

# Who killed the electric car? essay sample

[Environment](#), [Electricity](#)



In unabashedly polemic fashion, writer/director Chris Paine makes no pretense of a mixed message in his 2006 feature-length documentary, *Who Killed the Electric Car?*, over the issue of who exactly killed the electric car, a disappointing turn of events in light of the fact that electric cars could very well replace consumer demand for powerful automobiles, powered efficiently by electricity and bestow massive environmental gains while circumventing our dependence on oil.

The first half of the feature is devoted largely to numerous talking heads of varying degrees of fame. Character actor turned sustainability advocate Ed Begley, Jr., five-time Presidential candidate Ralph Nader and battery engineer Wally Rippel discuss the brief birth and adoption of the first U. S. battery electric automobile, the General Motors EV1, and its subsequent death.

Paine even drags a couple of famous names of Academy Award-winning repute – Tom Hanks and Mel Gibson – to provide their testimony on the joys and pleasures of the EV1. However, the EV1's presence on the consumer automotive market did not last. General Motors reacquired all the EVs – for they were not sold, but leased – and subsequently had them disassembled. Following this turn of events, former EV1s held a dramatic protest in the form of a 'funeral' in which they mourned the 'death' of the car, which was reported by Bob Pool of the L. A. Times, among others.

The second half of the feature asks the question of where the blame lies for the death of the EV1. Paine attributes each and every possible reason for this 'death' as a disappointing result of political, corporate and consumer

denial of the massive benefits of the V1 and its potential to supplant conventional notions of automobile use and displace a dependence on fossil fuels. The titular question is essentially a rhetorical one.

It is hypothesized that the car's death is one of market failure originating with technological limitations inherent to its design and ambivalence on the part of consumers. Dan Neill concurs with this by subscribing to the notion of profit-motivated corporate neutrality: " GM would sell you a car that runs on pig shit if it sold." The implication is that General Motors wouldn't possibly conspire against their own product, simply because they put profit above anything else. Thus, the notion of a market stance that runs counter to their bottom line is possibly ludicrous. Karl Brauer notes that automobile manufacturers are ambivalent, not evil.

Jamerson opines that consumer disinterest led to the downfall of the EV1, and Paul Roberts, the author of *The End of Oil* , appears in the film in agreement with this sentiment. Roberts notes that this claim is not entirely unrealistic, as the average consumer back then failed to see the difference between an ordinary car and an electric car. However, consumer disinterest was founded upon ignorance and a lack of awareness. The EV1 may have been a market failure, but it was General Motors that failed to market the vehicle properly, and it is in this light that underwhelming interest becomes unsurprising.

Never mind the fact that the EV1 was manufactured as a direct result of state legislation mandating a reduction in automobile emissions, those consumers who were posthumously informed of the EV1's existence

expressed significant disappointment in its decommissioning. It is also rather telling that the EV1's availability was limited by leasing program, effectively giving General Motors control over its ubiquity, giving them the authority to declare what demand there was.

Then there is the chestnut of how consumers were not willing to make the tradeoff of sacrificing mileage range and horsepower in exchange for environmental benefits. Some argue that consumers are not willing to compromise mileage range in exchange for environmental benefits. However, significant improvements to battery technology were developed by inventor Stanford Ovshinsky. However, Wald notes that Ovshinsky's work was purchased by companies that optimistically promised that the technology would be utilized, but contrary to that promise, opted to de-publicize the technology citing that it was not ready yet.

However, automotive battery technologies are a threat to existing oil infrastructure. Because a battery powered vehicle like the EV1 needs only electricity to sustain its use, it is extremely flexible in the sense that it only needs to be plugged in, eliminating the need for service stations to provide gasoline.

Additionally, Chelsea and Bob Sexton, former EV1 owners turned 'green car' evangelists, observe that an electric car is largely free of the maintenance burdens that plague internal combustion engines. As such, there are far fewer parts that require maintenance, replacement and repair as well as a significant absence of stains, grime and dirt in the maintenance of an electric

car. In effect, auto dealerships would be deprived of the income they earn from the maintenance of traditional automobiles.

However, the most damning indictment lies against oil companies such as Texaco and Mobil. The electric car directly conflicted with the interests of oil companies, which made them afraid of the implications it had for their monopoly on transportation fuel. Dr. Joseph Romm of the Center for Energy and Climate Solutions, says that in essence, the potential that electric vehicles such as the EV1 had to completely remake the business model of the automobile industry, meant that trillions of dollars worth of un-drilled business would not be capitalized on.

As such, oil companies discouraged the electric battery as an alternative by lobbying strongly against the zero emission mandates in California and presented disinformation in the media because it conflicted with their profit future. Romm also draws an interesting comparison between them and the automotive companies that disassembled the public trolley system in California in the late 40s. Not that the companies behind the automotive and oil industries are completely myopic. They recognize the eventual end of their oligopoly and have therefore given significant push towards hydrogen fuel as the future of engine technology.

George Blencoe of Hydrogen Discoveries reports that General Motors, in cooperation with Shell has been spearheading the initiative for creating the infrastructure necessary to get hydrogen vehicles such as the Chevy Equinox on the road.

However, both Chuck Squatriglia of *Wired Magazine* and Robert Boyd of *McClatchy Newspaper's* Washington Bureau charge that hydrogen fuel is the least efficient and most expensive possible replacement for a gasoline-based automotive industry. Furthermore, the underlying technologies are prone to the same kind of limitations and wear and tear that necessitate lucrative maintenance revenues. As such, a future of hydrogen fuel merely replaces one oligopolistic paradigm with another.

So, on the question of who killed the electric car, the blame lies with conglomerated oil companies, assisted by their friends in the government. Paine notes that in the case of the latter, they were playing favorites to the former employers of Andrew Card, former Vice President of Government Relations at General Motors, and Condoleezza Rice, former member of the Chevron Board of Directors; and in the case of the former, they were threatened by the idea that they were sitting on an obsolete resource, and fought successfully to ensure their profits.

The electric vehicle is our most desirable automobile future. Its potential for sustainability is massive: as Mike Millikin notes, the power power generation industry has shown a willingness to diversify its energy sources to encompass eco-friendly solar and wind-based options, which would make an electric vehicle tethered to such green progress. Consumers are most certainly willing to embrace that, but so long as oil companies compromise long-term benefits for the immediate rewards of profit, a highway drive will forever be linked with inefficiency, ecological damage and geo-political tensions in the Middle East.

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