

# Happy 40th Anniversary: National System of Interstate and Defense Highways

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## Happy 40th Anniversary: National System of Interstate and Defense Highways

by

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**(1993 - 1997)**

*To celebrate the 40th anniversary of the Interstate System, Federal Highway Administrator Rodney E. Slater participated in a transcontinental commemorative trip that paralleled the route of the 1919 U.S. Army convoy that gave a young officer named Dwight D. Eisenhower an understanding of the value of good roads. The 1996 trip crossed the country west - to - east on Interstate highways, ending at the Zero Milestone on the Ellipse south of the White House, the starting point of the 1919 convoy. Upon returning to Washington, Slater addressed the National Press Club on June 29, 1996.*

Thank you for that very warm and generous introduction.

Let me say what an honor it is to address such a distinguished audience - and to come to this podium in the footsteps of so many great leaders from across our country - and the world.

I'm humbled by the thought that many of you in this audience have heard remarks - right here in this room - from President and cabinet members, Prime Ministers and Party leaders, Supreme Court Justices and from business leaders whose work has truly changed the world.

I come to you as the latest in a long line of Federal Highway Administrators. We trace our roots back more than 103 years to General Roy Stone, the federal government's first special agent and engineer for road inquiry, a decorated veteran of Gettysburg and many other Civil War battles.

The achievements of this agency, and the work of all my predecessors, bring me before you today. Highway builders, too, have truly changes America - and the world - and we mean to carry that work forward well into the next century.

As most of your know, tomorrow is a very special anniversary for the Federal Highway Administration - and for America.

Forty years ago this Saturday, President D. Eisenhower signed the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956 - an idea that he had believed in for decades - and a bill that he fought hard for throughout his first term in office.

It must have been a very satisfying experience for Ike.

As a young Lieutenant Colonel, Eisenhower had hitched up with a 1919 U.S. Army expedition - called a "motor truck train" - 197 men and 72 vehicles - to travel from Washington to San Francisco - to test the Army's truck transports and to prove the strategic utility of the motor vehicle.

He saw first - hand how terribly primitive many of America's roads were. All along the way, trucks from the convoy smashed through wooden bridges, slid off into gullies and bogged down in axle - deep mud.

There was no "Triple - A" to call for help.

But Lieutenant Colonel Eisenhower got to San Francisco all the same.

It took him 62 days.

Years later, when his armies smashed across the German border and barreled down Hitler's Autobahns, *General* Eisenhower gained another hands-on experience of the tremendous mobility that world-class highways create.

So as he raised his pen over the Interstate Act, *President* Eisenhower had no doubt at all about the significance of what he was doing.

In his memoirs, *Mandate for Change*, Eisenhower wrote that, "More than any single action by the government since the end of World War II, this one would change the face of America... the impact on the American economy - the jobs that it would produce in manufacturing and construction, the rural areas it would open up - this impact was beyond calculation."

Four decades later, I believe that we can all agree that President Eisenhower's memoir was, if anything, an understatement.

As President Clinton recently said, "The Interstate Highway Act literally brought Americans closer together. We were connected city to city, town to town, family to family as we had never been before. That law did more to bring Americans together than any other law in this century."

What the Interstate Act did was to commit the Federal Government and its partners in the states to the construction of 44,000 miles of world-class, all-weather highways across rivers and gorges, swamps and deserts, over great mountain ranges - and through them if need be.

It was an awesome challenge - and America took it on with a "can-do" spirit.

You may have heard it said that the Interstates themselves are the greatest public works project in human history - and that's true.

They represent a staggering feat of engineering, planning, hard work - and spirit - that all Americans should be proud of. Instead, all too often, we take these roads for granted - as if they were some natural phenomenon, like the majestic Rockies of the mighty Mississippi.

There are literally dozens of segments of this system - bridges, tunnels, overpasses - that are, in themselves, candidates for the title "wonder of the world."

Having just returned from a road trip from San Francisco to Washington - which took me nine days, not sixty - I just want to mention just one of this system's many engineering marvels: Interstate 70 along the Colorado River.

Here is a road on which you can pass beneath the Continental Divide through a tunnel more than a mile and a half long and emerge into Glenwood Canyon, some of the most breathtaking scenery on earth - natural beauty that I-70's designers have carefully preserved and even enhanced. I urge you to drive it, enjoy it - and appreciate it. It's an eye-opener.

