



DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

NEWS

OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20590

57-S-70

EXCERPTS OF REMARKS BY U.S. SECRETARY OF TRANSPORTATION JOHN A. VOLPE TO THE 77TH ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF THE INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF CHIEFS OF POLICE, CONVENTION HALL, ATLANTIC CITY, NEW JERSEY, TUESDAY, OCTOBER 6, 1970, 11:00 A.M. EDT

Gentlemen, I feel privileged to attend this vital conference. I am most happy to bring you the personal good wishes of President Nixon for the success of your deliberations. And I'm glad to have the opportunity to talk with you frankly for a few minutes about some of the grave problems you and I share.

I might remind you also that one of our outstanding Department of Transportation facilities is located here in Atlantic City -- NAFEC, the National Aeronautic Facilities Experimental Center -- and you are most welcome to tour that installation during your visit here.

While preparing for this speech I was reminded of your study of a sample of cities two or three years ago showing that as much as 42 percent of police time is taken up with problems relating in one way or another to the automobile!

Now the automobile has provided this nation with a mobility that is the envy of the world, and the rest of the world is rushing pellmell to imitate us in "mobilizing" her citizens. But the automobile has also created by-products that are simply unacceptable. Smog, congestion, traffic control, auto theft, highway safety -- these are effects that must be brought under control.

Take safety for an example. Surely there is no more familiar sound on our streets today than the scream of police and ambulance sirens rushing to the scene of an accident. It is as familiar a scene of violence as the shoot-out was in the old West -- and far more deadly.

- more -

We are losing an incredible 56,000 lives a year on our roads, which proves that drivers, as well as cars, are recallable by their maker. We injure another two million every year -- some of them crippled for life. The pity is that so many young people are involved. Who knows how many of these young men might have gone on to become the Michaelangelos, the Einsteins and the Neil Armstrongs of the future.

For much too long we have taken the attitude that these crashes were just "accidents" and therefore by definition unpreventable. But our experience during the last two to three years under the Highway and Motor Vehicle Safety Acts shows that this fatalism is fatally wrong.

The rate of increase in fatal crashes has already begun its slow downward turn that we predicted. It is down from 6.9 percent between 1962-1966 to 2.3 percent in 1969, despite a 6.4 percent increase in vehicle registrations and an 8.6 percent jump in miles travelled. So we are on the right track.

Studies we and others, such as the National Safety Council, have undertaken show pretty conclusively that if the shoulder harnesses already installed in cars were always worn, 8 to 10,000 lives per year could be saved. They show that if available lap belts alone had been buckled in the year 1968, 6 to 8,000 more people would have survived. And they prove that if impact-absorbing steering wheels had been in effect in 1967 on all cars, the death rate would have plummeted from 53,000 down to 40,000.

I will go out on a limb and predict that with the new improvements in safety standards for automobiles such as the airbag and other passive restraint systems that we are now developing, with better designed highways, with the information from our experimental safety cars, and with better driver behavior, we will get a decrease of 10,000 in the highway death toll within the next two years.

I even will go so far as to say that we can achieve a 50 percent reduction within the next seven years. By 1980, in fact, I think cars will be so safe that it will be almost impossible to kill yourself in one at speeds under 60 miles-per-hour.

As police officers I know you will agree with me that there can be no permanent, total solution to the problem of highway safety, however, until we can do something about the habitually drunken driver. Getting control of this menace is just as important as making safer cars and designing better roads.

Look at the facts. We have estimated that the alcoholic is implicated in 30,000 deaths and 800,000 injuries every year. I don't know why the public is not as concerned about this as with the other violence in American life. One of the things you and I must do in our appearances before public groups is to make this picture clear. We should set the figures for highway crime and other crime side-by-side and let the public judge how serious drunken driving actually is.

We should keep repeating the sad fact that twice as many Americans dies last year in crashes where intoxicants were involved as were murdered.

We should reiterate that twice as many innocent passengers, drivers and pedestrians were killed by inebriated drivers as by rapists, thieves, and all other criminals combined.

We should keep hitting hard on the fact that alcoholic drivers destroyed six times as much property last year as was lost in all the robberies, arsons, and burglaries put together.

We ought to tell the public that more adults were convicted of drunken driving than of murder, rape, assault and burglary.

Maybe we ought to tell them too 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.

Now 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's not so. The ones we are after are the ones who cruise around the streets with .10 percent blood alcohol levels -- and higher -- and they constitute only 2 to 5 percent of the driving public. These are the compulsive drinkers, the repeaters, the invidious two percent who cause 40 percent -- and more -- of the highway fatalities in this country.

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.

You fellows have been facing this problem for so long, I wouldn't blame you for a little skepticism about the prospects. But certain European countries have already proven that alcoholic counter measures 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 10:00 P.M. and 4:00 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 made to prove it -- there is mandatory loss, suspension, or restriction of your licence. 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). Our goal is to raise the number of these programs to 86 by the close of fiscal year 1973. The first nine are already in operation, with a budget of \$18 million of three basic goals:

1. To identify the problem drinker.
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 are reasonable. They do not penalize the social drinker. They are not an attempt to impose moral standards across the board, as in prohibition days.

Yes, the police today are on the firing line of a lot of social issues. Your wisdom, imagination and professional skill are sorely needed. So have faith in yourselves. Have faith in the strength of our society.

The President has spoken urgently, eloquently, and bravely about our great prospects as a united people, and the people have responded. They are ready to solve their problems rationally and without violence. They still practice the old virtues of self-discipline, good manners, and moral uprightness. They have caught confidence that the President is making progress toward a lasting peace in Asia. If we can continue to work together, I have no doubt of the future glories of this Nation. We have come too far to turn our backs on destiny now.

####