

Cheap American Chicken Gave Us This Weird Subaru Pickup

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One of the funkiest, coolest little trucks ever made was the result of us having cheap chicken.

Way back in 1963, President Lyndon B. Johnson initiated a series of tariff increases on brandy, dextrin, potato starch and, weirdly, light trucks valued at more than \$1,000. He did this in response to a trade war with the Europeans, who were in a snit because inexpensive American chicken that was flooding the market over there, hurting continental chicken farmers.

Most of the tariffs, which came to be known as the “Chicken Tax,” eventually were repealed. Yet the one on light trucks remains. The 25 percent tax on the importation of light trucks (LBJ was specifically targeting German-built Volkswagen vans), utterly failed at protecting the US chicken market, yet remains in place more than 50 years later. The CATO Institute calls it “a textbook example of a ‘temporary’ government policy that has taken on a life of its own.”

Regardless, the Chicken Tax has required automakers wishing to avoid that tariff to do one of three things: build their trucks here in the US as Toyota, Nissan and Honda did; ignore the domestic truck market entirely; or sidestep the definition of a light truck in often peculiar ways.

Which brings us to the Subaru BRAT.

In the late 1970’s, Subaru—which was just gaining a foothold in the US—was looking to enter the light truck market with the Brat. That’s an acronym, for Bi-drive-Recreational All-terrain Transporter. Subaru was marketing it as a so-called coupe utility truck similar to the venerable El Camino. And to get around the Chicken Tax, Subaru welded a pair of seats to the cargo bed, then added carpeting, seat belts and grab handles of questionable utility.

Voila! The Brat was no longer a truck. It was, under the law, a passenger vehicle and therefore exempt from the 25 percent Chicken Tax. (Light cars were, at the time, subjected to a 2.5 percent tariff.)

The wonderfully weird little truck typically used front wheel drive, but a manual transfer case allowed all-wheel drive. Base models came with a four-speed, but if you spent a little more you could get a three-speed auto and push-button AWD system. The 1.6-liter boxer four produced 64 horsepower, but later models offered a turbocharger version good for a whopping 94. Puny engine aside, the Brat was a capable rig, with or without the extra seats. It [offered decent ground clearance and competence off road](#), so long as things didn’t get too hairy.

But don't take our word for it. No less an automotive authority than [Ronald Reagan owned a Brat](#), a 1978 model he used for tooling around his 688-acre ranch in Santa Barbara, California. It wouldn't do for the quintessential 'Murican to be seen with a Japanese truck, so the Gipper studiously avoided being photographed with his Brat, but the bright red beauty has been lovingly restored and remains at the Reagan Ranch.

Subaru is hardly alone in pulling a few moves to sell trucks made over there over here. Ford, for example, equips its small Transit Connect vans—built in Turkey—with rear seats and windows before shipping them to the states. Once they're here, [Ford yanks all that stuff out and sells the van](#) as a conventional cargo carrier. The feds have called said [the practice serves “no manufacturing or commercial purpose”](#) and is only performed to “manipulate the tariff schedule.”

Be that as it may, as questionable as the Chicken Tax may be, we can at least thank LBJ for giving us the automotive awesomeness that is the Brat.