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REMARKS BY SECRETARY OF TRANSPORTATION JOHN A. VOLPE
BEFORE THE MISSISSIPPI STATE UNIVERSITY HIGHWAY
SAFETY FORUM, WEDNESDAY, APRIL 8, 1970,
7:30 P.M., CST, STATE COLLEGE, MISSISSIPPI

As I have said on many previous occasions -- we won't really do the job in highway safety until enough people become personally concerned. And it is through forums such as this one that we can get our message across and come up with suggestions, programs, and improvements that are far-reaching and effective.

Let me say, too, that I am delighted to see such fine cooperation here between the private and public sectors. While I am sure that everyone at Allstate Insurance readily concedes that highway safety is in their best business interest, let me say that here is a company that is coming right out and doing something, not just talking. We are seeing more and more of this in the insurance industry every day, and I support their involvement and welcome their significant contribution.

We are faced with 150 highway deaths a day in this country -- a "dismal toll". But we are making progress. I was looking over some figures the other day -- checking the deaths-per-100-million vehicle miles for 1969. Here in Mississippi, the rate was 6.4. This is a little above the national figure, but it's a sharp improvement over 1967, when there were 9.1 deaths per 100-million vehicle miles.

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Then I saw another figure that puts the matter in perspective. Back in 1909, when our fathers and grandfathers rode around in buggies, carriages, and wagons, the death rate for horse-drawn vehicles was thirty per 100-million vehicle miles! So we've come a long way since 1909!

Of course, we are rolling up an awful lot more vehicle miles nowadays -- a point which I am sure doesn't escape any of you. So there is a distinct and profound need for involvement in highway safety. The work that you are doing is work of the highest order, and I support and endorse your efforts heartily and sincerely.

There is never one cheap, simple solution in our search for safety. We have a systems problem of man, machine, and highway, and we must get systems answers.

And awareness of the problem must be widespread before the system really starts to "swing". In fact, our growing awareness that we could do better prompted Congress to pass the National Highway Safety and National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Acts in the first place.

Now we have solid statistical proof that laminated windshields, reinforced fuel tanks, collapsible steering columns, better brakes, crash padding, and safety harnesses really do work. Seat belts alone saved almost 3,000 lives in 1969.

From 1962 through 1966, the average increase in fatalities was 6.9% per year. However, since our expanded Federal safety program got under way just two years ago, this deadly annual increment has dropped to 2.3% -- in spite of a 6.4% rise in vehicle registrations and an 8.6% jump in total mileage.

This is a rather startling drop when you remember that only 10% of all cars on the road have the new safety devices. So the potential for dramatic improvement is there. Safety does pay off.

I think this is the biggest factor we have going for us -- the knowledge that something can be done. For years we were victimized by the notion that all those crashes were "accidents" in the sense that they couldn't really be prevented. Now we know better. There's no such thing as a true accident. For every crash there is a cause -- and those causes can be countered.

I believe that if we systematically apply what we already know, 10,000 or more lives can be saved every year. Naturally, we can't achieve such a figure overnight, though Lord knows we all wish we

could. But the Department of Transportation, the Nixon Administration, and I'm sure the Congress, are totally committed to apply whatever resources are necessary to cut this toll of death and mutilation to the lowest level possible.

We are developing a quality grading system for tires so that customers will be able to compare brands and not be overwhelmed by the variety of types and grades now on the market. We are going to require greater endurance, strength, and traction. And we are taking firm steps to stop this practice where a handful of dealers are buffing the warning off "Farm Use Only" tires and selling them to unsuspecting motorists for highway use.

Incidentally, the tire industry just two days ago announced a campaign to inform motorists of the extreme danger of driving on under-inflated or bald tires. The industry is distributing a booklet showing that bald tires are fifty times as likely to develop flats and twice as likely to skid.

Here again -- we have action taken by industry that is in the public interest, action for which I applaud the tiremakers.

My friends -- with the Department of Transportation, safety is no slogan -- it's a crusade. We are in this for the long haul. Last October 23rd, President Nixon appointed an elite Task Force on Highway Safety to formulate basic strategies and goals for the Seventies and beyond. But while that task force of top experts and business leaders is at work, we in the Department of Transportation are pushing forward on all fronts to save lives now.

We are financing research on anti-skid devices, approach-rate detectors and proximity brakes. We have proposed new standards for retreads.

All these steps are important in a balanced program to prevent car crashes from happening in the first place. But what happens if all precautions fail?

Safety belts properly installed and used can and do save many lives.

But studies show that at most only 25% of motorists and passengers actually buckle up -- fewer still if you are talking about shoulder harnesses. A belt that isn't fastened is useless. What we need are passive restraint systems that work whether or not the occupants do anything on their own behalf.

Air bags are the most promising devices of this kind. I spent two days in Detroit in January and I found the industry is willing to go all out on air bags and is pouring a lot of time and energy into perfecting them. I saw demonstrations with a humanoid dummy and those bags really kept that simulated occupant in his seat.

I am so confident that the bugs can be worked out of the system that we announced -- last month -- our intention to publish a proposed rulemaking which will require that air bags be installed in the front seat passenger positions of all automobiles produced after January 1, 1972.

We intend to issue a formal "Notice of Proposed Rulemaking" in the very near future, and take interested comments from all interested parties. If we then go ahead with the order -- and every indication is that we will -- we then plan to extend air bag protection to the driver's side and to the rear seats as soon as certain design problems are solved.

