

Fatal Tesla Model S crash under investigation by authorities, raises safety concerns

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Last Monday the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) and the National Transportation Safety Board began sending teams to investigate a fiery Tesla Model S crash that occurred April 17 in Woodlands Township near Houston, Texas, that left two dead.

The two men killed in the crash were identified by local authorities as Everett Talbot, 69, an engineer, and his friend Dr. William Varner, 69. According to a Reuters report on April 19, the vehicle “was traveling at high speed near Houston when it failed to negotiate a curve and went off the road, crashing into a tree and bursting into flames” in the Carlton Woods Creekside subdivision last Saturday night.

The Harris County Precinct 4 Constable’s Office reported that subsequent small fires continued to flare up for hours and required rescue workers to use about 30,000 gallons of water to extinguish, due to the fact that the car’s battery continued to reignite after the crash, ABC13 Eyewitness News reported.

Authorities insist that no one was present in the driver’s seat at the time of the crash. One man was found in the passenger’s seat and another in the back seat of the vehicle when fire and emergency response teams arrived at the scene of the accident.

The cause of the initial fire, which almost completely torched the vehicle and its victims in a matter of moments, is still under investigation. However, there is some reason to believe that the car battery itself may have been defective. The corporation is still under investigation by the NHTSA for its decision to issue a software update for 2,000 vehicles rather than to recall them after reports that the vehicles had a possible battery defect that could start fires.

Tesla drivers have also made numerous complaints to the NHTSA to allege that sudden acceleration of the vehicles occurred in a number of situations which could potentially cause serious harm to drivers, passengers and property, such as sitting in traffic and while attempting to park in a garage or at a curb.

Woodlands Township Fire Chief Palmer Buck told *Car and Driver* that “this was our first experience with a large-

scale runaway lithium-ion fire” and that had the crash occurred on a highway rather than a residential area with access to a fire hydrant, the situation could have been far worse as the fire department’s trucks, “which carry between 500 and 1000 gallons, would not have been able to keep on lightly soaking the car for that much time.”

The NHTSA and NTB are currently investigating whether the Tesla Model S’s autopilot system, a partially automated system on Tesla vehicles that can keep a car centered in its lane, keep a distance from cars in front of it and change lanes automatically, was engaged at the time of the crash. “We have witness statements from people that said [the victims] left to test drive the vehicle without a driver and to show the friend how it can drive itself,” Herman told Reuters.

Elon Musk, billionaire Tesla CEO and currently the third wealthiest person in the world with a fortune of about \$174 billion, tweeted Monday to dispute assertions that the autopilot was engaged at the time of the Texas crash. “Data logs recovered so far show Autopilot was not enabled & this car did not purchase [Full Self-Driving].”

To date, there are no fully autonomous vehicles on market. Yet several consumer agencies note that the marketing of its autopilot feature is misleading and potentially dangerous to drivers.

Herman and other local and national officials have not said whether they have received any of this purported data from Tesla, if it exists. Musk’s wealth dropped by \$5.6 billion as share prices of Tesla’s stock dipped by 3.4 percent after news of the fatal crash hit the airwaves.

Tesla is well-known by now to authorities and interest groups for a number of incidents regarding possible defects with the vehicles’ software systems, including autopilot, and batteries. The April 17 crash is the 28th accident involving a Tesla vehicle under investigation by the NHTSA.

In the wake of numerous safety issues with Tesla cars, former US Transportation Secretary Elaine Chao, appointed by former US President Donald Trump, said that the NHTSA would look into measures to address safety

“without hampering innovation in development of automated driving systems,” meaning that it would consider the possibility of the most lenient regulations that would not interfere in any way with Tesla’s ability to amass profits.

Current US Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg, appointed by President Joe Biden, has also hinted at implementing regulations on electric vehicle safety, but nothing in his statements on the issue indicate that anything under the Democratic Biden administration would be any departure from the business-friendly policies of the Republican Trump.

Buttigieg said last month that “I would suggest that the policy framework in the U.S. has not really caught up with the technology platforms... So we intend to pay a lot of attention for that and do everything we can within our authorities.”

Buttigieg himself has overseen the dismantling of public transportation infrastructure during his tenure as mayor of South Bend, Indiana. From 2011–2019, public transportation ridership in the city fell 32 percent under his leadership while vast sums of money were funneled into the transformation of the industrial and mainly working class city’s downtown area into a playground for the wealthy.

For both the Democrats and the Republicans, the interests of US capitalism play a role in the refusal to seriously address safety regulations. Any attempt to slow the flow of profits into the hands of the ruling elites poses a threat to the US goal to dominate the world market in the production of electric and self-driving vehicles at the behest of its global competitors.

The NHTSA does not have much clout as a regulatory agency, and primarily relies on self-reporting from auto companies themselves, which puts the agency at the mercy of the corporations. A *Washington Post* report on the crash cited Frank Borris, a former head of NHTSA’s Office of Defects Investigation, who said “the agency is in a tough position because of a slow, outdated regulatory process that can’t keep up with fast-developing technology.”

Kelly Funkhouser, who heads connected and automated vehicle testing for the advocacy agency *Consumer Reports*, told the *Post*, “Tesla’s numbers have been inaccurate in the past and are difficult to verify without underlying data.”

Funkhauser has called for government oversight of the production and development of automated driving systems. She asserts that the circumstances surrounding recent crashes of Tesla vehicles may indicate that the company is not testing its automated driving systems, and instead dangerously “getting away with using the general population of Tesla owners as guinea pigs to test the system.”

On Thursday, *Consumer Reports* published the outcome of a demonstration that showed that car owners of its latest

Model Y could easily outsmart the Tesla autopilot’s driver monitoring features that are supposed to ensure a driver is alert and present in the driver’s seat while the system is engaged, by simply keeping a weight on the steering wheel.

The study revealed that Tesla relies primarily on detection of weight on the steering wheel to determine driver presence. This is a less advanced system than those used by Ford, GM, BMW and Subaru in their development of automated driver systems, which use camera-based technology and warning systems to ensure that drivers are looking at the road, and mechanisms to slow and stop the vehicle when drivers appear unfocused.

However, any regulations under the capitalist system will do little if anything to seriously address the issue of public safety in the development of electric and self-driving vehicles. Throughout the course of the pandemic and for years before, the government has always bowed to the corporations’ demands for profit interests over the health and safety of human beings.

Musk alone amassed a personal fortune of \$151 billion over the course of the pandemic, while workers in Tesla plants were forced to labor under unsafe conditions where the COVID-19 virus ran rampant to produce these profits. His wealth is based almost entirely on stock prices and ruthless speculation, leading Tesla to cut production costs and safety measures to continuously buoy up fictitious capital.

In 2020, Musk and Tesla defied Alameda County, California, public health officials’ orders to close its plant in Fremont, leading to hundreds of infections among workers and several deaths. These deadly conditions were aided and abetted by the Democratic Party, which is in control of the county and the state, by turning a blind eye to Tesla’s illegal actions and further pushing ahead with business and school reopenings to serve the interests of the corporations.



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