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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF
COMMERCE

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REMARKS BY THE UNDER SECRETARY OF COMMERCE FOR TRANSPORTATION, ALAN S. BOYD, BEFORE THE 33RD ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF MOTOR VEHICLE ADMINISTRATORS AT 9:30 A.M., WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 13, 1965, AT THE JUNG HOTEL, NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA

I consider it a timely opportunity to discuss highway safety before this 33rd Annual Conference of the American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators.

The President and the Congress have recently laid down a new assignment for us in this field, an assignment which, to put it bluntly, is to halt the rising trend of auto deaths and accidents and to make our highways safer and more enjoyable avenues for commerce and for recreation.

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It seems fitting to discuss this assignment here, for this organization represents one of the most important groups of officials in the country with direct responsibility for highway safety.

The motor vehicle administrators of the 50 states are responsible for the record keeping, for the registration of vehicles and for the control of the drivers who man those vehicles. The AAMVA is, in fact, vitally concerned with every phase of highway safety except, perhaps, engineering and construction.

So you are all too aware, I am sure, of the fact that we have been losing ground lately in our effort to reduce the number of fatalities on our highways.

Down through the past several decades, we have been able to salve our conscience somewhat by citing the fact that while the number of traffic deaths has been increasing, the number of deaths per million vehicle miles has not.

That conscience-easing statistic is no longer available to us.

In the mid 1930s, the rate of traffic deaths per 100 million vehicle miles was 15. It dropped to eight in the 1940s and to a low of 5.2 in 1961.

In the past three years it has been slowly on the rise, climbing to 5.7 in 1964.

That is a hard, cold, impersonal way of putting it.

What we are talking about is:

-- 48,000 people who were killed in highway accidents last year.

-- 1,750,000 people who were injured in traffic accidents.

-- a total of 12.3 million mishaps which resulted in property damage or loss of some \$8 billion in a single year.

This is tragedy and destruction on a war-time scale. As President Johnson has noted, "This staggering toll is clearly a national problem. The rising cost in life and property must be reversed." "I am convinced," the President added, "that a significant national effort is called for..."

And to launch such a national effort, President Johnson signed into law recently an amendment giving new direction to the quest for highway safety.

Known as the Baldwin amendment, it directs that after December 31, 1967, each State should "have a highway safety program, approved by the Secretary (of Commerce), designed to reduce traffic accidents and deaths, injuries and property damage resulting therefrom, on highways on the Federal-aid system. . ."

It calls for uniform standards to be approved by the Secretary of Commerce, for an effective accident records system, and measures calculated to improve driver performance, vehicle safety, highway design and maintenance, and correction of high or potentially high accident locations.

In signing the measure, President Johnson asserted:

"This legislation provides the tools for a coordinated attack on highway accidents...."

"The approach provided," the President noted, "is in keeping with the traditional Federal-State relationship through which the Federal aid highway program has operated so successfully. It recognizes the primary responsibility of the States for highway safety and at the same time acknowledges the Federal Government's responsibility to lead and coordinate."

This law does not become effective until December 1967, but there is much that can be done -- and must be done -- in the interim.

What we need most before we can attain the kind of cooperative effort which this problem demands is more knowledge.

We simply have to know more about our highway transportation system -- what causes these accidents which have posed this national problem?

Despite all the splendid work done down through the years, it is surprising to learn how little we know about the cause of highway accidents.

When a commercial airplane crashes in this country, teams of experts representing the manufacturers of the craft, the pilots, the airline, the insurance companies and the Government spring into action, trying to determine why the accident occurred and how.

When an auto accident occurs, a traffic officer, or a highway patrolman, or perhaps a part-time sheriff's deputy usually represent the extent of the expertise available to gather the knowledge and make the report. And in most instances, the overriding concern is over liability rather than the cause and effect of the accident, itself.

This simply is not good enough in an era when we face the staggering future prospect of 90 million new cars and 14 million new trucks and buses pouring onto our roads and streets in the next 10 years; when the number of licensed operators is expected to increase from this year's 95 million drivers to 125 million in the decade ahead of us.

We can't match the detailed investigation that is devoted to each airline accident but we can use the same techniques on a simple basis to do a better job than we now are doing.

In getting ready for this new safety effort in the Department of Commerce, we are taking a new look at our highway transportation network. We are trying to apply the same techniques that our scientists and researchers apply in identifying and solving the complex problems of the space age.

The highway system, we know, is composed of people, of definite physical elements, and of certain social, political and economic forces.

By people, we mean drivers, policemen, engineers, planners, educators, passengers, examiners, pedestrians, judges, doctors and others.

By physical elements, we mean roadways, roadsides, vehicles, signals, signs, control devices, weather, communications and so on.

By social, political and economic forces, we mean, public opinion, profit motive, legislation, economics, government at all levels, vested and special interests, and above all -- freedom of personal actions.

No single one of these factors causes a highway accident. It is the interaction of these elements that have to come into action for a mishap to occur.

Despite the fact that we are chalking up something like 12 million accidents a year, there is no great statistical frequency yet identifiable among these accidents.

That's what I mean when I say we have to have more knowledge.