Naturally, such devices as air bags work best when intrusions into the passenger compartment can be limited, and we are studying the potential of impact-attenuating bumpers and side and top intrusion resistance right now. I was delighted that Allstate is preparing to reduce collision premium rates by 20% on cars that can take a front or rear-end impact of 5 miles per hour without damage. And Ford's stated intent to make significant improvements in bumper design is most timely and welcome. Better bumpers could save motorists \$1 billion every year in lower premiums and lower repair costs.

As far as the vehicle is concerned, I don't believe we have overlooked very much -- including the hazards of fire. We are proposing a rule to minimize the danger to crash victims of flammable fabrics in auto upholstery. When these fabrics catch fire, they give off poisonous fumes that can suffocate helpless occupants who would otherwise survive.

However, the problem of doctoring present-day cars is endlessly complex and, as you may recall, in the Motor Vehicle Safety Act Congress

mandated D-O-T to build an experimental safety car from scratch. We have put this program on a firm technical and management base and now we are really rolling.

We have already received some interesting proposals and we anticipate the awarding of contracts by about June 30. We hope to get delivery of prototypes from outside and inside the auto industry by October 31, 1971. We will aim for maximum crashworthiness, ease of inspection and maintenance, stability, and occupant safety.

I think you can sense our urgency in all this. We haven't a moment to waste where human lives are at stake. How many of the thousands of young people killed every year might have become the Jonas Salks, Albert Einsteins, and Michelangelos of the future? We will never know unless we save them from needless, tragic death and mutilation.

A lot of crash victims are dying simply because we don't get them to the hospital fast enough. In May of last year, our Department made a grant of \$455,000 to Mississippi State University, to develop emergency medical services based on the latest technology, and I am pleased that Mississippi is one of the states that is exploiting helicopters effectively right now through the Highway Safety Program. This was a demonstration program on the part of the Federal Government and we proved the point. Helicopter ambulance service is necessary, worthwhile, and we are delighted that the State of Mississippi will be picking up the financing after the July 1 expiration date.

However, we look at highway safety -- from the point of view of the automobile, the road, the driver, or the life-saving measures we must employ when any of those three components fail -- we see the need for a systematic approach to safety. We must see the picture whole.

And there is much more that needs to be done.

Isn't it obvious that driver education is not what it should be, that it doesn't screen out potential highway lunatics and instill a sense of responsibility in young drivers? Isn't it clear that our methods of licensing drivers are often primitive? And isn't it obvious even to a child that our casual attitude toward drunks is perhaps the most neglected part of our safety approach?

Just consider the hard facts about alcohol for a minute. How many citizens know that drunken drivers are implicated in nearly one-half of all fatal crashes in this country? How many know that drunken drivers account for up to 25,000 deaths every year, 800,000 injuries, and untold waste and misery?

How some people still think you can't do anything about the drunken driver. It's not so. The first thing we must do -- and can do -- is to identify the drunk. When a man is convicted for drunk driving his entire background should be investigated before he is sentenced. The judge should order a search of the records to find out whether the offender has ever been arrested before for drunkenness -- on or off the highway.

The least we can do is know who the alcoholics are.

Then the judge can say to this individual, "okay, it's either jail or treatment, take your choice."

This is just an example of the approach we feel must be taken. Let me tell you, we have new management and new organization at the National Highway Safety Bureau -- and we're going to come up with new ways to get the job done!

Tomorrow afternoon, Doug Toms, the Director of the National Highway Safety Bureau, and his associates, will be talking to you about the possibilities in greater detail.

Doug, by the way, is a real top caliber individual, and I know you will all profit greatly by his remarks. He has two of his colleagues with him, and tomorrow afternoon's sessions should be fruitful and productive.

I have only been able to briefly outline the immense task remaining before us. It is a many-sided problem of analysis and action but the difficulties must not discourage us. Let us keep in mind that even with no further reductions in the death rate per 10,000 vehicles, 85,000 American men, women, and children will die on our streets and highways in 1980.

This is a loss we can't afford -- a loss civilized people should not tolerate. We have a long way to go, however -- even with a 10%

reduction annually in the death rate per 100-million miles, we would still lose 43,000 people per year on the highways ten years from now.

So we must redouble our efforts; triple them; pour in men, money, and ideas. Most of all -- we must commit ourselves at all levels of government.

I see hopeful signs that we are on the move -- in the private sector, where the auto makers, the tire makers, and the insurance people are investing unprecedented attention and funds in auto safety; in state and local government where there is a willingness to challenge tradition, in the research community, and in the Federal Government itself acting as a catalyst. One thing is certain -- this is a national problem, yet the Federal Government cannot solve it without your creative assistance at the state level.

We need you to help us convince the public that an investment in safety pays many dividends -- to families and to society at large. It will cost us a major public effort. Ultimately, however, safety can carry no price tag -- not where lives are at stake -- not when the productive potential of this nation depends on maximizing our human resources.

The first traffic fatality in America happened in 1899 on the streets of New York. There was a great public outcry but what has happened in the intervening 71 years? Since then, we have lost over one million lives on our highways. Even though I have read the figures many times, it still astonishes me that highway crashes kill off ten times as many people every year as die in all our violent crimes put together, far more than we lose in foreign wars. It is strange how casually we take this suffering. If we lost as many fine, productive people from tuberculosis or polio -- diseases we have conquered -- there would be a national uproar. Let's make it the business of our generation to put highway fatalities in the same league with other conquered diseases.

My conviction is that safe passage on our highways and byways will undoubtedly be a major challenge of the next decade.

I would like to see more of these meetings all across the nation to face that challenge. I'd like to see more public leaders getting behind solid research, information exchange, and preventive measures such as Senator Stennis has done here. I'd like to see a real commitment to highway safety in every community in the country, because that commitment always pays off -- and there is no other way.