

# Introduction

**Series: FHWA Highway History Website Articles**

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## Introduction

by

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*(For consistency, this article relies on contemporary fatality and other statistics as estimated by the National Safety Council. These statistics were used at the time of the events described. Final statistics accepted by the U.S. Department of Transportation vary. See [Appendix 1 for fatalities, VMT, and fatality rates, 1950-2002.](#))*

In explaining his support for highway improvements, President Dwight D. Eisenhower cited several factors, including the growing number of fatal accidents on the Nation's roads. For his Grand Plan speech on July 12, 1954 (delivered to the Nation's Governors by Vice President Richard M. Nixon), Eisenhower's notes included safety among several penalties resulting from "this obsolete net which we have today." He said:

Our first most apparent [penalty is] an annual death toll comparable to the casualties of a bloody war, beyond calculation in dollar terms. It approaches 40 thousand killed and exceeds one and three-tenths million injured annually.

He also referred to "all the civil suits that clog up our courts." Half the suits, he estimated, "have their origins on highways, roads and streets."

Although the Grand Plan launched the fight for the Interstate System, President Eisenhower's campaign for highway safety began even before he took office. In a late 1952 statement to the Hearst Newspaper chain, which was then involved in a massive campaign in support of better highways, President-elect Eisenhower emphasized the need for good roads in view of the "appalling problem of waste, death and danger." He added:

There were 37,500 men, woman and children killed in traffic accidents last year, and those injured totaled another 1,300,000. This awful total presents a real crisis to America. As a humane nation, we must end this unnecessary toll. Property losses have reached a staggering total, and insurance costs have become a real burden.

During his 8 years as President, Eisenhower would return to these images periodically-and attempt to do something about them.

President Dwight D. Eisenhower and the Federal Role in Highway Safety

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