smoke released by burning interior cabin materials, such as decorative draperies and polyvinyl fluoride ceiling panels.

The danger related to the burning of interior cabin materials, say Hill and Borenstein, has been recognized as a safety hazard by airplane manufacturers and airlines at least since 1966; yet no rules setting safe toxic gas and smoke emission levels for these materials have been developed, much less adopted.

The failure of seats and the tiedown mechanism by which they are attached to the aircraft has also been cited in more than a half-dozen reports of commercial air crashes. When seats tear loose, passengers are trapped in their chairs, others are injured when hit by unattached seats, and exit ways are frequently blocked by seat wreckage. Yet with one minor exception, current seat strength requirements have not been changed since 1952, before the advent of jet aircraft brought marked increases in landing speeds and other impact factors.

New technology has produced aircraft better able to withstand impacts and enabled manufacturers to use safer interior designs and new materials. Yet the FAA has still not responded to petitions filed in October 1977 by organizations representing consumers, flight attendants, flight engineers, and airline pilots asking that the existing regulations be amended. As a consumer protection agency, Hill and Borenstein conclude, the FAA leaves something to be desired.

The Bottom Line: Audit or Analysis

"The GAO: An Evolving Role" by John T. Rourke, in *Public Administration Review* (Sept.-Oct. 1978), 1225 Connecticut Ave. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

The role of the U.S. General Accounting Office has changed substantially since its creation as a watchdog agency for Congress in 1921. For 30 years, the GAO concentrated on straightforward voucher audits—checking the books of federal agencies and departments. Then, in the late 1940s, it shifted its emphasis to "comprehensive" auditing that covered managerial efficiency as well as the legality of expenditures. During the past decade, says Rourke, a political scientist at the University of Connecticut, the GAO has moved into more controversial territory—examining not just how a program works, but whether it achieves its intended purpose. This larger role has aroused alarm, both within the GAO and in Congress.

The GAO's evolution, says Rourke, has been pushed by its current director, Comptroller General Elmer B. Staats, as well as by members of Congress concerned with the spiraling costs of government. The first congressional directive to enter the program evaluation field came in 1967 when Sen. Winston Prouty (R-Vt.) ordered the GAO to find out whether the new Office of Economic Opportunity was achieving its assigned goals in the "war on poverty."

Traditionalists in the GAO worry that the organization will lose its credibility by becoming involved in speculative areas not subject to strict cost-benefit analysis and that emphasis on the "timeliness" of its studies will result in excessive haste and errors. Congressional critics, including House Appropriations Committee Chairman George Mahon (D-Tex.) fear that involvement in program evaluation will drag the GAO into political battles and impair its independence and judgement.

Since 1970, Congress has refused to grant the GAO new authority (e.g., subpoena power and access to the courts) and has created other institutions (Congressional Budget Office, Office of Technology Assessment) to provide independent information. Since many GAO proposals for legislative or administrative action are never followed up, Rourke concludes that "Congress would be wiser to act more vigorously on these recommendations than to assign the organization more tasks."

Speed Kills, but Time is Money

"Assessing the National 55 m.p.h. Speed Limit" by Charles T. Clotfelter and John C. Hahn, in *Policy Sciences* (June 1978), Elsevier Scientific Publishing Co., Box 211, Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

In response to the October 1973 Arab oil embargo and higher oil prices, Congress established a 55-mile-per-hour nationwide speed limit on January 2, 1974. The law resulted in a dramatic decrease in average highway driving speeds and brought many protests, especially from independent truckers, who felt the economic impact of spending more time on the highway.

Reduced highway speeds entail certain penalties, say Clotfelter and Hahn, economists at the University of Maryland. They estimate the cost of added driving time, and of compliance and enforcement, at somewhere between $2.89 and $3.96 billion annually (based on 1974 figures). The value of the benefits in terms of gasoline saved (between 3.39 and 3.50 billion gallons in 1974) and reduced traffic fatalities, injuries, and property damage amount to between $4.4 and $5.2 billion. (Fatalities fell from 50,087 in 1973 to 46,049 in 1974, a decrease of 16.4 percent.)

Thus, by their "rough" calculations, the authors contend, the benefits clearly outweigh the economic costs. However, setting a national speed limit of 55 m.p.h. is not necessarily the best way to achieve fuel conservation and highway safety, and alternative policies might also "eliminate the present inequity of penalizing, in terms of time costs, drivers of efficient compacts and gas guzzlers alike."

Several alternative—or complementary—proposals have been made by the Carter administration and rejected by Congress. These include raising the tax on gasoline and taxing automobiles on the basis of their rated fuel consumption. Mandatory seat belt laws (as in Australia, France, and Canada) or mandatory air bags in new cars could help reduce highway fatalities. Such moves, the authors conclude, would entail economic burdens, but these might be well below the present costs imposed by the new speed limit.