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DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION | NEWS

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EXCERPTS OF REMARKS BY U.S. SECRETARY OF TRANSPORTATION, JOHN A. VOLPE TO THE AMERICAN SOCIETY OF CIVIL ENGINEERS, CHASE PARK PLAZA HOTEL, ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI, TUESDAY, OCTOBER 19, 1971, 1:15 p.m.

Transportation is on trial today, which means -- in a very real sense -- that America's engineering competence is also being put to the test.

The issue is not the engineering of stronger bridges, better highways or more graceful airline terminals; your profession's superb performance in these tasks is well proven.

The crucible today is public acceptance of transportation's interface with society. It is no longer enough to bridge rivers and span canyons, unless we also close the gap of public confidence in our capacity to solve social as well as technical problems.

Up to the time of the present Administration, the last really bold stroke for transportation progress came in 1956, when the Federal Aid Highway Act launched construction of the Interstate Highway System. The success of that program is supremely evident. When fully completed before the end of this decade, the Interstate System should surely qualify as one of the engineering wonders of the modern world.

The Interstate System was a bold step taken in good time. The transportation network it has produced is a vital national asset.

But in the 1940's and '50's, when the highway program was taking shape, no one foresaw the impact it would have on our cities or the social headaches it would produce for a later generation.

Because of the convenience afforded by the car and the speed provided by aircraft, intercity rail transportation in America declined almost to the disappearing point.

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By linking city with suburb, the new highways freed millions of workers from the confinement of living over the shop or in the shadow of the mill.

Indeed, the highway network enlarges a working man's job market by a radius of at least 50 miles in any direction from his home, whereas previously he was imprisoned within the economic scope of his own community.

But while they built a clientele of commuters, the highways made separate societies of suburb and city, ordained the demise of public transit, and made the twice-daily "rush-hour" an exercise in frustration.

As I have said before, the fault is not that too much has been spent on highways in the past, but that not enough time, thought and money have been invested in public transportation.

President Nixon and I are committed to the correction of that oversight.

Too many people who depend fully on public transportation -- the very old, the very young, and the very poor; city dwellers and suburbanites alike who do not or prefer not to drive -- have been disenfranchised from what has been termed the "fifth freedom": The freedom of mobility.

Too many travelers have been deprived of rail transportation and forced to fly or drive to their destinations, when rails afford the best medium-distance potential for relieving the mounting congestion of our airways and roadways. A rail line uses one-fourth the land required for a six-lane expressway, put can accommodate five times as many people.

The challenge, then, is not to build more of the same, but to make better use of what we have. This calls for a new order of imagination in planning, and in engineering. Civil engineering must take on a larger civic aspect. It is simply a fact of life that we can no longer rely on the automobile and the highway as the sole or even the principal solutions to our transportation problems. We need a better blend of transportation in America, and under President Nixon's leadership we are on the way to attaining it.

The President's Urban Mass Transportation Assistance Act of 1970 completely changes the complexion of Federal funding for public transit. Prior to passage of that Act, the largest annual Federal appropriation for mass transit was $175 million. Now we have $3.1 billion authorized for the five-year period through 1975.

Establishment of the National Railroad Passenger Corporation (Amtrak) is aimed at the survival of intercity rail passenger service. The recent 12,000 mile tour of the Department's Turbotrain -- clean, efficient, comfortable and safe -- proved to be a very convincing demonstration of the public's interest in improved rail service.

The National Environmental Policy Act states very clearly the Federal position on protection of the environment. The Airport-Airways Development Act, the Federal Aid to Highways Act, and, in fact, all transportation legislation enacted during President Nixon's Administration contain strict provisions relative to the interface of transportation systems with the environment. I have halted a number of projects which threatened to overstep the bounds prescribed, I have delayed others for closer ecological examination, and I have directed some projects back to the drawing boards for purely environmental reasons.

Never again will the course of transportation developments be determined only by the path of least resistance. We will continue to go the old ways where they truly serve the public interest. But we will constantly and aggressively seek new ways to do that job better. And when I say "better," I mean "more efficiently."

Transportation, which should be efficient if it is anything, is appallingly inefficient under our present system. Commuters travel 1.5 persons to a car. Planes fly half empty. The Nation's rails and trucks aren't utilized anywhere near their full capacity. Many of our highways are, of necessity, geared to peak loading periods, but become jammed at the slightest provocation.

It must be obvious that if we are to double the capacity of our transportation system within the next 20 years, as forecasts indicate we must, we can go a long way toward that goal by improving the efficiency of our existing transportation resources. We have to make far better use of facilities already in place -- better use of concepts already on-line.

Urban transportation is our toughest nut to crack -- moving people within and around the perimeters of our cities. Our highly successful experiments with exclusive bus lanes work on that same principle. An important transportation resource -- the highway -- is being used to greater advantage. We are also finding that the medians on many of our urban expressways are ideal locations for rapid rail service. They're doing it in Chicago and in San Francisco.

We have good foundations for transportation in this country. The superstructure simply needs modification.

It is typical of President Nixon's brand of leadership not to uproot foundations, but to build upon them.

President Nixon is building on established American foundations in dealing forthrightly with the problems of inflation, unemployment, and America's place in the international market.

He has taken the fight against inflation to the people -- and the public has accepted the challenge. According to Opinion Research Corporation, a very respected firm, 77 percent of the people believe that the actions the President has taken to deal with economic dangers were "the right moves at the right time."

The cycle of successive wage and price increases that fuel the fires of inflation had to be broken. The Nixon way is the American way of voluntary constraints and total cooperation. It's not somebody else's job; it's our job. In the President's words: "We can't protect the value of the dollar by passing the buck."

The President also has put faith in the sustaining power of two proven American principles -- the benefits of increasing productivity, and the dignity of honest work.

More Americans are working today then ever before in our country's history. Yet unemployment is still at an unacceptably high rate.

This would not be the case if the war were still going full blast. If troop strength and defense production were up where they were in January of 1969, unemployment today would be only about 4.3 percent.

But we do not want -- nor will we accept -- an economy dependent on war. The President's goal is a peacetime economy that within 10 years will provide jobs for 100 million Americans.

I know President Nixon is especially concerned about the unemployment rate among engineers, currently running at 2.9 percent within the profession. Considering the range and depth of the challenges confronting us, allowing any of our engineering talents to lie fallow is an extravagant waste of human resources. To correct that situation, the President has called for new programs -- new opportunities in technology -- to make full and productive use of America's wealth of scientific and engineering talents.

Many of those new opportunities lie, and will lie, in the field of transportation.

We have passed a lot of tests in 200 years of pioneering, settling, and building our great Nation. Those who have designed and engineered our transportation facilities deserve high marks for a near-impossible job remarkably well done.

But now we must show that we have learned the lessons of an unbalanced system. Let's buckle down to the larger task of moving people -- and their goods -- with degrees of safety, comfort, efficiency and economy never before attained. That will surely be the number one engineering wonder of the future.

We can do it. We must do it. And while we are renovating the rails, lowering noise levels, reducing pollution, reducing carnage on our highways and revitalizing public transportation, we can also get on with the business of innovation -- the business of building the transportation systems of the future.

It is our challenge -- as we create an expanded civilization within a geography that cannot expand -- to work wisely and well. The engineers of the world are the builders, the creators, the keystone placers. I am delighted to have had this opportunity to be with men I respect and admire. I look forward to a continued fine association with your society.

Thank you.

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