It will be necessary to state in-depth regional studies and surveys with highly-trained personnel to get the kind of knowledge we need. And this new legislation, I would say, agrees with that position, for it mentions "an effective accident records system, and measures calculated to improve driver performance, vehicle safety, highway design," etc.

I'm not suggesting that we merely have more studies and more surveys. I'm talking about an action program.

There is much that we can do now to ease the situation and better prepare us for the overall cooperative effort that we simply must achieve.

Along this line, President Johnson directed in the Spring of 1964, an acceleration in a spot program to reduce high-accident locations along Federal aid highways.

You may be amazed to learn how much work there is to be done in this effort alone.

A report from the Bureau of Public Roads, covering 274 projects for improving these accident prone sites, noted that there had been more than 8500 accidents at the locations.

On one three-mile stretch of highway, through an area which had experienced rapid commercial growth, there were 1323 accidents over a five-year period ending in May 1964. These resulted in 325 injuries and seven fatalities.

Certainly we can not tolerate this kind of performance, especially when the job of correcting many of the sites requires not much more than widening traffic lanes and bridges, providing stable shoulders, increasing sight distances around curves and over hills, installing better signals, signs, and markings, and so forth.

Before and after studies of the effectiveness of spot improvements have shown exceptionally encouraging results. The State of Virginia, in a survey of 11 minor projects of this type, representing an investment of only \$43,000, found accidents had been reduced 66 percent. The savings in accident costs was estimated at \$153,000.

That looks like a real sound investment, not even considering the lives that might have been saved or the injuries that might have been avoided.

And speaking of investment, the United States States is fast approaching the \$100 billion per year mark in highway transportation expenditures. We are paying nearly \$85 billion a year for vehicles and their operation, including gas, oil, parts and insurance. The cost of construction, maintenance and policing of our streets is about \$13 billion a year,

This is yielding dividends impossible to calculate. But it also is yielding an economic loss in death, injury and damage of about \$8 billion a year -- about double the Federal Government's total annual Federal-aid highway program.

Proof that something can be done about the highway safety problem may be found in the 41,000-mile Interstate Highway System, half of which is now open to traffic. This is costing some \$46.8 billion to build, but when finished it will carry about 20 percent of our traffic even though it represents only around 1 percent of all our roads.

The death rate on the Interstate now in use in running around 2.8 per 100 million vehicle miles. On roads in the same area which used to carry this same traffic load, the death rate was 9.7 per 100 million miles.

In view of the growing magnitude of the problem, it is not surprising that officials at all levels of government have shown unprecedented concern in recent years.

I recently established an interagency task force which is currently formulating plans for an accelerated action program. The recommendations of this task force will soon be submitted to the President.

Other developments at the Federal level of government include an unprecedented number of highway safety measures introduced in both houses of Congress.

It is against this background, then, that I would like to discuss national highway safety standards. I believe it is entirely appropriate that State motor vehicle administrators and other State and local officials know at once the posture and intent of the Department of Commerce as we approach this new assignment.

While guidelines for the administration of the new law have not yet been precisely drawn, I can--and want--to assure you that standards for highway safety programs conducted by the States will not be arbitrarily imposed. The Department of Commerce, and specifically its Bureau of Public Roads, has as you know a long history of highly effective, cooperative working relationships with the States in the development and application of highway standards.

I am confident that comparable Federal-State partnerships dealing with all elements of the highway transportation system - drivers, vehicles, and roadway - can be established.

As a continuing activity for a good many years we have studied existing standards and recommended measures for improved highway safety. A large number of these have been developed and tested by experience in professional societies and among the various national organizations of public officials.

Obviously we shall need to call upon the most competent sources of knowledge, wherever they are, for final resolution of the technical and administrative questions that will be involved in setting meaningful standards for future highway safety programs.

I believe this offers a challenge to all official associations, professional societies, and other organizations having a declared interest in highway safety to examine carefully and identify those elements of a highway safety program which can be advanced with assurance at this time.

While we cannot wait for perfect answers, the urgency of the situation demands that we apply the best knowledge and judgment available to us today. And prudence demands critical evaluation in areas of uncertainty, and some caution in advancing national standards too rapidly on the basis of logical assumption or professional judgment alone. Rather, there should be room for systematic experimentation, and careful measurement of results, from which, with other research, standards can evolve.

We propose to proceed with deliberate haste. At the present time, a comprehensive inventory of standards, criteria, and recommended practices is being put in order for critical evaluation.

The complexity of the problems involved will require strengthened teamwork by professionals employing a wide variety of scientific disciplines. It will require the best efforts of this association, and its individual members.

We need and we are seeking your cooperation and assistance. We also need and are seeking the cooperation and assistance of all other national associations of State and local officials having legal responsibilities for the various aspects of highway safety. We shall need and welcome the assistance of all responsible groups and agencies which employ special competencies in these fields.

We recognize that the magnitude, as well as the complexity, of the problems to which we are addressing ourselves will require accelerated and greatly expanded accident prevention programs by all responsible agencies working in cooperation.

I hope you will agree that the problem also demands a coordinated attack by all levels of government--Federal, State, and local--with optimum appropriate contributions by each.

We propose that the contributions of the Department of Commerce be designed, with your help, to provide mutual reinforcement for the constructive work by all levels of government to insure the public safety in highway transportation.