

# Preface

**Series: FHWA Highway History Website Articles**

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Search

[Home](#) / [President Dwight D. Eisenhower and the Federal Role in Highway Safety](#)

Highway History	
Interstate System	>
Federal-Aid Legislation	
History of FHWA	
General Highway History	
FHWA By Day	

## Preface

This monograph began as a sidebar to my two-part article, "[The Man Who Changed America](#)," in *Public Roads* magazine (March/April 2003 and May/June 2003). In "President Eisenhower on Highway Safety," I intended to quote from several of the President's speeches on the subject to supplement the other online sidebars I had written to elaborate on the President's interest in highways.

The speeches, however, needed context, and as I provided it, I began thinking about one of President Harry S. Truman's comments during his speech to the May 1946 Highway Safety Conference. The focus of his speech and the conference was on rallying public support and improving State motor vehicle laws and driver licensing and education. After summarizing his unsuccessful efforts as a United States Senator to enact Federal legislation on motor vehicle registration and driver licensing, the President said the Congress was not ready at the time to interfere with what were seen as State prerogatives. He added:

At the same time, we cannot expect the Congress and the Federal Government to stand idly by if the toll of disaster continues to go unchecked.

Just a few months longer than 20 years later, standing idly by ended. On September 9, 1966, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act of 1966 and the Highway Safety Act of 1966. The signing ceremony in the Rose Garden of the White House marked a transformation in the Federal role in highway safety that had been slowly growing during the Eisenhower Administration, but had finally taken hold as fatalities on the Nation's highways climbed toward 50,000. The steps taken during the previous 2 decades to reverse the trend had failed and the old "truths"-that highway safety was a State responsibility, that drivers could be convinced or taught to drive safely, and that the automobile industry should set its own rules-were revealed as insufficient in the wake of ever increasing fatalities and injuries.

The sidebar grew into "President Dwight D. Eisenhower and the Federal Role in Highway Safety," the story of how this transformation took place.

In writing this monograph, I took advantage of the chronological history of the war on traffic deaths and injuries contained in the pages of the National Safety Council's magazine *Public Safety* (*Traffic Safety* beginning in July 1957). Because each issue reflected contemporary thinking as it evolved, the magazine helped tell the story of the transformation nationally as the Federal Government moved gradually, even reluctantly, from rallying public support to legislating changes.

Throughout the monograph, I relied on fatality, injury, and other statistics reported in the magazine. Aside from the consistency this approach provided, I adopted it because these statistics were used by

President Dwight D. Eisenhower and the Federal Role in Highway Safety
Preface
Introduction
Chapter 1: President Harry S. Truman's Highway Safety Conferences
Chapter 2: A Crusade for Safety
Chapter 3: Maintaining The Focus
Chapter 4: The Federal Role in Highway Safety
Epilogue: The Changing Federal Role
Appendix

all sources in speeches and articles at the time of the events described. Final statistics accepted by the U.S. Department of Transportation vary, often significantly. [See Appendix 1 for fatalities, VMT, and fatality rates, 1950-2002.](#)

I want to thank the U.S. Department of Transportation Library for the resources it made available for this monograph. As always, its staff was consistently helpful and productive-as well as patient when I held magazines and publications beyond the due dates. Loretta A. Hoffman, Manager of the Circulation and Interlibrary Loan Services, was especially helpful (and patient). Sherie A. Abassi and Barbara D. Day in the FHWA's Office of Chief Counsel were also helpful in tracking down obscure information about laws and resolutions passed many years ago.

I also want to thank Sonquela "Sonnie" Seabron for her invaluable research assistance at key points. On several occasions, she went to the Library of Congress with only a barebones description of what I was looking for and found exactly what I had in mind. She also used her research skills in the U.S. Department of Transportation Library and the Martin Luther King Jr. Public Library with equally useful results. In addition, Sonnie used her computer skills to provide the illustrations that accompany this monograph.

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<a href="#">◀ President Dwight D. Eisenhower and the Federal Role in Highway Safety</a>	<a href="#">Introduction ▶</a>
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