Fighter jet-flying, horse-power-hungry Bob Lutz believes global warming is “a crock of shit,” yet GM’s vice-chairman is the driving force behind the Chevy Volt, an innovative electric car that calls to mind the company’s glory days of engineering ingenuity. And it still might not be enough to save GM.
THE CONGRESSIONAL HEARINGS WERE “A HUMILIATING SPECTACLE,” HE SAYS. “I HATED TO SEE THAT ORDEAL.”

analysts agree that the GM product line is the best it’s been since the ’90s, comparing Chevrolet to Toyotas and Cadillacs to BMW’s without much. What’s more, Lutz has championed what could be the most important American electric hybrid car yet, and a key to securing GM’s future — the Volt. He still has one more task, the toughest of all: make Americans love GM again.

Lutz has always stood out from the bland ranks of his auto industry brethren. He’s a straight-talking former marine flyer; a quasi-vegetarian who’s skeptical about global warming’s causes. A Zurich-raised, Berkeley-educated gentleman who speaks English, Swiss-German, and French with a set of low-vibrating, cigar-and-martini-marinated vocal chords. An amateur fighter pilot and motorcycle fanatic who likes to blast a Ducati through the twisties. He is a 6-foot-3 white-haired tough guy with a perpetual dimple in his upper lip that adds some in-your-face blue collar cred to his otherwise dapper demeanor. “I hate to quote Kipling,” says Tony Posawatz, who heads the Volt program at GM. “But Bob has the ability to walk with kings and never lose the touch.

In a remarkable 45-year career in the auto business, Lutz rose to high positions at BMW, GM, Chrylser, and now GM, earning a reputation as a firebrand with a talent for reviving faltering companies. “Bob’s a true enthusiast,” says GM. “But Bob has the ability to walk with kings and never lose the touch.”

Rough Landing: Lutz, beside the German Dornier Alpha fighter jet he likes to fly over the Great Lakes (above); with a Europe-only Opel Kadett that he flipped during high-speed testing on a German track (opposite)

Lutz is behind the wheel of the new Chevy Lacrosse, the eight-track belt of Homero Pizzi, I tell Lutz about my flashback, but he scoffs: “The 1968 Camaro was a primitive car.”

"I said, ‘You can have the other 50 cells, but one has got to be at the center, and it's product excellence,'” recalls Lutz. "The rest are tiny things, like yellow petals around a sunflower. If you don't have the car, nothing else matters.'"

Lutz has a job cut out for him. He worked from the inside out. Product neglect at GM showed most noticeably in wretched interiors. Anyone who slid into the driver’s seat floated in a sea of cheap plastic assembled with all the care and precision of a four-year-old putting together an Erector set.

"Frankly, before Bob Lutz came onboard, interiors were not the priority," admits Ed Welburn, GM’s vice-president of global design. “Often the interiors were developed in the 11th hour, and if the costs were not in alignment on the car, you would take it out of the interior. Then Bob came in with fresh eyes, talking about how bad our interiors were. We quickly reversed things.”

The exteriors were only marginally better, and Lutz made sure that changed just as fast. The curvy Pontiac Solstice two-seater that changed just as fast. The curvy Pontiac Solstice two-seater earned graphic display of the corporation’s managerial incompetence. “They had this matrix on a big screen with things the company should be doing,” he says. Hidden among the normal carmaker concerns — reduce costs, improve advertising effectiveness — sat one small square that read DEVELOP EXCELLENT PRODUCTS.

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Lutz immediately recalls the meeting this way: “Rick said, ‘Who’s the equivalent of you, but 50 years old?’ I said, ‘Gosh, he’s probably out there, but I don’t know.’ I said it would be tough to find someone that fascinates with car but with a degree from Stanford and broad level of experience. Someone beuhtul, in the sense of having worked in Europe for almost 20 years, and who’s equally at home in the European and American parts of the business.

"Rick hemmed and hawed for a long time and was finally able to speak the words, ‘I don’t suppose you’d consider coming to work for us full time?’ I said, ‘Sure I have!’"

Lutz was back home. “I was not happy being out of the industry. The car business is the most interesting business there is. It combines high tech, high levels of capital, and more consumer psychology than any other business.”

