



DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

NEWS

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REMARKS BY SECRETARY OF TRANSPORTATION JOHN A. VOLPE BEFORE THE 13TH BIENNIAL HIGHWAY TRANSPORTATION CONGRESS, AT THE WASHINGTON HILTON HOTEL, WASHINGTON, D. C., APRIL 21, 1970, 12 NOON.

It is a distinct pleasure to be here for the 13th Biennial Highway Transportation Congress. The highway network that links America together is the backbone of our national strength.

Our fabulous interstate system alone is the most substantial public works project ever undertaken in the history of civilization. I use the word "alone," because I always like to emphasize that when completed, the interstate system will carry well over 20 percent of the Nation's traffic, but still will comprise just a little more than only one percent of the Nation's total road and street mileage.

The interstate system is one of the best things that ever happened to this -- or any other Nation. Studies show that highway-user benefits (and you can translate that to read "American Taxpayer Benefits") will total almost \$12 billion by the time the system is complete. These benefits stem from lower operating costs, time costs and the value of convenience in this fast-moving, dollar-oriented world.

The safety features of the interstate system are such that when completed, we will be saving close to 10,000 lives each year; travel on the interstate system is more than twice as safe as on older roads -- in fact, for every 5 miles of highway we build to interstate standards, we save one life per year -- on a continuing basis! If there were no other reason to build the system, this would be reason enough!

But I didn't come here today to tell you something you already know. I would rather take my allotted time today to

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pass along to you a message that I have stated elsewhere in recent months -- a message that Frank Turner and Ralph Bartlesmeyer have been carrying from coast to coast. In fact, it's a matter that all of us in the Federal Government are concerned with, and that is the environment we live in and the environment we hope to leave for the generations that will walk in our footsteps.

"Environment" seems -- all of a sudden -- to be the "in" thing this year. Why even movie stars, jet-setters, northern democrats, southern republicans, college students and even high school kids are making it "their bag" -- as they say. And I say that's all well and good. It's about time the people of this planet began to care about the world that was given to us to live on.

When someone wants to know what right we have -- in the time-span of a few generations -- to use up the majority of our irreplaceable natural resources which took millions of years to produce -- you had better be ready with an answer! It is a serious question -- it is a valid question. And you and I have to be dead serious in trying to answer that question -- because in all too many instances (and highway-originated air pollution is one of them), we are dealing with a matter of life or death for future generations.

Don't get me wrong. I don't have a great deal of patience with those few people who seem to think we could solve a whole pack of social and environmental problems if we would simply stop building highway improvements. I think you and I know American independence well enough to agree that those motor vehicles are going to be operated whether we provide safe and efficient highways or not. And without good highways, those vehicles will be operated with a considerable degree of danger, congestion and inefficiency.

The answer to the problem then is not to halt the building of highways. The answer is to make sure that the highways go in the proper place -- and I mean "proper" with a whole lot of qualifications which I'll get into in a moment -- and to make sure that the vehicles which use those highways in ever-increasing numbers do not foul our air, choke our lungs, take our lives.

There are a number of presumably well-meaning persons in this country today who have -- to say the least -- a sadly underdeveloped understanding of what highway transportation does for these United States.

I am impatient with those who would bury automobiles, and those who would insist on complete moratoriums on highway construction.

Yet, on the other hand, let's today take a rational, soul-searching look at the problems created by highway transportation. Because there are problems -- yes; because there is damage to the environment -- yes; and most of all, because we can make an extra effort to come up with solid results.

I have enough faith in American ingenuity -- enough faith in the basic American conscience that made this Nation great -- to know instinctively that we will not cover the Nation with concrete, will not throw people out in the streets in order to build better streets, that we will not fill precious urban land with parking lots, garages and interchanges, and that we will not desecrate our atmosphere so that plants won't grow, aircraft have to use radar on otherwise sunny days and people are afraid to open the windows of their houses.

I know that you gentlemen want a better highway network, but I also know you are not thinking of making the Nation -- and the world -- pay so inordinate a price. Let's take a look at American transportation right now from national viewpoint. I think it will help make my case.

In 1968 (the last year for which figures are available), cars and buses together accounted for 89 percent of the Nation's total passenger bill, and 10 percent of the gross national product. Motor trucks, which accounted for 17 percent of the registered vehicles and nearly 20 percent of the vehicle miles traveled, accounted for 73 percent of the Nation's total freight bill and over 6 percent of the gross national product. This represents an expenditure of almost \$55 billion in 1968 for the movement of goods by truck over the Nation's roads and streets. This was not sight-seeing driving, remember. This was not taking a spin on a Sunday afternoon. This is money spent by shippers and by consumers for the goods they need.

And beyond commercial highway traffic -- the movement of necessary goods -- highways have given Americans the opportunity to own and operate their own personal transportation systems.

The private passenger automobile has been a vital factor in opening up the Nation to job opportunities, educational facilities, parks and recreational areas, health centers and just plain simple friendly neighborhood visiting. The private passenger automobile has brought this Nation together as nothing has ever done before.

Yes, because of its combination of flexibility with speed and dependability, highway transportation has had an impact on our entire social and economic development that would be difficult to exaggerate. The impact is so pervasive it is even difficult to comprehend. We simply tend to take it for granted.

Highways open new land, so our cities will not be as crowded. Highways allow the less-affluent small businessman to take advantage of less expensive manufacturing sites. Highways provide overnight truck service to major cities -- bringing perishables 12 months a year.

The conclusion is inescapable -- the way we live in America today would be impossible without economically healthy and efficient highway transportation, and I mean highways that move an incredible amount and variety of goods and services as well as people.

