

A Bush at Both Ends: Before and After the Interstate Era

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A Bush at Both Ends: Before and After the Interstate Era

When President Dwight D. Eisenhower's plan for building the Interstate System and other highways was under consideration in Congress in 1955 and 1956, one of his leading supporters was Senator Prescott Bush of Connecticut.

An imposing figure, Bush stood 6 feet 4 inches tall and had a well-muscled physique, a handsome, craggy face, and thick charcoal black hair. After graduating from Yale, he worked for several companies before joining W. A. Harriman's investment banking house; Bush's father-in-law, George Herbert Walker, was the company's President. In 1931, the firm merged with Brown Brothers to form Brown Brothers, Harriman, and Company.

Aside from earning a fortune in the investment business and tending to a growing family of four sons and one daughter, "Pres" Bush had two passions. One was golfing. He was a champion throughout his life; he won the national senior golf championship in 1951. His life-long interest led to his appointment as President of the U.S. Golf Association and helped form a friendship with another dedicated golfer, President Eisenhower, in the 1950's. Bush's other passion was singing. Throughout his life, he employed his booming bass at every opportunity. Senator Bush would continue his lifelong passion for singing in Washington, often joining with friends to sing for hours at the Alibi Club or in their homes.

Bush believed that the more advantages a man has, the greater his obligation to public service. This view was evident during World War II when he headed the U.S.O. (United Service Organization) and chaired the National War Fund campaign of 600 war relief groups. In 1950, at the age of 55, he ran as the Republican candidate for the United States Senate from Connecticut. Although Bush adopted moderate to conservative views, he was defeated after muckraking journalist Drew Pearson, a few days before the election, claimed the candidate was promoting birth control. Bush denied the charge, but lost by 1,000 votes. Two years later, when Democratic Senator Brien McMahon died, Bush won a special election to fill the remainder of the term. He took office in 1953, winning reelection to a full term in November 1956.

The first major issue confronting Senator Bush as a freshman member of the Committee on Public Works and its Subcommittee on Roads was the President's proposed Interstate Highway Program. He strongly supported "these modern, divided-lane highways which we so urgently need for reasons of traffic safety, economic development, and defense."

The problem was how to pay for them. Based on the recommendations of a committee headed by General Lucius D. Clay, the President proposed to finance construction by issuing bonds, with revenue from highway user taxes dedicated to repaying bondholders. Senior Republicans declined to endorse the proposal, which never made much headway in Congress. However, as a natural leader, Bush stepped easily into the role of chief Senate backer of the President's proposal. His experience in financial markets was especially helpful during hearings considering ways to pay for the Interstate System. Ultimately, despite Senator Bush's advocacy of the Republican President's proposal, Congress decided to pay for construction on a pay-as-you-go basis with highway user tax revenue credited to a newly created Highway Trust Fund.

Senator Bush also was unsuccessful in efforts to secure reimbursement under the Interstate program for States, such as Connecticut, that had built turnpikes and other Interstate-type facilities without waiting for the start of the Federal program. As a result of this effort, made in cooperation with Senators from other turnpike States, the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956 called for a study of the issue—a compromise that, as is usually the case, resulted in a study and no action.

Still, Senator Bush had an impact. He was, for example, an advocate of Interstate apportionment based on relative need, a principle that was adopted in 1956. He explained:

The importance of the Interstate Highway System is so great that it has to be provided for now. It must be completed within 10 years and must be put in effect as a whole, and not piecemeal.

The 1956 Act required an Interstate Cost Estimate in 1958, after which Interstate apportionments would be based on the cost of completing mileage in each State compared with the national total.

Bush's advocacy of the President's Interstate proposals prompted contemporary writer Theodore H. White to describe the Senator in 1955 as "an able and distinguished man making his mark for the first time upon the Senate and nation in an issue of national significance."

Following enactment of the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956, Senator Bush supported President Eisenhower's initiative to create the post of Federal Highway Administrator to head the Bureau of Public Roads. As Bush explained during a hearing on July 23, 1956:

It is highly desirable that we create a post . . . that will attract a man of real competence to do this job, a man who knows the business of building roads and whose economy and stature would be recognized generally by [State highway] officials and by the association and by the industry, so to speak. It seems to me to be of the utmost importance that this enormous program be headed by . . . a man of such recognized competence that he will assert the authority of the Federal Government in this matter and do what the law has been designed to accomplish.

President Eisenhower signed P.L. 84-966 on August 3, 1956. The President's choice for first Administrator was Bertram D. Tallamy, a former Superintendent of Public Works in New York (1947-1954) and AASHO President (1951-52) who had been the guiding force behind the New York State Thruway. (Massachusetts' John A. Volpe served as Administrator until Tallamy could clear his New York obligations and take the oath of office on February 5, 1957.)

On April 12, 1957, Senator Bush recorded a radio and television "Report from Washington" with Administrator Tallamy for broadcast throughout the State. They discussed the progress of the new Interstate Highway Program as well as control of outdoor advertising and reimbursement for previously built turnpikes incorporated into the Interstate System. The program was broadcast throughout the State.

Senator Bush retired in 1962, citing poor health, and died on October 8, 1972, from lung cancer.

On January 20, 1989, one of Senator Bush's sons, George Herbert Walker Bush, became the nation's 41st President. As the father had helped launch the Interstate Era, the son helped create the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991, the landmark legislation of the post-Interstate Era. He also signed Public Law 101-427 (October 15, 1990), which changed the official name of the Interstate System to honor one of its founders: "The Dwight D. Eisenhower System of Interstate and Defense Highways."

Senator Bush's grandson, George W. Bush, became the Nation's 43rd President on January 20, 2001. He defeated Vice President Al Gore, whose father, Senator Al Gore, Sr., had been Chairman of the Subcommittee on Roads in 1955-56 and one of the chief authors of the 1956 Act. In 2003, President Bush will be working with Congress on the second reauthorization of the ISTEA programs, which were initially reauthorized by the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century in 1998.