At one of his first GM meetings, Lutz was greeted with a vivid graphic display of the corporation’s managerial incompetence. “They had this matrix on a big screen with things the company should be doing,” he says. Hidden among the normal carmaker concerns — reduce costs, improve advertising effectiveness — sat one small square that read DEVELOP EXCELLENT PRODUCTS.

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Lutz’s office at the GM tech center is like a rich kid’s bedroom in the 1960s, sheers neatly arranged with beautiful models of Ferraris, Ducatis, and Corsairs. He has a full-scale replica of a Lamborghini engine sitting in the center. On the walls, there are photos of posters of a boy’s heroes would hang, are pictures of Lutz. On his desk sits a quote etched in Lucite.

Lutz has always been afforded the chance to play. Born in Zurich, where his father was a top banker at Credit Suisse, he attended a private string of schools in Switzerland and on America’s East Coast. He avoided schoolwork. In high school he was constantly in trouble due to “jocks and unauthorized driving.” Expelled from one Swiss prep school, he didn’t receive a high school diploma until age 22.

Hoping to instill some sensibility in his son, Lutz’s father persuaded him to join the U.S. Marines, where he became a lighter pilot in the peacetimeull between the Korean and Vietnam wars. The marines taught him how to speak truth to power. “Officers, even junior officers, encouraged to think and express their opinions.”

In the early ’60s he took his flappyt haircut and squashy shoes to the University of California—Berkeley, where he wrote a master’s thesis titled “The Influence of Design on Product Image.” In an experiment that would hone his eye for design, he built two car models, identical but for one small difference: The wheels on one model were from bankruptcy with financing from federal bailout loans, but by the ’90s his booting compact K-cars and boxy four-doors weren’t cutting it. Lutz sparked excitement at Chrysler — and helped keep it afloat — by producing the Dodge Viper and designing the angular sedans using a novel configuration that created more room in the front and back seats.

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After college Lutz was hired by GM. His first big project was to send him to Europe, where he succeeded in making the millions-selling Ford Explorer.

With Ford’s new model, the Explorer, Lutz was able to consider the millions-selling Ford Explorer. Lutz says. “But I think I have a personality that is antithetical to that thing.”

A story of revenge on Iacocca, who didn’t want to go.” The movie is still out there doing damage.”

The Volt is an attempt at atonement, and a radical departure in the design of electric cars. Hybrid-like the Toyota Prius switch from hybrid power to engine power for the first 40 or so miles. All-electric cars, like the $100,000 Tesla Roadster sports car, drive on pure battery power but need to spend at least a few hours with an electrical outlet-up.

The Volt strives for the best of both worlds. It will use only battery power for the first 40 or so miles. When the cells are nearly depleted, a small gas engine kicks in.

The Malibu isn’t as novel as the Tumblr, but it has earned rave reviews for being an equal part of the Camry and Accord. Lutz took great care to make the interior feel upmarket (it’s been compared to a Lexus’s) and to design a body that’s subtly stylish with lines accenting the roofline and side windows.

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(continued on page 68)
in that indirectly recharges the batteries or powers the electric motor, keeping the car running for another 200–300 miles. GM sees the Volt mainly as a zero-gasoline overnight plug-in commuter car without the “range anxiety” inherent in all-electric vehicles.

The Volt was the darling of the auto show, and the board quickly green-lit a production version. Chris Paine, the director of Who Killed the Electric Car?, will be telling the Volt’s development story with his next documentary. “I like Bob’s candor and the Volt concept,” he says. “I think that for the car companies will come when anyone can actually buy plug-in cars in showrooms.”

Despite helming the Volt project, Lutz is no tree hugger. In his grandest foot-in-mouth moment since joining GM, last year he dubbed global warming “a crock of shit,” a remark he now acknowledges was “politically incorrect.” Lutz, no scientist, believes that sunspots are a more likely cause of global warming than human-generated carbon dioxide. Mainstream scientists note a positive correlation between sunspot activity and global warming effects, but few identify it as the main cause of the greenhouse effect.

