

Forbes Rips Musk's smoke-screen

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(Photo Above: Tinman was RIGHT be to afraid of Fires. Musk is a carry with shiny objects)

Red Herrings And Straw Men: Musk's Argument On Tesla Fires

Dale Buss- Forbes

It's still a good bet that the Tesla Model S and Elon Musk will come through their fire-investigation saga relatively unscathed and even vindicated in the end.

But in the meantime, what lingers is Musk's take-no-prisoners argument, which essentially is that the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration probe into two fires in the car in incidents on U.S. roads is a monumental waste of time; that any media outlets even discussing the fires are irresponsible; and that Americans should take his word that the cars are safe.

Musk has to try to ensure that consumers and investors don't lose faith in him and his technology, and three Model S cars turning into hibachis on the highway (including one in Mexico) comprise a significant obstacle.

This is a refutation of significant parts of his argument, which turns out to be filled with red herrings and straw men that not even the formidable Musk can spin into smooth persuasion.

In attempting to thwart attention to this little problem, Musk has tried to have it just about every way.

First he insisted that there was no flaw in the design of Model S; but then he decided to adjust the suspension on the vehicles via a software change so that they ride higher on the highway and are less likely to take a hit from debris. Initially Musk insisted the cars wouldn't be recalled, but then he said Tesla actually had asked the federal highway-safety agency to examine Model S — an assertion that NHTSA officials have said simply isn't true.

Then Musk laid out his broad argument in the context of what he believes is an unassailable rationale for his creation of Tesla in the first place. In "The Mission of Tesla" post that he put on the Tesla blog this week, Musk penned an eloquent explosion of triumphalist fury.

But Musk also exposed some logical vulnerabilities that shouldn't be ignored even amid his intellectual suppleness:

A murky standard: Musk wrote that "new technology should be held to a higher standard than what has come before" but didn't say what that loftier standard should be. Then he seemed to undercut his concession by comparing the record of car fires in the Model S — "new technology" — to what he said were a quarter-million gasoline-car fires in the U.S. alone over the last year.

Certainly he believes Model S should be pulled up short at some number far lower than a quarter-million fires; but what is that number? Would he argue that forest fires aren't important because house fires turn out so many more Americans from their homes each year? And Musk didn't mention another relevant comparison: the Nissan Leaf all-electric vehicle, which has had no reports of fires with many thousands of models on the road.

The media straw man: Musk complained in the post about "an onslaught of popular and financial media seeking to make a sensation out of something that a simple Google search would reveal to be false."

But he didn't really specify what it is that is "false." By "false," was he referring to mere reporting about the fires, which seemed by and large to be pretty factual? Or reporters' failing to compare the number of Model S fires to the much higher number in gasoline-powered vehicles? Or media speculation about the effects of the fires on Tesla?

Or was Musk implying that a substantial number of media outlets leaped to the conclusion that these three incidents mean the Model S somehow is poorly engineered? If it's the last option, there's little evidence for his charge.

Besides, whatever "persecution" Tesla might be suffering at the moment at the hands of the media — most of whom actually seem to adore Musk, his technology and his cars — is nothing compared to what, for example, General Motors has suffered in the past. Just a couple of years ago, NHTSA briefly investigated a single fire in a Chevrolet Volt plug-in hybrid that occurred days after it had been crash-tested, and some wild media speculation ensued about the very future of the car.

Going back even further: Dateline NBC aired an investigative report in 1992 that allegedly showed C/K-Series pickup trucks exploding upon impact during accidents due to the poor design of fuel tanks. The NBC producers didn't tell the audience their nasty little secret: that they had rigged the truck's fuel tank with remotely controlled model rocket engines to initiate the explosion.

The lightning canard: Musk turned to a ready old comparison about the odds of experiencing "even a non-injurious fire in a Tesla" being less than those of getting struck by lightning.

Yet actually, the odds of getting struck by lightning are about the same as the odds of dying in a plane crash, depending on the time horizons involved. And yet, even the slim odds of fatal airplane fatalities are such that an entire branch of the federal government has been built around preventing and analyzing them, and airlines spend hundreds of millions of dollars a year to try to make sure it doesn't happen.

Or, closer to home for Musk: What would he say is the importance of the odds of a fire not occurring in one of the SpaceX transport crafts that his other company plans to hurtle into space

next year, carrying civilian passengers?

The no-harm, no-foul red herring: He pointed out that the drivers of the two Teslas in the U.S. fires weren't hurt and were, in fact, able to pull their cars safely over to the side of the highway after the car gave them appropriate warnings that things were awry. Musk wrote that "the primary concern is not for the safety of the vehicle, which can easily be replaced, but for the safety of our customers and the families they entrust to our cars."

But the statement implies somehow that it's, well, alright to have a fire under the hood of a Model S as long as no one actually has gotten hurt so far. But what if either of those two drivers in the U.S. accidents were upset or panicked or just not quick enough to react to the car's warnings, and the Model S had burst into flames before they'd had a chance to pull over? Things could have turned out quite worse for those drivers and for others on the road. And by Musk's logic, only worse outcomes would have made the fires unacceptable.

A devil's choice: As another way of illustrating the relative danger of gasoline-powered vehicles versus Model S, Musk wrote that "arsonists tend to favor gasoline" and used the analogy, "Trying to set the side of a building on fire with a battery pack is far less effective" than using gasoline would be. Yet Boeing faced significant fire concerns about its Dreamliner jets, and even grounded them for a while, in battery systems similar in basic technology to those used in the Tesla Model S.

Besides, the lethality of a particular form of power depends on the application: Apparently no one pointed out to Musk that prison wardens prefer carrying out capital punishment with electricity rather than gasoline. That fact is just about as relevant as the one he pulled out of the air.

Feigned concern: True, Musk did selflessly suggest that NHTSA shouldn't be bothering with investigating the paltry little pair of Model S fires when there are "hundreds of gasoline fire deaths per year that warrant their attention." But is he really that concerned about the stretching of federal resources?

Musk's other grandiose notion was to state unequivocally that the very survival of the planet may hinge on whether the gnashing media hordes stop bugging him about the two campfires in the Model S.

"If a false perception about the safety of electric cars is allowed to linger, it will delay the advent of sustainable transport and increase the risk of global climate change," he wrote, "with potentially disastrous consequences worldwide. That cannot be allowed to happen."

NHTSA, are you listening?