



Written by [Brian Koenig](#) on January 26, 2012

House Republicans Question Safety of Chevy Volt Batteries

House Republicans unleashed a barrage of criticism Wednesday during a House hearing on Chevrolet's Volt electric car, after the head of the federal auto safety agency insisted that the vehicles are not dangerous. "The Chevrolet Volt is safe to drive and it has been safe to drive the whole time," David Strickland, head of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), told a congressional panel. "Not only would I drive it, I would [take] my wife, my mother and my baby sister along for the ride."



The controversy was ignited by a government investigation into the safety of the Volt's batteries, when three fires broke out in Volt battery packs days after side-impact crash tests were administered. As previously [reported](#) by *The New American*, Chevy and government officials sparred over allegations that the Volt's batteries are a fire hazard and that they may need modifications:

The crash tests punctured the cases of the batteries, and leaking battery coolant could have spurred the delayed ignition in the regulators' undrained Volt batteries, Chevy spokesman Rob Peterson suggested. But Chevy is not planning a battery storage redesign at the moment. Considering that the fires did not occur until days later, some GM officials alleged that the crashed Volts were not stored properly. Still, the NHTSA has launched a safety probe into the battery malfunctions and has requested that other electric car manufacturers submit battery testing data as well.

In response to a flood of bad press, GM offered to buy back Volts from any owners worried that their plug-in electric car would catch fire. Maintaining that the vehicles are completely safe, CEO Dan Akerson said GE was offering the buyback simply to ensure customer loyalty.

House Republicans are not convinced by the NHTSA's verdict, accusing Strickland of downplaying the investigation because the Obama administration is an adamant proponent of the electric car industry. Also, they added, the federal government still owns [26.5 percent](#) of General Motor's shares. "Whose best interest were you acting in?" Rep. Mike Kelly (R-Pa.) asked. "It certainly wasn't the American public," he charged.

"Is the commitment to the American public or is the commitment to clean energy that we are going to get there any way we can?" Kelly continued. "When the market is ready... it won't have to be subsidized."

Republicans pounced on previously-held allegations that the NHTSA had concealed the Volt probe until news reports detailing the incident surfaced in November. "You knew about that explosion... when you came and testified before Congress, and when the president talked about [fuel efficiency] standards," Rep. Jim Jordan (R-Ohio), who led the hearing by the House Oversight and Government Reform subcommittee, said to Strickland. "But for the [news reports], would you have ever told us?"



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While defending the safety of the vehicles, Strickland countered that the investigation “took every second of that time,” and that it would have been imprudent to publicize any dangerous warnings about the cars until the investigation came to a conclusive verdict.

Democrats on the committee rushed to the defense of both Strickland and the Chevy Volt, blaming their Republican foes for using the incident as a ploy to halt the Obama administration’s environmental proposals. “This hearing is not about safety,” asserted Rep. Elijah Cummings (D-Md.). “This hearing is about an attack.”

“I wouldn’t want this committee’s activities on this issue to discourage companies like GM from continuing to innovate,” Rep. Dennis Kucinich (D-Ohio) chimed in. “We don’t want to be buying lithium-ion batteries from China in five years.”

General Motors CEO Daniel Akerson also blamed Republicans’ allegations as being political, affirming, “We did not develop the Chevy Volt to be a political punching bag... We engineered the Volt to be a technological wonder.”

But in deflecting such resistance, House Oversight Committee Chairman Darrell Issa (R-Calif.) suggested that the President’s “green” agenda creates a conflict of interest in the Chevy Volt’s development, particularly as the White House works to broker new mileage requirements which were negotiated last year. In disputing this “conflict of interest,” House Republicans released a [staff report](#) explaining the issue, which stated:

The delayed public notification of serious safety concerns relating to the Chevy Volt raises significant concerns regarding the unnatural relationship between General Motors (GM), Chrysler and the Obama Administration. Rather than allowing GM and Chrysler to enter into a traditional bankruptcy process, the Obama Administration intervened and forced the companies to participate in a politically orchestrated process. The result was that GM and Chrysler emerged as quasi-private entities, partially owned by the United States government.

“President Obama has used this unusual blurring of public and private sector boundaries to openly tout the results of this partnership as a top accomplishment of his Administration,” the report continued, “creating a dynamic where the President is politically reliant on the success of GM and Chrysler.”

Moreover, the administration offered bulky taxpayer-funded subsidies to stimulate the production of GM’s Chevy Volt; for example, \$151.4 million in stimulus money went to a Michigan-based company which manufactures lithium-ion battery cells, and \$105 million was given directly to GM.

The GOP lawmakers explained how in 2008, the U.S. automobile industry became trapped under a crippling burden of labor costs, as expensive union contracts, including high pensions for retired workers, threatened the viability of Ford, GM, and Chrysler. Blaming the Obama administration for meddling in the companies’ affairs — by overruling the opportunity for GM and Chrysler to enter into bankruptcy processes — Republicans expatiated on the federal government’s intervention into the private sector, particularly as the President “touts the survival of General Motors as one of the [administration’s] top accomplishments.” In fact, the report noted:

Since January 2010, Obama Administration officials have made at least four public appearances at factories involved in the production of the Chevy Volt. When the first Chevy Volt electric battery came off the assembly line at a GM battery plant in Michigan, Secretary of Energy Steven Chu was present to publicly applaud the company. Secretary of Labor Hilda Solis also visited a GM factory to observe the manufacturing of the Volt. In addition to factory observations, President



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Obama test drove the Volt for a crowd at GM's Detroit-Hamtramck factory months before the Volt was released for retail purchase. Thereafter, President Obama referred to the Volt as a "car of the future" and declared the Volt "drives really well." Like in the case of Solyndra [the solar technology company which went bankrupt after being given \$535 million in loan guarantees from the federal government], the President has closely tied his reputation to the success of the Volt.



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