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REMARKS BY U.S. SECRETARY OF TRANSPORTATION JOHN A. VOLPE BEFORE THE NATIONAL COUNCIL ON ALCOHOLISM, PLAZA INN, KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI, WEDNESDAY, APRIL 12, 1972, 7:00 P.M.

I appreciate this opportunity to discuss alcoholism and highway safety -- a pressing national problem that demands immediate attention. I recognize that the National Council on Alcoholism is a foremost authority in the alcoholism field. And let me say right now that without the long and arduous dedication of the NCA -- without the work you have done over the last several decades -- today's progress would not be possible. It's true we have a long way to go on this problem. But people are beginning to catch on. Governments are responding. New programs are being started. Millions of dollars are flowing into the cause. And for all of that, the NCA must be given substantial credit. You have done a tremendous job.

And I want to add my congratulations to two people here tonight whose contributions are also in that category: Miss Mercedes McCambridge and Senator Harold Hughes. Senator Hughes' personal testimony, and his informative hearings as Chairman of the Subcommittee on Alcoholism and Narcotics, have touched the conscience of this country. And tonight he presents your Seventh Gold Key Award to a woman who has contributed vast amounts of courage and persuasion to the fight against alcoholism -- and

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for safe driving. Mercedes has worked with the National Association of Women Highway Safety Leaders. (I shared their speaking platform with her not so very long ago.)

And about two weeks ago we appeared together -- along with Dana Andrews -- on the David Frost Show. And let me tell you -- this gal was truly great. She is a dedicated, committed, responsible, compassionate human being -- and really gets the message across. And she has been a source of great inspiration to all of us. Inspiration in the fight against alcoholism means a great deal.

I have been meeting with national organizations of every kind to explain the drunk driving problem and to enlist aid in our countermeasures program. As I told the Presidents of Women's National Organization only three months ago, "To drink or not to drink is an individual concern. But to drink excessively and then drive is our concern."

And as long as over 25,000 people die each year as a result of abusive drinking and driving -- indeed as long as even one person dies from this cause -- then drunk driving will remain our concern. President Nixon feels that way. I feel that way -- and so should every citizen in this Nation. It's our problem -- and our responsibility -- to get the drunk driver off the road and into an appropriate course of rehabilitation.

This Administration is committed to that task and we're going to do it with your help. Throughout the Federal government today -- in Health, Education and Welfare, in the National Institute of Health, in Transportation, in Defense and in numerous other agencies -- millions of dollars and man-hours are being spent to cure alcoholism. In my Department, we've committed \$82 million dollars to Alcohol Safety Action Projects -- for a three and a half year period. And I'm here to tell you tonight that no task in our Department is more important than lowering the highway death toll -- and solving the drinking-driving problem is basic to that objective.

Let me focus for a moment on the size and severity of this problem. We estimate that there are nearly seven million abusive drinkers on our streets and highways each year -- they represent about six percent of the driving population. At least 800,000 of them are involved in highway accidents, and we have about two million crashes annually. This amounts to six percent of our drivers involved in 40 percent of the accidents!

Of the fatal accidents resulting in 55,000 highway deaths last year, more than half were alcohol related. Included in that figure are a lot of innocent victims -- wiped out by the thoughtless driving of a hapless drunk. How many pictures have we seen of the weeping drunk as he surveys the remnants of a deathly crash. That picture can no longer be tolerated.

A particularly tragic aspect of this problem is that so many of those killed are our young people -- between the ages of 15 and 24. In 1970, 16,500 young persons in this age group died in highway accidents, making the automobile the number one killer of young adults in America.

Each year we license three and one-half million new drivers. Two and one-half million of them are tenth graders -- just learning to drive, and just learning to drink. The influences of modern living on today's youth can make safe driving doubly difficult.

Drinking joins the inexperienced driver with the inexperienced drinker.

Just last week six college boys -- fraternity brothers -- lost their lives on a highway near Washington when their vehicle slammed into a bridge abutment. They were going so fast that the car disintegrated. Even the engine block broke in half. And published police reports revealed that the driver's blood alcohol content level was well over Maryland's .15 intoxication level.

