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REMARKS BY U.S. SECRETARY OF TRANSPORTATION JOHN A. VOLPE TO THE FIFTH ANNUAL CONFERENCE, NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF WOMEN HIGHWAY SAFETY LEADERS, WASHINGTON, D. C., SUNDAY, OCTOBER 1, 1972

Let me begin by bringing you greetings from President Nixon along with his appreciation and admiration for the job you're doing for highway safety.

Last May, when Agnes Beaton asked me if I would speak at your fall conference, I said "Name the day and the hour and I'll be there."

I consider alcohol countermeasures one of our most important programs, and this association among its greatest champions. You proclaim the message in places where it counts most -- in Governors' offices, the halls of state legislatures, and local assemblies; you carry the word into public forums, polling places, and into the schools and homes of our Nation.

Last January, with your participation and support, the representatives of 46 national women's organizations went away from the conference at Disney World committed to the full support of your crusade for greater highway safety. We couldn't buy the kind of manpower it would take to solve the drunk driver problem in the United States. But with the tremendous woman-power supporting our Alcohol Countermeasures Program, with the help of private and public agencies, and with the growing awareness that the highway drunk is not a problem we can live with, I just don't see how the drinking driver can expect to escape the enforcement and rehabilitation dragnet now spreading across the country.

The message is unmistakable. When a problem drinker puts his hand to the bottle, that's his business. But when he puts his foot to the throttle, then it's society's business. And it's our business -- yours and mine -- to stop him!

You know the penalty if we fail.

Last year there were more than 13 million motor vehicle accidents. 54,700 Americans died on the highways. Four million others were injured. The economic cost alone is a staggering \$46 billion, and no one can put a price tag on the lives -- especially the young lives -- lost in highway crashes.

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There is, however, some cause for cautious optimism.

The highway "body count" declined slightly last year, for the second year in a row. The highway death rate (fatalities per 100 million miles driven) now stands at 4.70 -- lowest in our history. That's a reduction of 14-1/2 percent from the 5.50 rate of five years ago.

In fact, if the 1967 rate had gone unchecked, we would have lost 65,000 people in highway accidents last year. So we can conclude that national programs to make cars, drivers and highways safer had a collective impact last year alone of 10,300 lives saved that might otherwise have been squandered in highway homicides. And you can take credit for playing a part in that accomplishment.

But gratifying as any toehold on the highway safety challenge may be, there are certain off-setting and frankly disturbing facts that have to be faced.

For one, alcohol is still a major killer andcrippler of highway travelers -- a factor in 50 percent of all fatal traffic accidents, up from 18 percent 25 years ago.

Then we must also accept the ugly fact that sometime in the months just ahead we will log the two millionth highway fatality in the 75 years the motor vehicle has been a part of the American scene. And we are speeding toward that grim milestone at the rate of one thousand deaths a week!

There are other realities not to be ignored.

The total number of miles driven in this country is going up five percent a year.

The motor vehicle population grew four-and-a-half million in 1971. In the past five years, motor vehicle registrations have increased 16-1/2 percent. In the same period, the growth in motorcycles and similar vehicles was nearly 69 percent. This is a matter of some concern, because the greater the disparity in size and weight between colliding vehicles, the more serious the consequences are apt to be.

Since 1967 the number of licensed drivers on our streets and highways has gone up 11 percent. And a greater proportion of the drivers today are in the under-25 category.

So the potential for tragedy is much greater. It's a real tribute to your dedication to the task at hand, together with President Nixon's determination to do everything possible at the Federal level to reduce highway casualties, that we have been able to actually reduce the highway death toll, however slightly, in each of the past two years.

Now we must do more and we must work still harder. We must be more effective in our efforts to safeguard the motorist, and more emphatic in programs of public, parental and professional guidance. And together we must do a better job of persuading those who write the rules of the road, those who enforce them, and those who adjudicate infractions that the license to drive is not a license to kill. A reckless, careless or irresponsible driver can be as destructive as a terrorist on the loose; a "loaded" driver as lethal as a loaded gun. By taking pity on a dangerous driver -- by releasing the drunk driver to drink and drive again -- a judge or jury may be motivated by compassion, but they are doing the individual a dis-service that may cost him his life, or the crushing guilt of having other lives on his conscience.

Earlier this year, a man driving home from work on I-66 near Washington, D. C. was killed when his car was struck head-on by a motorist going the wrong way on the divided highway. The wrong-way driver reeked of liquor, and in his pocket was a letter reminding him that in two days he had a date with his probation officer. Why was he on probation? For a drunk driving charge.

In another case, also near Washington, five young people were killed on a Sunday afternoon sightseeing drive in the Shenandoah Mountains, when a drunk driver unaccountably crossed the divider line and rammed their small car.