Even if we sometimes forget the sheer *physical* scale of the Interstates, I know that I don't have to go on at length for this audience about the tremendous impact that these highways have had on land values, the growth of the suburbs, and now, the "edge cities," the "nationalization" of the market for agricultural produce and the unprecedented mobility of ordinary Americans and the goods we produce.

Time and again, on my trip, I heard from ordinary Americans like Lloyd Riegle, of Hays, Kansas - a small town with a population of 17,000 - that the Interstates have been the lifeblood of the town that they were born in - the homes they

love.

These highways have, in fact, worked their way deeply into Americans' lifestyles, our literature, our films and our culture - from Jack Kerouac's *On The Road* to *Thelma and Louise*.

But I think we should remind ourselves that the Interstates have been - and remain - one of the single most crucial circulatory systems of America's economy.

In the forty years since we launched their construction, America's Gross National Product has multiplied more than 10 - fold. We have created the most powerful and productive economy in history.

Without making any exaggerated claims, there is simply no question that the Interstate System has played a major role in making this achievement possible - by knitting together a vast continental market that had been much more loosely connected through this century's first half.

One reasonable estimate holds that the Interstates contributed roughly one - quarter of the total gains in productivity across the American economy over the last four decades.

Certainly, the Interstates have made it possible for American manufacturers - now the world's most competitive - to adopt successfully "just - in - time" manufacturing techniques - with the assurances that their inventories could be rapidly replenished. These same Interstates also carry much of today's record volume of American exports for transshipment to foreign markets.

And these highways have done more than just strengthen our economy - they've unified a diverse nation.

As President Eisenhower put it in one of the many speeches and messages he delivered in his long fight for the Interstate Act, "the forces of our communication and transportation systems are dynamic elements in the very name we bear - United States. Without them, we would be a mere alliance of many separate parts."

Ladies and gentlemen, as we reflect on this anniversary, let me suggest to you that President Eisenhower's fight to create the Interstate System was one of his greatest legacies to America - a truly visionary act of nation - building.

And Ike's vision was shared, by the way, by Democrats and Republicans from all regions of this nation.

It was based on the work of great public servants like Thomas MacDonald, Chief of the Bureau of Public Roads from the 1920's to the 1940s, and his assistant, Frank Turner, one of my predecessors as FHWA administrator, a man named by American Heritage Magazine as one of this century's 10 "agents of change."

The Interstates' founding fathers also included Representative George Fallon of Maryland, Hale Boggs of Louisiana - Cokie Roberts' dad - and Senator Albert Gore Sr. of Tennessee, whose son, our Vice President, is such a strong support of transportation research and new technology today.

Their vision - and the support of dozens of others - was crucial, not only to passing the Interstate Act - but to driving the work forward to completion.

The roughly \$130 billion that America invested to build the Dwight D. Eisenhower System of Interstate and Defense Highways has, in fact, *united these states*. It has been money well spent - or *well invested* as transportation professionals prefer to say.

And it has laid a strong foundation for the fully - integrated transportation systems America will need to compete - and to win - in the global markets of tomorrow.

Yet today, as we seek solutions to the transportation needs of our future, the challenges are, in some ways, more daunting than those that President Eisenhower faced in launching the Interstate era.

The America of 1996 is far more complex and dynamic than the America that Dwight Eisenhower set out to transform.

As against the raw challenge of improving a primitive highway network to provide mobility above all, today's America has a mature transportation infrastructure - which is in need of constant, costly maintenance and improvement.

And today's Americans demand much more than just mobility - although they surely want that, too.

Americans today insist - rightly - that our transportation investments also enhance clean air and water, protect wilderness, provide scenic beauty, preserve historic communities rather than bulldozing them down, revitalize local and regional economies and above all, enhance the quality and safety of Americans' day - to - day life and travel.

And they are asking us to do all of this more efficiently, more economically than ever.

Most of you will recall President Clinton saying in his State of the Union address that "the era of big government is over," and that what we need going forward is a more limited, more effective, more responsive government.

In terms of transportation policy - in the post - Interstate era - we are already making the transition to that kind of governance - and we're doing it with very limited resources.

