



DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

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EXCERPTS OF REMARKS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY BY SECRETARY OF TRANSPORTATION JOHN A. VOLPE AT ANNUAL MEETING OF NATIONAL RESEARCH COUNCIL, CHAIRMAN'S LUNCHEON, WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 14, 1970, 12:00 NOON, SHERATON-PARK HOTEL, WASHINGTON, D. C.

I welcome this opportunity to be with you for your forty-ninth annual meeting. The last 49 years have been a period of extraordinary growth for the American highway system.

Today we have almost 90 million cars on the road plus another 17 million trucks and buses. We are adding to this number by a net increase of more than 12-thousand vehicles every 24 hours. At the same time, the volume of traffic is rising 5 percent a year -- doubling every 15 years at the current rate.

There is no question that this is the age of the automobile as a major instrument in improving the quality of life in rural as well as urban America, for rich and poor alike - north, south, east and west. It has been a foundation of our economy, as well as a profound shaper of the quality of life in our society.

But I think we can no longer avoid the vital and very tough question: Should we continue to increase our reliance on this one transportation mode? Has it "topped out," as we say in construction? Should we push our dependence on it beyond some reasonable upper bound and permit it to change from a servant to our master, to become an end in itself rather than a means to a better life?

This is one of the most critical questions now facing transportation planners and decision makers in this country.

I don't want to jump to conclusions particularly without as much research evidence and hard data as I would like to have to back me up, but I am -- very frankly, skeptical that we can continue to plan around the automobile as we have been doing.

This continued explosive growth in automobile usage can begin to produce greater degradations than improvements in the quality of life. And the different degradations that our present trends can produce are increasingly obvious.

--Air pollution is one. The internal combustion engine accounts for 50 to 85 percent of air pollution in the cities.

--Congestion is another. We seem to be the victims of a growth phenomenon which, almost with the precision of a pure mathematical formula, guarantees that the more roads you build the more traffic jams develop.

--Another problem is that highways promote the flight to suburbs, contribute to urban sprawl, increase commuting time and remove revenue-producing land from the tax rolls.

--And, most tragically, there are the so-called "accidents," the highway crashes that kill 55,000 Americans every year, and injure close to two million.

I say "so-called accidents" to emphasize that the crash that ends with broken bleeding bodies is the result of man-made vehicles, man-made roads, man-made rules of driving and -- obviously, the action of man behind the wheel.

I hardly need recite to this group the conclusive evidence that we now have that our modern, well-designed Interstate System is the safest network of highways anywhere in the world.

-- In rural areas, the mileage death rate off the Interstate is 7.56 per hundred million vehicle miles compared to 3.74 on the Interstate.

-- In urban areas, the non-Interstate death record is 3.71 per hundred million vehicle miles, while the Interstate's record is 2.25.

This means that modern, well-designed highways save lives; later in this decade there will be 42,000 Interstate Highway miles in this Nation, with an annual savings of 7500 lives. Even now, with only some 28,000 miles of Interstate open to traffic, we know that for every 5 miles of highway we build we save one life per year -- on a continuing basis. This record isn't being generated by chance. It is irrefutable evidence of payoff in carefully conceived research -- spearheaded by the Highway Research Board, by you men in meetings such as this, and then implemented in both a fiscally and technically responsive manner.

But vastly safer highways, unfortunately, are not enough.

When the Congress unanimously enacted the landmark safety laws in 1966, it was to direct more attention to the motor vehicle, to the driver, to State and local government officials with responsibility for carrying out safety programs.

There was good reason for this.

-- Cars were not being built as safe as they should be -- not only in Detroit but in foreign factories as well.

-- Youngsters weren't being taught to drive as well as they should.

-- People weren't driving as well as circumstances demanded.

-- And we still had many miles of highway -- Interstate standards notwithstanding -- that suffered from unsafe design features.

In short, no one or group was doing all that was required in a coordinated approach bringing all elements together. This was, and continues in my mind to be, a fundamental objective of the safety laws: To bring about a unified, non-overlapping but mutually complimentary safety effort among all elements of governments -- not only within the Department of Transportation but all other Federal agencies as well; in State capitals as well as in local councils.

In keeping with this objective, we have taken what I am sure will prove to be a significant step.

After studying many alternatives for best accomplishing this fundamental purpose of providing safety leadership on a national all-out effort to bring this problem under control, I decided to bring the National Highway Safety Bureau directly under me into the Office of the Secretary.

This is to emphasize to all groups both in and out of government, whether they relate to the vehicle, the driver, the highway -- that I mean business. Transportation safety has been and will continue to be my personal crusade and I intend to push it to the hilt.

I predict that safety, in all modes of transportation, is going to be one of the great causes during the 70's.

An all-out effort in transportation safety could not be more timely, for the rising toll of deaths and injuries in all types of transportation crashes is clearly an important aspect of an overall environmental crisis we face in America.

We must act now to eliminate the intolerable congestion and pollution in our cities. From 50 to 85 percent of the pollution in urban areas is caused by the internal combustion engine.

I believe the cities cannot survive without alternative modes of transportation -- pollution-free buses, rapid rail-cars, subways, and other more exotic vehicles based on advances in aerospace and defense technology.

Without better urban transportation, the cities will choke and die; the pollution and noise will be unbearable. And ecologists tell us that our physical and emotional health is already in jeopardy -- so we can't wait to act. We have to act now to reverse this trend.

We are determined to protect the interests of posterity, which is to say the interest of your children and grandchildren and mine.

To put it all in perspective, I think we should remember that we began almost 200 years ago as a small band of pioneers on the Eastern Seaboard who fought with the unfriendly environment for their existence. Today, the tables have turned. Our God-given land and environment, so richly endowed to have produced in some two centuries the highest standards of living known to man, is in desperate danger of being destroyed for all time. And if the ecologists are right, the future of the environment is the future of man himself.

Your own responsibility in all this is enormous, for you have the highway expertise needed to produce the expansion of automotive transportation that is so crucial to continued economic growth. But your expert skills and judgment are no less vital for accomplishing this needed growth in highway transportation without degrading the environment.

This is the challenge to the highway research community: to lead in devising new ways of assessing each proposed highway project not only for its contribution to better transportation but also for any degradations, especially the irreversible kinds, it would produce.

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