. For 100,000 people, two power blackouts cut off electricity as the storm raged. Never ending lines of snowbound residents stripped the few grocery stores open of food staples and then of almost anything edible. Not for another two days, when major highways were partially cleared, was the city restocked with food.

All public bus and private car travel was banned by Governor Michael Dukakis who appeared on television each day at 4 p.m. to extend the ban for an additional agonizing day, leaving thousands of motorists stranded in the city. A three-day bank holiday was declared, and as the money supply of many families began to diminish, stores were asked by public officials to begin accepting personal checks and IOU’s.

For five days the city and suburbs remained under house arrest, while all four-wheel-drive vehicles and trucks, 20,000 state workers, 4,000 National Guardsmen and 300 federal troops from Georgia, North Carolina and Texas combined forces to clear the snow. Their primary effort was to plow a runway at Logan airport to allow the Army to fly in additional front-end loaders, dump trucks and emergency generators.

Buffeted by the wind and waves, the famous Peter Stuyvesant, part of Anthony’s Pier Four Restaurant, was torn from its concrete pilings and destroyed as it slowly sank in Boston Harbor. Outside of Boston, some of New England’s landmarks lay in pieces. In Eastham, on Cape Cod, the dwelling made famous by Henry Bes-ton’s 1928 bestseller THE OUTER-MOST HOUSE, was leveled. In Rockport, raging seas battered the red fishing shack “Motif No. 1,” a favorite subject for painters, completely destroying the structure. The state of Maine lost three lighthouses and the Old Orchard Beach pier where Benny Goodman and Louis Armstrong once played.

In the end, the hurricane-like storm, which paralyzed New York City for merely 24 hours, and entirely spared the Midwest, had claimed the lives of 56 people and caused an estimated half billion dollars’ worth of damage and devastation.

A Trojan Dies

The Death Of Hubert Humphrey

Hubert H. Humphrey raced at full liberal tilt through the years when liberal was fashionable and past the years when others were slowing down to look back at programs started and not working out.

Humphrey was a deciding force behind the civil rights bills of the 1960s, the Peace Corps, federal aid to education, Medicare and the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency. When he died at 66 at his Lakeside home in Waverly, Minn., after an agonizing struggle with cancer, the Senator’s liberal boots were still firmly on, his warmth and wit still in place.

At the memorial service, President Carter said of Humphrey, “He has been an inspiration and a conscience to us all. His greatest attribute was that he really knew how to love.”
The Cuban-Soviet Challenge

In the last few months, America and its allies have watched from the sidelines the alarming buildup of a Cuban expeditionary force that already numbers nearly 12,000 men in Ethiopia. Made possible by the money, airplanes and weapons of Russia, this Soviet-Cuban adventure by Fidel Castro confronts Jimmy Carter’s Administration with the first real problem approaching crisis magnitude.

At one point reluctant, Carter is now willing to admit that Russia is pushing him around, recently warning that the Communist thrust in the Horn of Africa could jeopardize an agreement limiting strategic arms.

Currently, the Cubans have sent about a quarter of their 120,000 man army to Africa, and have ordered a second group of reservists, this time all men in their 40s.

Stalled at a mountain pass for weeks, the Cuban drive on the key Ogaden town of Ijjiga appears to be moving again, using Soviet helicopters to airlift an armed force around the mountains. If Ijjiga falls, Somali’s hold on the Og aden could be broken, a strong encouragement for Castro. Consequently, Carter’s Ad-

mination looks with dismay at 12,000 Cubans in the Horn of Africa, the fruit of conciliation attempts in the past.

Ramifications of Castro’s adventure are only now being felt, nearly five months after the first big Soviet airlift in late November. National Security Adviser Brzezinski argued that Moscow not be allowed to expect cooperation on SALT as long as intervention in Africa continued. Another view, however, was held by Vance and Young. They pointed out that the Somalis were really the aggressors in the Ogaden and that the Cubans would do useful work in driving them out. But Brzezinski won Carter’s ear in the early days of March, the President stating that Russia’s African challenge could endanger the “negotiating process itself.”

The price paid by Cuba thus far has been slight. Fewer than 1,000 soldiers have been killed and the adventure provides an occupation for thousands of Cuba’s youth. But with the military bills paid and jobs available, Cuba still experiences economic problems due mainly to the low price of sugar worldwide. Ironically, Cuba is defending Angola, one of the world’s major producers of coffee, but is still required to restrict its own reserve of the brew because Angola prefers to export coffee for dollars rather than Cuban pesos.

Although Cubans carry the reputation of guns for hire, not all Cubans are eager to fight, a symptom of morale problems surfacing especially among students. In words reminiscent of campus Viet Nam protests, many resent fighting in far off Africa when so many things are yet to be done in Cuba, itself.

Despite a Soviet refusal to mention human rights in the last communiqué of the European Security conference in Belgrade, the Kremlin is vulnerable on SALT, the meat of Carter’s latest threatening rebuke. A new strategic arms treaty is critical to Brezhnev’s personal commitment to detente, and failure to agree on a new one could prove the beginning of many political problems at home for the Soviet president. It is possible that a definitive move by the Carter Administration to shelve SALT could act as a restraint on the Russians. However, Carter is still not ready to call the bluff of the Soviets and their Cuban Ally.