Consider this: the original \$50 billion commitment that President made to the Interstate System would, in today's terms, translate into a roughly \$500 billion commitment over twenty years - *over and above* routine federal transportation outlays.

In an era of sustained budgetary constraint at every level of government, that scale of federal dollar commitment is beyond anything we can realistically expect.

But we are not simply pressing the case for enhanced investment - or waiting for funding to come. In today's context, we have to use every element of flexibility and creativity we can to do more with less - and that's what we are doing.

Last year, for example, we secured passage through the House of Representatives and the Senate of a landmark piece of legislation creating a new National Highway System - a network of 160,000 miles of the nation's most vital roads - including the Interstates, but extending beyond to cover state and local highways that reach into every corner of America.

The vote, by the way, was 412 to 12 in the House, unanimous in the Senate.

The NHS is a comprehensive, national network of major roads - 4% of our total - which nevertheless carries 75% of our commerce and tourism. It comes within five miles of 90% of the American people, reaches 100% of all cities over 50,000, and connects to counties that hold 99% of our manufacturing jobs, 97% of mining jobs and 93% of farm jobs. It is also designed to be coordinated with the networks of our NAFTA trading partners in Canada and Mexico.

And the NHS is more than an expanded highway system. It connects to literally hundreds of ports, airports, highway - rail transfer points, AMTRAK stations, bus stations and transit systems.

But the NHS is **not** a massive new spending program - a 1990s equivalent of the Interstates.

It is, rather, a strategic guide to ensure that the investment funds that we - and our state and local partners - already have will come together in a national system that is, like the Interstates, more than the sum of its parts.

The NHS is, in a real sense, the embodiment of the seamless, interlinked network envisioned in the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 - better known as ISTEA.

Today, everyone in America's transportation community - whatever their specific "mode" - knows that our greatest collective need is to "connect" - that as Benjamin Franklin said in the context of another Revolution, "we must hang together - or we shall surely hang separately."

None of us can just think "highways," or "airports" or "railways" for their own sakes. We all must recall that the ability of each of these systems to perform its own role depends critically on how well it connects to all of the rest.

The same spirit of ISTEA underlies our commitment to genuine community involvement. We are all well aware of the sometimes terrible mistakes and blunders of the Interstate era - particularly in urban areas where highways were sometimes rammed through vibrant neighborhoods - ruthlessly uprooting whole communities.

Like "big government," the era of Robert Moses - Robert Caro's **Power Broker** - is over.

From now on, community consultation, work with neighborhood groups and other stakeholders is not only essential for the legitimacy of transportation projects - **it's the law** - and **we welcome it**.

America, after all, is not a technocracy - we are **a democracy** - what Winston Churchill called "the worst system of government - except for all the rest that have been tried from time to time."

Today, our democracy is demanding that we deliver on a promise that President Clinton and Vice President Gore have made repeatedly: re - inventing government so that it works better and costs less. And we're doing that, too.

In fact, for the Federal Highway Administration, which has had seven different names over its 103 - year history, "re - invention" is something of a way of life.

During my tenure, this tradition has taken on new meaning - well beyond nomenclature.

We've not only broken down the "silo" mentality that once inhibited communication and coordination between various transportation agencies in our own Department - we've launched a whole series of genuine innovations that are revitalizing our partnerships with state and local governments and private business.

For example, we learned from the reconstruction of highways destroyed by the Northridge Earthquake that innovative contracting techniques - including substantial bonuses for early completion - could deliver real savings and faster results. We're taking that less nationally - with our state and local partners.

Faced with budget constraints and the investment shortfalls I've mentioned, some would say that we could do more to provide money for our highways. I agree - **once could always do more in any situation**. But let's take a minute to take stock of what we've done.

The Administration believes that deficit reduction is vital to our future. I agree. President Clinton recently left for the G - 7 summit in Lyon, France as the leader of the world's leading economy. A great reason that that is because we've gotten a handle on our nation's deficit... the legacy we leave for our kids.

But at the same time, infrastructure investment under President Clinton is up 10 percent. In the first three years of this Administration, we will invest more than \$60 billion in our nation's highways... a record level. But we've done more, we've developed innovative financing methods that enable states and locality to cut through red tape, engage private business partners, bringing private resources to the table, and launch projects that would otherwise take years - or never get done at all.

