

AUTOEXTREMIST

The bare-knuckled, unvarnished, high-octane truth.

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ON THE TABLE

↑↓ Daimler AG. On the one hand, the Germans are high-fiving back at headquarters over the prospect of the company finally being free of Jurgen Schrempp's monumental miscalculation. And now they're anxious to get back to focusing on the Mercedes-Benz brand, which they believe was tarnished because of the link-up to an "inferior" American brand. And they're already counting the money and bonuses they'll be making now that they don't have the Chrysler Group to carry around anymore. On the other hand, these are the same geniuses who basically spent \$60 billion in eight years on Chrysler - and now they're walking away with nothing. Just off the top of our heads, these guys need to keep their heads down and focus on their own challenges, because judging by their miserable track record of corporate futility, they're not out of the woods yet.

↑ Brilliance China Automotive. Speaking of looming juggernauts, Brilliance China Automotive is going to be the first serious player bringing in Chinese-built automobiles to the U.S. With deep resources and equally deep ties to the Chinese government, Brilliance has been doing their due diligence by organizing their distribution network, testing and certifying their cars with NHTSA and the EPA, and quietly going about the serious business of preparing to launch a product offensive in this country. We haven't heard much about Brilliance here, but we will, and judging by the lineup of vehicles we previewed last week, these guys are serious, they're prepared, they have a huge bankroll, and most important they have a lineup of formidable-looking cars with content, quality and an Italian design pedigree that could turn this market upside down in a hurry.

↓ Malcolm Bricklin. **Publisher's Note:** I had the pleasure of attending (and speaking at) the Bel Air Partners Elite Dealer Summit in New York last week, a very interesting gathering of top dealers and dealer groups from all over the country. The focus of the meeting was the emerging Chinese automobile industry and the eventual reality of Chinese vehicles being imported here. There were a series of speakers on Thursday and Friday, but by far the most interesting sequence occurred when Malcolm Bricklin did a presentation, followed shortly by a representative from Brilliance China Automotive. Always entertaining and filled with quips and funny lines, Bricklin got up and promised he would be back - this time importing Chinese hybrid vehicles, after first settling his dispute with Chery (Daimler AG waltzed-in and took Chery out from under him,

according to Bricklin). All of the usual promises and hype - a Bricklin specialty - were made in vintage loosey-goosey style, and Malcolm even waved around poster boards with artist's rendering of his proposed "world-beater" Chinese car. Of course, he alluded to the fact that he had all of the problems associated with this advanced technology solved and that his partners had figured out the whole battery "thing" and then he was gone, leaving everybody wondering if there was anything there "there" - per usual. But Bricklin's misfortune was that after a break the representative from Brilliance China Automotive got up and proceeded to deliver the most buttoned-up, detailed and seamless presentation you can imagine, delineating every detail from vehicle importation sites, sales regions, product development and testing all the way to product photos and even initial pricing. Everyone in the room couldn't help but be impressed, and everyone in attendance that day knew they were witnessing the beginnings of the first serious Chinese threat to the status quo in the U.S. market. What I also took away from that meeting was that Brilliance China Automotive effectively put an end to Malcolm Bricklin's career. The juxtaposition between the two presenters was painfully striking, with Bricklin and all of his smoke and mirrors bluster going up against a thoroughly detailed presentation perfectly suited to the new century and the global scope of the automobile business. - PMD

↑↓Chrysler Dealers. Talk about damned if you do and damned if you don't, Chrysler dealers have to be crossing their fingers that all of the "feel good" public pronouncements of the last few days come to fruition, because the alternative scenario is grim. They want things to work out, but can you blame them if they hedge their bets? And we wouldn't be surprised if some of them didn't hedge their bets by aligning themselves with the emerging Brilliance China Automotive.

↑Hummer-istas. With rising gasoline prices beginning to wreak havoc on the SUV market, our moles tell us that GM has finally green-lighted the much-anticipated H4 - the sensational compact Hummer concept that has never been shown in public but that was previewed to select members of the media late last year. If GM sticks to the H4 Concept's visually arresting script, this entry will jump start the Hummer buzz all over again in the market. It's that good.