

# A Moment in Time: President Harry S. Truman's Highway Safety Crusade

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### A Moment in Time: President Harry S. Truman's Highway Safety Crusade

By Richard Weingroff



**President Harry S. Truman addresses the 1946 Highway Safety Conference. Looking on (left to right) are Doctor Fredrick E. Reissig, Executive Secretary to the Washington Federation of Churches; John Russell Young, president, D.C. Board of Commissioners; and General Philip B. Fleming, Administrator, Public Works Agency, and General Chairman of the conference. (Getty Images)**

President Harry S. Truman was an avid motorist his whole life, a road builder as County Judge in Jackson County, Missouri, a member of the American Road Builders' Association, a sales representative for the Kansas City Automobile Club, and president of the National Old Trails Road Association, which had designated a transcontinental highway that in later years included segments of U.S. Routes 40 and 66.

As a U.S. Senator (1935-1945), he had introduced a Drivers' Licensing bill several times, beginning in December 1936, that required States to adopt uniform laws governing drivers' licensing based on qualifications. His bills, which were not adopted, reflected a common idea among highway safety advocates at the time. Senator Truman explained

in a speech on CBS radio on February 7, 1939, that experts agreed “the general condition of streets and highways is not an important factor in traffic accidents.” Further, “We have motor vehicles whose mechanism is of a standard which makes for safety.” As a result, “it becomes necessary to focus our attention upon the human element – the driver.” That was the purpose of his bill. “By means of this simple instrument, we believe that the needless slaughter of American citizens can be greatly reduced and that the highways of our nation can be made safer for the use of our people for business and for pleasure.”

As President (April 1945-January 1953), he remained concerned about the growing traffic safety problem – and with good reason. Fatalities had reached 38,142 in 1941, with a fatality rate of 11.43 deaths per 100 million vehicle miles traveled (VMT), the highest recorded totals to that date. Restrictions on driving during World War II (such as gas rationing) reduced traffic volumes and highway deaths, which fell to 22,727 in 1943 (fatality rate: 10.92 per VMT), but the number of fatalities was on the rise in 1945 (26,785 deaths and a fatality rate of 10.71).

Any number would be too high, but President Truman took this moment in time, as traffic volumes were returning to peacetime levels, to launch a crusade to save lives.

### **The President’s Highway Safety Conference**

Vice President Truman had become President after the death of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt on April 12, 1945. The European phase of the war ended on May 8, 1945. Japan surrendered on August 14, 1945. After a period of disruption, the Nation entered the post-war boom. By the time of President Truman's State of the Union address on January 6, 1947, he could accurately say that the Nation was prospering as never before, in part because of motor vehicle sales. In 1945, the country had 31 million registered vehicles; by 1950, the total would increase to 49 million.



**In July 1944, Senator Harry S. Truman emerged from the Democratic National Convention as the unexpected nominee for Vice President. On August 18, he had lunch with President Franklin D. Roosevelt on the White House lawn. Eight months later, upon the death of President Roosevelt, Truman became President on April 12, 1945. (Harry S. Truman Library and Museum)**

On December 18, 1945, President Truman wrote to Major General Philip B. Fleming, Administrator of the Federal Works Agency, home of the Public Roads Administration (PRA – FHWA's predecessor agency) to express concern about "the extent of traffic accidents on the Nation's streets and highways which have increased alarmingly since the end of gasoline rationing." The loss of lives, bodily injuries, and property destruction were "a drain upon the nation's resources which we cannot possibly allow to continue." The President added:

*It is my intention to call into conference at the White House next spring representatives of the States and municipalities who have legal responsibility in matters of highway traffic, together with representatives of the several national organizations which have a primary interest in traffic safety. I hope that additional means may be devised by such a conference to make our streets and highways safer for motorists and for the public before the beginning of the automobile touring season of 1946.*

General Fleming would be general chairman of the President's Highway Safety Conference, which was held on May 8 to 10, 1946, in the Departmental Auditorium on Constitution Avenue in Washington. The 2,000 participants included Federal, State, and local officials, civic leaders, highway transportation and traffic technicians, and leaders of national organizations.

President Truman addressed the conference on May 8, explaining, "The problem before you is urgent." Already, the number of fatalities was increasing after wartime travel restrictions were lifted. "During the three days of the Conference, more than one hundred will be killed, and thousands injured," he said. He had studied the problem when he was in the Senate (1935-1945). "I found at that time that more people had been killed in automobile accidents than had been killed in all the wars we had ever fought, beginning with the French and Indian wars." He knew this was a "startling statement," but he added that, "More people have been injured, permanently, than were injured in both the World Wars – from the United States."

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*You know, in some States – my own in particular – you can buy a license to drive a car for twenty-five cents at the corner drug store. It's a revenue-raising measure. It isn't used for safety at all.*

The States were doing little about the problem:

*Some States, at the time I made this investigation – I think there were seven or eight, including the District of Columbia – had license requirements which required drivers to know something about running a car – certain safety signals, to know a green light from a red one, to know which hand to put out when he was going to turn right or left.*

He added:

*It is perfectly absurd that a man or a woman or a child, can go to a place and buy an automobile and get behind the wheel – whether he has ever been there before makes no difference, or if he is insane, or he is a "nut," or a moron doesn't make a particle of difference – all he has to do is just pay the price and get behind the wheel and go out on the street and kill somebody.*

He said that as a Senator, he had tried to pass legislation to impose requirements on drivers, but the bills had passed in the Senate but then failed in the House of Representatives because of a concern about the States' right to control operation of their highways. He agreed that State and local governments were responsible for licensing of drivers and vehicles, regulating traffic flow, and deciding on driver instruction in the schools. He did not want to encroach on the States' rights and responsibilities, but "we cannot expect the Congress and the Federal Government to stand idly by if the toll of disaster continues to go unchecked."