More than 25,000 cities and towns in the United States rely exclusively on highway transportation -- they don't have rail service, they don't have airports. For those 25,000 communities -- and the millions of people who live in them -- we have no intention of saying "no more highways," "no more motor vehicles," "no more transportation."

Yet at the same time we must recognize that highways can wipe out neighborhoods. Air pollution is a killer. Traffic congestion is tedious -- in fact, unhealthy. It's bad for your nerves and heaven knows we have enough other things to worry about. Highways can obliterate irreplaceable historical assets. Highways can -- and have, in a few sorry cases -- been bulldozed through scenic areas.

As you know, I was a builder in private life; not a highway builder, but a builder nonetheless. And I was determined that whenever we could, we would do our building and leave the land a little better than it was when we found it. We did that with buildings -- and I know it can be done with highways. I know that sometimes it costs a little more -- sometimes it extends the mileage a little. Sometimes it delays a ribbon-cutting ceremony by a few months (sometimes even a few years.) Sometimes it is frustrating for those who think that the shortest distance between two points should be regularly under construction.

But delay we will -- as protect we must. Highways are so permanent that they will some day be the artifacts of our civilization -- they will remain, just as the pyramids are all that are left of ancient Egypt.

We cannot build one inch of pavement without full planning, full consideration for the environment, full consideration for human and natural resources. And that is the policy of the Department of Transportation, the Federal Highway Administration and the Bureau of Public Roads today. And that is the policy that shall remain.

You are the highway users -- you are the ones who pay the bills, through our great highway trust fund which the late President Eisenhower recognized would be the best possible way to get the job done -- a job that really needed doing. And because you are the bill-payers, I want to make a partial accounting to you here today on what we've done with your money.

In the past fiscal year a full 15 percent of total project costs for Federal-aid highway projects was devoted to items generally associated with the environment. That is more than half a billion dollars of your Federal highway user tax money committed in just one year for such items as landscaping, beautification, control of erosion and siltation, control of noise and air pollution and added costs in design features -- such as depressed roadways or aesthetic treatment of structures -- and added costs in right-of-way -- such as buffer zones and wider medians.

This emphasis on the environment will receive even higher priority in the future as the highway program responds to its social as well as its transportation responsibilities.

Two weeks ago today the Wall Street Journal ran an article about what we are doing at the Department. The headlines read: "Volpe stiffens stand on roads that disrupts housing, scenic sites." And in about the fifth paragraph they quoted me directly -- and I'd like to repeat that quote and emphasize our position. I said then -- and I say again now -- "Freeways that adversely affect our environment cannot be built."

Well, that article has generated quite a bit of fan mail -- from all across the country, from people in all walks of life. But there was one letter in particular that I would like to share with you today. It came from James Biddle, who is President of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. The most important point in the letter is this: Jim wrote, "Last year representatives from the President's Advisory Council on Historic Preservation and I met with members of the American Road Builders Association and other interested persons for exploratory discussions. We discovered that our aims were not as divergent as it might seem. We agreed that communications between the two groups could and should be improved in the interest of meeting our respective goals. I earnestly hope that other such meetings will follow."

So you see, gentlemen, this is not an irreconcilable confrontation. We are not -- you and I -- specifically at odds with those who think of highways as threats. In fact, as Frank Turner and I have pointed out on many occasions, out of the 42,500 mile interstate system, the grand total of projects under protest amounts to 105 miles! Gentlemen, you could face much more damaging odds.

I am convinced that working together, and with the improved communications Jim Biddle wrote about, the conflict some extremists wail about can and will be resolved. While government and the auto industry work to counter air pollution, you can work and make concessions to good design, protection of green space and compatibility with human needs.

While government forges ahead with vastly expanded programs for public transportation of people in urban areas, you can intensify your efforts for efficient and compatible movement of materials and goods into and out of our congested urban areas.

While we develop long-range plans for such new and different modes of transportation such as tracked air cushion vehicles, high-speed trains in tubes and tunnels, "STOL" and "V-STOL" aircraft, and better uses of our waterways, you can make more efficient use of highways that now exist.

Transportation demands will double in the next decade. Highways alone will never come close to doing the whole job. But without highways the job would be impossible.

On this note, then, let me again solicit your unqualified support for our public transportation legislation now being considered by the Congress. This bill -- which will provide America's cities large and small with guaranteed long-range financing for public transportation projects -- passed the Senate 88 to 4. It will come up for debate on the floor of the House soon, and we will be delighted to have your support. It will be support well-placed, believe me.

If we fail to provide America's cities with alternatives to highway transportation, the highway users of this Nation will be faced with congestion of unimaginable proportions.

I mentioned that transportation demands will double in the next two decades. When the research boys first gave me that figure, I sent them back. I told them it sounded preposterous. When they came back they said: "You were right, Mr. Secretary, it'll be a lot more like 18 years rather than 20."

So we must forever abandon the idea that highway transportation alone will solve America's needs in the movement of people and goods. We must forever abandon the idea that one mode of transportation deserves to be favored over all others. And we must commit ourselves to the cooperation required if we are to live in harmony with the environment while providing the transportation capacity the Nation demands.

My friends -- working together, understanding common problems, sharing expertise and dedicating ourselves to excellence -- will allow this Nation and its people to fully enjoy the best of everything.

Narrow thinking, petty jealousy, professional infighting -- these will result in nothing short of disaster.

I am confident the highway users federation will steer clear of this latter course. I am confident you can and will meet all the needs of coming generations.

Again, I thank you for the opportunity to be with you today. I have enjoyed the chance to discuss our common challenges.

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