We've already launched well over \$5 billion worth of more - more than 60 of them - in some 31 states - and this initiative is less than two years old - still in its early days. We call it Innovative Financing, but it's quickly moving from being innovative to being routine.

It will, I believe, become the new "paradigm" for public - private transportation partnerships that will engage private business and the private capital markets to supplement government investment in transportation - with no new taxes and with less, not more, regulation.

As I traveled around our country, a concern I heard at several stops was whether, in light of the budget squeeze taking place at **every** level of government - Federal, State, and Local - we would be able to continue the level of transportation investment needed to sustain the national economy and keep us competitive. The good news I heard from President Clinton at the US Conference of Mayors meeting in Cleveland last week was that a local leader of national stature - Houston Mayor Bob Lanier - has agreed to lead an organization called the Rebuild America Coalition. Rebuilt may be just the forum needed to bring **all** the parties together, to work toward consensus, on how to maintain a necessary level of investment. We look forward to working with them.

Finally, let me say that we are also making real progress in applying new technologies to create what we call Intelligent Transportation System - ITS - again, in partnership with industry and local governments. Because we know that we can't just build our way out of congestion, we have to manage our traffic more efficiently providing more capacity on **existing** roadways.

These kinds of system - ranging from intelligent traffic lights, to traffic monitoring and reporting systems, to computer - assisted dispatching of tow trucks and safety vehicles - are being deployed all around this country.

And they are breaking up gridlock, smoothing traffic flow and saving lives everyday.

For example, ramp monitoring devices on I - 35 in the Twin Cities have raised rush - hour speeds from 34 MPH to 46 MPH and cut freeway accidents by 34 percent. In Chicago, a basic incident detection and response program now clears over 115,000 crashes and breakdowns a year - at a cost benefit ratio of 17 - to - 1.

And while I don't want to sketch for you futuristic fantasies of radio - controlled, hands - off commuting - I do want you to know that we are already tracking container trucks and railcars and taxi fleets from satellites in outer space.

As the chorus of a great Paul Simon song said, "These are the days of miracles and wonders" and I'm convinced that we will see developments in transportation technology that will amaze all of us.

As difficult as our budget challenges are - and as ingenious as some of the responses I've mentioned may be - perhaps the greatest challenge we face in working for America's transportation future is restoring and sustaining faith in government itself - in our capacity to share great visions and achieve common goals.

There's a common cynicism in America today which would disappoint the founders of the Interstate System.

After all, these men and women first imagined - then fought for - and then built - the greatest public works project in history - one that has served farmers and workers and businesses for four decades and made America an economic power second to none.

Now, as we are putting the final touches on their great vision - completing the last few miles out of more than 45,000 - there are some who say: "It's done - we can rest on our laurels."

But I can tell you from my trip across this nation that is not so.

That's not what I heard from a gold miner in Nevada who recognizes that transportation is his company's lifeblood.



That's not what I heard from Sam Caudill in Glenwood Canyon, who recognizes that transportation can co - exist with - and complement - our environment.

And that's not what I heard from a truck driver in Effingham, Illinois, who knows how vital our nation's highways are to the movement of goods across our land.

Resting on our laurels is **not** an option I heard in Omaha at the Western Governors Conference - or in Cleveland, with President Clinton at the U.S. Conference of Mayors.

These Governors, these mayors - and truck drivers and gold miners and ordinary citizens - all realize and celebrate the great achievement of the interstate - but they are also looking to the future.

They are looking at this nation's transportation needs in the 21st century - and their bags are packed for the future.

And we are forging a vision for that future.

It is a vision crafted by listening to the American people - a vision based on all that we've learned from experience - and from the dreams we've dared to dream - but have yet to fulfill.

So as we celebrate the 40th anniversary of the Interstates, I believe that as a nation we need to need to rededicate ourselves to the possibility of Abraham Lincoln's ideal... the American ideal... "of government of the people, by the people and for the people" - - the same ideal that my predecessor General Roy Stone risked his life for at the battle of Gettysburg.

If we look at them this way, I submit to you that the Interstates are, in fact, more than highways. They are just one of many noble examples of what this democracy can accomplish for us.

As Lincoln did in his day and Eisenhower in his, it's up to us to find new ways to bring America together - to dream our own dreams - then roll our sleeves up and make those dreams come true.

Thank you very much for having me.

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