The States "have been standing idly by for the last 25 years, and I think they will continue to stand idly by, unless you do something to force the control of this terrible weapon which goes up and down our roads and streets all this time." The challenge must be met. "I firmly hope and believe that every agency of government, backed by the aroused support of its citizens, will meet its responsibilities fully in this field." He was certain the public would respond wholeheartedly to appeals for safe and sensible conduct.

Beyond working at the State level, he suggested that "modern techniques of enforcement, engineering, and education" could help make communities safer. The techniques, he said, would be discussed during the conference. He concluded:

*Out of their studies and reports, you can formulate a uniform and balanced highway safety program. I urge you to take this program back home with you, and to take whatever steps are needed to see that it is adopted.*

*I also appeal to every driver and pedestrian for cooperation in making our streets and highways safer. Give this program your earnest and continuous support, individually and through organized effort. In that direction lies the promise of a safer and a happier United States of America. The National Safety Council's (NSC) magazine, Public Safety, reported, "The thunderous roar of applause that greeted his remarks left no doubt that the gathering would produce a program to fulfill his hopes and expectations."*

## **The Action Program**

One result of the conference was an Action Program to combat highway deaths and injuries. It addressed collection and analysis of accident records, adoption of a Uniform Vehicle Code and Model Traffic Ordinances to cut confusion over road rules, education in the schools, increased enforcement of traffic laws, improved highway design to eliminate



hazards, adoption of sound driver and motor vehicle licensing requirements, and an aggressive public information campaign.

Another result was Executive Order (EO) 9775, which President Truman signed on September 3, 1946. It established the Federal Committee on Highway Safety, as recommended by the President's Safety Conference, to include representatives of 13 Federal Agencies, including PRA; the FBI; the Departments of Agriculture, War, and the Interior; the Bureau of the Census; the Interstate Commerce Commission, and the Post Office Department. The EO stated the committee's purpose:

*The Committee shall promote highway safety and the reduction of highway traffic accidents and, to this end, shall encourage Federal agencies concerned with highway safety activities to cooperate with agencies of State and local governments similarly concerned, with nationwide highway safety organizations of State and local officials, and with national non-official highway safety organizations, as the Committee may determine. The Committee shall also, to the extent permitted by law, coordinate the highway safety activities of Federal agencies.*

The EO also asked the head of each Federal Agency to take "such measures within his sphere of responsibility as will result in improved highway safety conditions; to cooperate with the Committee with a view toward attainment of improved highway safety conditions; and, consonant with law, to provide the Committee with necessary staff assistance."

## The Results



**President Harry S. Truman**  
(Harry S. Truman Library and Museum)

President Truman sponsored highway safety conferences in June 1947, June 1949, June 1951, and October 1952; he addressed the 1947 and 1949 conferences. The conferences had set many changes in motion, but the number of fatalities had varied during President Truman's crusade, with the highest total (still below the 1941 total) in his last full year in office. Advocates took some comfort in a lowering of the fatality rate from before World War II, but unlike that war, the Korean War did not affect the results:

- 1946: 31,874 deaths (9.35 per 100 million VMT)
- 1947: 31,193 deaths (8.41)
- 1948: 30,774 deaths (9.26)
- 1949: 30,246 deaths (7.13)
- 1950: 33,186 deaths (7.24)
- 1951: 35,309 deaths (10.61)
- 1952: 36,088 deaths (7.03)

On April 11, 1952, President Truman asked Secretary of Commerce Charles Sawyer to serve as General Chairman of the upcoming conference (General Fleming had been appointed Ambassador to Costa Rica). Using contemporary NSC figures that differ from FHWA statistics, the President explained his frustration:

*In 1950 traffic fatalities reached 35,000. In 1951 this total increased to 37,500 and the National Safety Council estimates that a further increase to the alarming total of 40,000 will result from highway accidents in 1952. Coupled with the bodily injury to more than 1,000,000 persons and monetary losses approaching \$3,000,000,000, these staggering totals indicate the need for renewed and increased efforts.*

The President would not appear during the conference, but he asked Secretary Sawyer to “enlist the support of business and other civil groups as well as public officials.”

Despite President Truman’s efforts, the numbers continued to grow, reaching a peak of 55,600 fatalities in 1972 (fatality rate: 4.41). Through combined efforts by all concerned, the numbers finally began to decline in the 1970s due to highway design changes, public service activities by highway safety organizations, a reduction in speed limits as a result of the energy crisis that began in October 1973, enforcement by police and the courts, and – something that in President Truman’s era seemed unthinkable – Federal laws beginning in 1966 that prompted changes in how the automobile industry designed cars, buses, and trucks.

## Today

In 2018, 36,560 people lost their lives in motor vehicle traffic crashes, with a fatality rate of 1.13 per VMT. Compared with the statistics through the 1970s, that is progress, but no one can be satisfied with the results. As Secretary of Transportation Elaine L. Chao said in announcing the 2018 results, “This is encouraging news, but still far too many perished or were injured, and nearly all crashes are preventable, so much more work remains to be done to make America’s roads safer for everyone.”

In a moment in time in May 1946, President Truman argued that a concerted, across-the-board effort can make a difference in reducing the toll of highway tragedies. History – although it took a few decades – has proven him correct.

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