Sunspots or not, Lutz insists his views on global warming won’t affect his work. More regulation, tighter fuel standards, higher energy prices: All, he knows, are inevitable. “My motivation is to be petroleum-free,” he says. “If anyone thinks we’re going to reach higher mileage standards using gas engines, they’re nuts.” Don’t think the internal combustion engine is going away soon, but the electrification of the automobile is a necessity. “No matter what, Lutz says, the Volt program will go forward. “The Volt is our highest priority,” he says. “Everything else can get cut, but the Volt won’t.”

Not that GM has a choice. If the Volt does not fulfill Lutz’s promises, if it costs too much (rumors point to a $35,000 price tag versus the Prius’s $22,000), if it does not arrive on time (it’s set to hit showrooms late next year), it won’t matter whether GM survives from month to month on bailout fumes. If the Volt doesn’t make it, GM won’t either.

AS THE SUN RISES OVER THE GERMAN gingerbread main house at the Lutz farm in Ann Arbor, Lutz’s beautiful wife Denise (his third) heads to the barn to care for the horses. Close by, Lutz’s MD 500E helicopter sits ready for his morning commute.

Lutz folds his frame into his copter, fires it up, and lifts off northeast toward GM’s Tech Center in nearby Warren. The flight takes him to the edge of burned-out Detroit. “You become immune to the ugliness,” Lutz says. “If anyone thinks we’re going to reach higher mileage standards using gas engines, they’re nuts. I don’t think the internal combustion engine is going away soon, but the electrification of the automobile is a necessity. “No matter what, Lutz says, the Volt program will go forward. “The Volt is our highest priority,” he says. “Everything else can get cut, but the Volt won’t.”

The last great car guy in Detroit descends again into the fray, knowing there’s still much to do. Lutz will continue to build great cars and try to undo Daddy’s effect on car buyers. Trouble is, Lutz is about all that separates the GM of today from the bean-counting days of the recent past, and he won’t be around forever. “The day he retires,” one longtime GM supplier told me, “the traditional GM culture will move in like the tide and wash away the sand castle that Bob built.”

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Virus Hunter

“Tambouf’s team approaches 17 hunters and their sexual partners, asking them to participate in today’s ‘special study.’ The chief adds his own encouragement. “We are hunters here,” he says, “and this is how we hunt. We know that there are some bad things inside some of the animals we kill. If we can help our friends discover how to protect people, that’s good.”

Both Tambouf and ecologist LeBreton concede that they have doubts about this work. “But whether or not we get these extra fluids,” LeBreton says, “we’ll get plenty of blood.”

LATE THAT AFTERNOON THE TEAM meets back at GVFI’s headquarters in N’goula, where night drops quickly. Within a matter of minutes the kerosene lamps are lit and the abundant butterflies are replaced by fireflies — one of which finds its way inside the screened-in porch, zigzagging among the team members. “We Cameroonians say that it’s a lucky thing to have fireflies in your house,” says Tambouf.

Indeed, it has been a good day. Of the people approached, three men and four women provided semen samples and vaginal swabs — a pretty good start, all agree. That’s in addition to the 100 blood samples collected.

Working like this, one village at a time, Wolfe has quickly accumulated one of the most comprehensive blood collections on Earth, some 25,000 human and 16,000 animal samples that are available to researchers around the globe. “I can guarantee that these repositories of samples will be treasure troves of information for the future,” says Michael Worobey, of the University of Arizona.

Even though Wolfe is fundamentally a collector — of blood and exotic microbes and, to a lesser extent, West African art — he’s a minimalist in his personal life. “Almost everything I own is in a storage locker in Los Angeles,” he says. When Wolfe was on the faculty at UCLA, he had an apartment in Venice Beach. “I would swim and do yoga and ride around on my Vespa. I was also into rare orchids, but I wasn’t there enough, so they died.”

He tells me he lives for moments like these, drinking warm beer with his team, listening to the sounds of the jungle as they build into a riotous chorus of grunts and coughs and chuckles. But Wolfe, who is single, says that as he nears the age of 40 the urge to drop anchor is getting stronger. “I’m actually thinking that things will begin to calm down in a few months,” he says. “Of course, I’ve been saying this for the last 10 years.”

Pike suggests we go outside to toast the almost-full moon. As we do, someone fires up a generator and a radio, sending the warm, liquid guitar lines of Congolese soukous skipping across the courtyard.

“We vertebrates are a pimple on the ass of life on this planet,” Wolfe says, to no one in particular.