



DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

NEWS

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EXCERPTS OF REMARKS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY BY SECRETARY OF TRANSPORTATION JOHN A. VOLPE TO FORUM ON TRAFFIC SAFETY ALCOHOL COUNTERMEASURES FOR WOMEN'S NATIONAL ORGANIZATION, WASHINGTON, D.C., TUESDAY, JANUARY 12, 1971

There can be no permanent, total solution to the problem of highway safety until we do something about the habitually drunken driver. Getting control of this mindless menace is just as important as making safer cars and better roads.

It is a fact that alcohol is involved in 50 to 60 percent of highway fatalities, causing at least 30,000 deaths and 800,000 crashes every year.

It is a fact that problem drinkers, not social drinkers, cause at least two-thirds of these deaths.

It is a fact that the seven percent of drivers who cause 50 percent of the deaths can be identified, can be apprehended, can be controlled.

So there is no excuse for not sweeping them off the roads right now. President Nixon boldly seized the leadership in this issue last year and recommended that Congress give the highest possible priority to control of drunk drivers. He requested and we received from Congress an additional \$40 million for fiscal year 1972 and \$70 million for fiscal 1973 (as part of the 1970 Highway Act) to bolster our alcohol programs -- which I will describe in greater detail in a few moments. But first, let's take a look at our approach. Let's identify our target.

Some people have the notion that we are after the hide of ordinary social drinkers -- the 80 percent who have just one social drink and then drive home. It is not so. The one we are after -- right now -- are those who cruise around the streets with point ten percent blood alcohol levels -- and higher. They, in our opinion, are drunk. Too drunk to drive. Too drunk to be depended upon. But not too drunk to kill innocent people. And the tragic fact is, they constitute only 5 to 7 percent of the driving public. How tragic! That these few can kill and main so many!

These are the ones we must identify, treat, and control. That isn't as hard as it sounds. These habitual drunks are well-known in their communities. They often have multiple arrest records. They have been under treatment. They are bad employment risks. They are well known to their neighbors, to welfare agencies, and to local traffic courts.

Once we have identified these alcoholic menaces in our midst we must then weed them out through selective licensing and stiffer enforcement. You and I have to mobilize and enlist public support among the pace-setters, opinion-makers, and trend-setters in our local communities. This is basically a job for local government to do. It absolutely cannot be accomplished simply by exhortations or money from Washington. It can be accomplished, however, with the dedication and concern I know **we** can expect from organizations such as yours.

I hope that in your states and communities you ladies will keep hammering home the sad fact that twice as many Americans died last year in crashes where intoxicants were involved as were murdered. And that twice as many innocent passengers, drivers, and pedestrians were killed by inebriated drivers as by rapists, thieves, and all other criminals combined.

I hope you will remind the public that alcoholic drivers destroyed six times as much property last year as was lost in all the robberies, arsons, and burglaries put together.

You should reiterate the astonishing truth that more adults were convicted of drunken driving than of murder, rape, assault and burglary.

You should tell influential state lawmakers that according to the Stanford Research Institute, if only 20 percent of drivers lost their licenses, the accident rate would go down as much as 80 percent! These are the facts that can wake people up and make them demand an end to this carnival of carnage on our public ways.

I wouldn't blame you for a little skepticism about the prospects. We all face a tough job. But certain European countries have already proven that alcohol countermeasures work. In Sweden, for example, only 10 percent, rather than 50 percent, of all fatally injured drivers are impaired by alcohol at the time of their accidents. In Britain fatalities and injuries are down by 35 percent in the hours between 10 p.m. and 4 a.m. when most alcohol-related crashes occur.

How did they do it? The answer is simplicity itself. If you are caught drunk while behind the wheel -- and breathalyzer tests are taken to prove it -- there is mandatory loss, suspension or restriction of your license. In Sweden and England there is no license to kill. And the law is backed up by severe social penalties -- the drunken driver is "bad news" in his community. Period. People ignore him. He is ostracized. He isn't glorified by night club comedians. He's known for what he is -- a potential killer.

We in this country can do the same.

I can assure you that the Department of Transportation will cooperate with State Governments and local law enforcement agencies in every way we can to help. We are already doing so in our community demonstrations known as Alcohol Safety Action Programs (ASAP). The first nine of 86 programs are already in operation, with a budget of 18 million dollars and three basic goals:

- (1) To Identify the problem drinkers.
- (2) To determine the extent of his drinking and dispose of his case.
- (3) To keep him from ever getting behind the wheel -- drunk -- again.

I think the public will gladly support these progressive measures. They do not penalize the social drinker. They are not an attempt to impose moral standards across the board, as in prohibition days. Can we succeed? The answer is that we don't have any choice.

The number of vehicle miles driven may double in the next ten years. Therefore, alcohol countermeasures must be twice as effective over the next decade if we are even to hold our own, let alone solve the problem. And to reduce our death rate in half we will have to quadruple our present efforts.

We have to educate the public. We have to build a wave of public resentment against these losses which in financial terms alone amount to 16 billion dollars every year. We have to put that pressure on state legislatures and highway departments. We absolutely must dry out or control the 7 million heavy drinkers and alcoholics who persist in driving. Their present freedom to murder innocent people is absolutely intolerable in a civilized society.

President Nixon has issued a great challenge to the people of this country -- to be a nation of builders who can unite to solve problems with common sense and tolerance, with technology and tenacity, with vigor and good will.

I know we can do so with your dedication and persistence. In fact, I will go out on a limb and make a prediction -- that with safety automobiles, better highways and strict control of irresponsible drivers, we will see a decrease of 10,000 in the highway death toll by the end of 1973.

And let me say again what you -- as citizens -- can do specifically to bring this about. Be aware. Be experts on individual state highway safety programs. Write to your Attorneys General and local law enforcement people. Call them. Ask what they're doing to get the drunk off the highway. Ask how you can help. Put them on the spot. If they slack off let them know you think more ought to be done -- and let us know too.

If that doesn't work insist upon talking with the Governor. It can be done! As a former governor, I know full well the power and influence of strong-willed, civic-minded women! Meet with the legislative chairmen of highway safety committees. Go to State Supreme Judicial Councils. be gadflies. Be activists. Be tenacious. Be sincere. Never let go.

I've learned in Washington that programs without commitment from the citizens, don't go very far. What I'm really asking you is this: To become a people's lobby for highway safety. Your insistence on action will ensure the success of this program. You'll be lobbying for most precious thing the good Lord gave us. You'll be lobbying for life.

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