

Interview with General Bragdon on Study of the Road Program

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Interview with General Bragdon on Study of the Road Program

President Eisenhower's internal review, launched in 1959, of the Interstate Highway Program raised concerns and generated rumors within the highway community. The February-March 1960 issue of *Highway Highlights* magazine, contained the following interview with General John S. Bragdon, who was in charge of the President's review:

A Report in the Making

A White House Staff Led by General Bragdon Is Making an Important Study of the Road Program. Its Report will go to the President.

By A STAFF REPORTER

It was President Eisenhower's own idea that his administration should father a grand program whereby all major control points throughout the nation would be connected by modern highways, Major. Gen. J. S. Bragdon (USA-Ret.) recently told HIGHWAY HIGHLIGHTS.

General Bragdon is special assistant to the President for public works planning. As such, he was asked to undertake last July a progress study of the Federal-state highway program. This study -not a "fishing expedition to find something wrong" -was begun in advance of current Congressional investigations and probably will be at the report stage sometime this spring. "Not before April," says General Bragdon. Queried as to whether the President sparked the stepped-up program with emphasis on the National System of Defense and Interstate Highways, General Bragdon gave a categorical "yes."

"I am sure of it. I know it," he said. "I talked with the President about it before it was ever publicized. The Bolton Landing (N. Y.) speech was the President's own words. Vice President Nixon gave the speech because there was a death in the President's family."

"Where did General Clay fit into the picture?" General Bragdon was asked. "He worked out some details. But it was the President's own idea that there should be a program of a magnitude never before known." The careful look now being given highway progress is the President's own idea, too. "He told me to make this study," General Bragdon emphasized.

Subject Matter. Some 25 or 30 subjects will be covered in the study. They will include basic policy, methods, procedures and criteria which, General Bragdon points out, are on a higher level than standards. Standards, specific engineering and design points cannot all be examined for the purposes of this report.

However, the matter of whether to bypass cities or go through them is an example of one thing under scrutiny. The study is particularly interested in ways costs can be held down. For this reason, it is concerned with interchanges, their type and how many per mile.

The needs of cities come into the study. "We are not trying to omit cities, as has been said," General Bragdon remarked. As for highway administration, he said, "we intend to look into it. But not to see if it is up to standard in any particular instance."

Toll roads also are being considered in the study. But, General Bragdon believes, tolls are not likely to be a large factor in road development at this time. "They could have been five year ago," he feels. "Ninety-ten money has changed all

that. Tolls might be feasible for a relatively small amount of road financing.

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"What about financing?" General Bragdon was asked. "Are you going into that?"

"We are not going into whether the Highway Trust Fund is advisable," he replied. "But we are trying to study what methods should be used to get money for roads. New estimates will be coming up. We want to look into the best ways to meet their money requirements."

With respect to general benefits, General Bragdon said, "They are important." He added, however, "when you come to secondary benefits, they are speculative."

He is familiar, he said, with the "210 Study" being conducted by the Bureau of Public Roads, which, in accordance with Congressional direction, will give exhaustive consideration to the benefits received from highways by groups other than highway users. The report on this study is due in 1961 and is intended to offer guidance for future tax bills.

Contract Controls. On the matter of keeping down costs, General Bragdon feels that so-called "contract controls," recently inaugurated by the Bureau of Public Roads, are "all to the good." This is the procedure whereby the BPR controls the number of Federal-aid highway contracts a state may enter into in a given period of time.

Asked if this were not the procedure criticized by Senator Gore as "an invasion of state rights," General Bragdon smiled and indicated that it was. "The BPR is developing a system whereby they know what costs are and can compare actual costs with estimates. It is all to the good."

A subject which really elicits enthusiasm from General Bragdon is "comprehensive planning."

"It's what we need at every level of government, " he insists. "If a unit of government-a town or county-can't give a department to it, then it should give a man to it. If even that can't be done, then someone should be assigned to give part time to it. But some one group or person should be responsible."

Comprehensive planning, as General Bragdon explains it, is concerned, first, with working out priorities for all types of public works so that needed developments go along in balance. Thus, schools, roads, dams, public buildings, all would be considered in one giant project with a view to determining what was most needed first.