I know personally how sudden and how frightening the crossover experience can be. I was on my way to the airport from a speech to the National Council on Alcoholism in Kansas City last April, when the lights of a speeding car suddenly appeared -- on our side of the divided highway! That's one time I was glad to have a police escort! The officer chased the driver and, fortunately, stopped him before he did any damage. Yes ... he was obviously intoxicated.

These are the kinds of situations and tragedies our Alcohol Safety Action Projects and our entire Alcohol Countermeasures Program are designed to prevent. Certainly my experience was not a rare one. Nearly everyone who travels by car has had a close call. Many never know they have flirted with death or skirted disaster.

We found, for example, in our Kansas City Alcohol Safety Action Program research that a motorist driving the streets between 1:00 p.m. and 3:00 a.m. could expect to encounter a car driven by a drunk driver every four minutes... 15 times an hour! And, as I had told that Kansas City audience just an hour before my experience with a wrong-way motorist, "That's playing Russian roulette with your life -- a gamble that some drunk won't cross the white line and collide head-on with your car."

In many places people are afraid to walk the city streets at night. So they have given up walking the streets.

But driving at night can be just as dangerous, yet no one seems ready to give up his car. In a survey a few years ago, people were first reminded of the motor vehicle's side effects -- the pollution and congestion it causes, the impact on our cities, the toll it takes in deaths and injuries -- and then they were asked: Is it worth it?

Eighty five percent said yes -- whatever its costs, the car is necessary, and the mobility it provides essential to the American lifestyle.

But if the car is worth having, then it must be worth the small additional measures of time and energy and resources needed to make it a safe and sane instrument of transportation. And if we can reform, or remove from the traffic pattern, the slim seven percent of the drivers -- the problem drinkers -- who cause two thirds of the 27,000 deaths and 800,000 crashes in which alcohol is a factor, then we will have gone a long way toward our goal of 50 percent fewer fatalities by 1980.

That's what our Alcohol Countermeasures Program, bolstered by organized public support, can achieve. We can get the drunk driver -- the unreformed alcoholic -- off the road before he kills himself or others. If that task entails arrest, then we must not be reluctant to impose treatment and rehabilitation in dealing with the offender.

I am well aware that there is a delicate balance between punishment and rehabilitation, and mixed opinions on the relative values of each. We walk a thin line in trying to determine the merits of confinement or license confiscation versus medical and educational programs.

But there is also a thin line between the social drinker and the irresponsible drunk ... a thin line in safe reaction times (a delay of just two-fifths of a second in hitting the brakes at 30 miles-per-hour can cause a car to travel through a crosswalk instead of stopping in front of it) ... a thin line between life and death.

So we intend to take the narrow path -- to walk the thin line that may force some to choose between the right to drink and the privilege to drive. We intend to press for stricter enforcement and tougher judgements, to get drunks off the road and on the wagon. And we need your continued help and inspiration.

At the meeting of the presidents of women's national organizations last January, the delegates to that conference agreed to produce a handbook for use by women's organizations all across the country in gaining understanding and support for our Alcohol Countermeasures Program. That handbook will soon be finished and available in quantity.

But I've noticed that no one is sitting back waiting for the book. You have been working, very forcefully and effectively, without it. It is gratifying the way you have vigorously attacked the problem, working with our DOT Regional Representatives, and within the states, to promote the adoption and application of effective alcohol countermeasures.

We can provide funds and propose laws in Washington, but the real battleground is the main streets and the back roads of America. If the drunk driver is to be stopped, he must be intercepted by local law enforcement officers, tried by local judiciaries, treated by local medical agencies, tested by local motor vehicle authorities, and his future standing in the community determined by local public opinion.

At the Federal level we have proposed a slate of new highway standards to go into effect in 1973. These include:

- the mandatory use of seat belts;
- uniform traffic laws and rules;
- requirement that any motor vehicle operator submit to a breath test if a law enforcement officer has reason to believe he has been drinking;
- provision for a law making it illegal for a person to drive when he has 0.10 percent alcohol content in his blood;
- and a requirement for severely penalizing anyone convicted of driving without a license or while his license has been suspended or revoked.

The application of these standards, together with our other highway, vehicle and driver safety improvement programs, will help us meet President Nixon's commitment to reduce the slaughter on our highways.

We already have made a dent in the problem. With your help, we can remove it as a problem altogether.

So I hope you will continue to campaign earnestly for effective civil, medical and judicial responses to the challenge of alcoholism on wheels. I hope you will be satisfied with nothing short of a total solution to the drunk driver contagion in our country.

That's President Nixon's goal. It's mine. And I know you, and this organization, too well to believe that anyone here will ever settle for anything less.

Thank you for your zeal, your commitment, and your dedication to the task at hand. Let's make it clearly understood, far and wide, that the only belt for the road is the one we buckle.

Thank you.

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