Second, priorities would be accorded individual types of needed public works.

Third, any comprehensive plan, General Bragdon believes, should be coordinated with the echelon of government above and below so that contiguous echelons are completely aware of each other's activities.

With roads, General Bragdon says, "There should be a comprehensive economic growth and land use plan. Then a transportation plan. And of that, one part would be a highway and street plan.

"We cannot expect highways to take care of peak traffic unless we build highways on a tremendous scale," he says. As a possible control, he cites a proposal that special charges be imposed on those who use their cars in downtown areas during peak hours.

Some form of traffic control in cities, coupled with an improvement of mass transit methods, is essential for the future, in General Bragdon opinion.

The railroads, he points out, are cutting out commuter traffic. In order to keep the railroads handling a large share of the commuter load, we must deal with "what really counts and is going to work," he opines. "That is, how much it costs."

Case History. He illustrates his view with the following case histories. Cost of commuter service went up on the run from a point in New Jersey into New York City. Result: Neighborhood car pools began to form.

On the other hand, Philadelphia subsidized its commuter service and rates were reduced. The use of this mass transit medium rose several percentage points in a relatively short time.

General Bragdon admits to riding down to his office alone in this automobile each day.

As for acceptance of the recommendations coming out of comprehensive planning, he believes there are two practical possibilities of "teeth." Comprehensive planning should be, in fact, must be a staff operation, he feels. An over-all plan has a chance of general acceptance, therefore, if all subsidiary plans are referred or linked to it. But, in his opinion, the most effective "tooth" to make comprehensive planning really work would be to make it mandatory that the results of such planning be regularly publicized. If this were done, General Bragdon feels, public opinion would do the rest

Asked if the results of the highway study he has under way would be publicized, General Bragdon said he did not know. "That part is not up to me," he said. He emphasized that his was "merely a staff job." "When the report is ready, I'll send it to my 'boss.' He may send it back for further work. I don't know what he will do with it."

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General Bragdon has increased his staff by about 10 persons to conduct this study, he says. Besides, he employs consultants from time to time, consults individually with persons variously interested in the highway field, and frequently borrows personnel from the Bureau of Public Roads.

"The BPR has been most cooperative," he remarked. "I have had no problems with cooperation anywhere. My instructions were to work with Fred Mueller, Secretary of Commerce, and with Maurice Stans, head of the Bureau of the Budget. We certainly have no problems getting all the information we seek."

As for state information, General Bragdon said he has a "team" visiting all BPR regional offices and some district offices. This team expects to be in consultation with a great many state highway officials. Already, it has visited Kansas City, MO., Atlanta and Boston.

General Bragdon was asked if, when the study is complete or at some definite stage, he would be available to appear before a Congressional hearing-or whether this were considered out of order for a special assistant to the President.

He implied that it would be so considered and was not in the picture.

Boiled Down. Regarding the form in which he would send his report to his "boss," General Bragdon said the study would be greatly condensed for Presidential consumption.

"Naturally, he couldn't read the whole report," General Bragdon commented. "He is much too busy for that. I'll talk it over a few times with Jerry Persons. He'll be thoroughly familiar with it and what needs to be emphasized. And, of course, it will all be gone over with Maurice Stans and Fred Mueller, before I take it to the President. Then, we will boil it down and then boil it down again."

In answer to a question about whether the summation of the report taken to the President would include recommendations, General Bragdon said that it would.

"All the high points will be set forth for the President," he stressed. "And it is amazing how fast he can go through something like that. He gets it all, too. And he remembers it. It is amazing what he remembers. A mind like his picks and sorts all the time."

General Bragdon never served under or directly with President Eisenhower when they were both in the Army. "But," he says, "I have known him a long time. And the thing that never ceases to surprise me is how he can always go right to the heart of a thing."

Pressed for a picture of himself, his staff or of some of their activities, General Bragdon was adamant.

"This is purely a staff operation," he insisted. "When the report goes to the 'boss' any publicity will be up to him. I'm just working for him."