We take some consolation that the newspapers printed this fact -- conspicuously. Only a few years ago, newspapers were much more prone to gloss over drunkenness, with misguided compassion for the surviving family. But that doesn't help us solve the problem. That doesn't make things any better for the hundreds of thousands of other youngsters who might be tempted to mix alcohol and gasoline. One of our Alcohol Safety Action Projects reported just two weeks ago that 40 percent of all those arrested for driving while intoxicated were under 25 years old.

And that newest of plagues -- experimentation with narcotics and drugs -- can leave youth helpless at the wheel of an auto. As President Nixon has pointed out; as Senator Hughes' committee has graphically described: the drug problem in this country is of epidemic proportions. And it affects the highway user with tragic results. Yet as each person here tonight knows, alcohol is involved in ten times the fatal accidents that dope is involved.

Let me give you one other fact that I find extremely disturbing. In the last ten years, we have killed ten thousand children under the age of four in auto crashes. These are tiny tots that trust us as adults for their very existence. They can never question our driving habits or our driving skills. They can't say "Put down that bottle," or "Drive slower." They can only trust us to do what's right. And at least a thousand times a year that trust leads to an early grave.

But statistics are somehow inadequate to describe the tragedy of losing a son or a daughter, destroyed in an instance by the impersonal forces of crashing metal. We see the statistics rise -- and do nothing. We read the newspaper accounts -- then turn the page. We talk about highway tragedies -- often at cocktail parties -- then turn to the weather. Our highway safety attention must be much longer than that.

The NCA has demonstrated the value of long term dedication in the fight against alcoholism. Now a similar commitment -- a similar fight -- must be made for highway safety.

If you detect an outrage in my voice, it's because I mean it. I have little tolerance for the drunk driver. But I do have understanding -- an understanding of the alcoholic and the problems he faces. This man has a terrifying compulsion for alcohol. Left alone, he must drink. Furthermore, he must drink himself into intoxication. And while we must appreciate that excessive drinking is a sickness, the minute the problem drinker climbs behind the wheel of his car he puts himself into another category. By turning on the ignition he becomes a menace to society; a potential killer and maimer.

This fact adds a new sense of urgency to the treatment of our Alcohol Safety Action Projects. We must get the drunk driver -- the alcoholic -- off the road before he kills himself or others. If that process involves arrest, then, we must give him treatment and rehabilitation necessary to insure that it will not happen again. And that treatment must be an integral part of the court system which judges his crime.

There is a delicate balance between the sometimes conflicting factors of enforcement and rehabilitation. We walk a thin line in determining the merits of confinement and license confiscation versus medical and educational programs. But we are walking that line. And we need your help.

This afternoon you gained some insight into our ASAP Projects. And the one here in Kansas City is a good one -- one that faces overwhelming odds. Just one example is their finding that a car traveling on city streets here between 7:00 P.M. and 3:00 A.M. will meet a car driven by a drunk driver every four minutes. That's 15 times an hour -- Russian roulette with your life; a gamble that the drunk driver won't cross the white line and collide head-on with your car.

As you saw this afternoon, a major part of the Kansas City ASAP relates to pre-sentencing investigations, recommending appropriate sentences to the courts, and the establishment of rehabilitation programs. I cannot over-emphasize the importance of pre-sentencing investigations. This is where the real determination formulates as to how to help an alcoholic driver. You know as well as I do that a jail cell, if ever, cures alcoholism. And it's not often that a casual once-a-month drunk needs disulfiram or would respond to organized alcohol treatment. But even these generalizations cannot afford to be made. Each case must be judged individually. And our ASAP's are doing just that.

I've already paid personal visits to a number of the ASAP installations -- such as my visit to the one here this afternoon. Day after tomorrow I'll be visiting the one in Boston, and before the month is up I will have visited those in New Orleans and in San Juan.

I've told my staff to make sure that when I visit any city that has a program underway, I want to be there -- because I want this program to be more than an exercise. I want effective results.

Remember that ASAP also stands for "as soon as possible", and that's when our investigators and special prosecutors go to work to study the background of a person arrested for drunk driving. Our premise is that if we can identify the problem drinker, we can help him. We can get the courts to help. And most importantly, we can get him to help himself.

Identification isn't as hard as it sounds. Most habitual drunks are well-known in their communities. They often have multiple arrest records. They have been under treatment before. They have unstable employment records. They are well-known to their neighbors, to welfare agencies, and to local traffic courts.

Our computers and investigators check all of these sources. These are facts that most judges and juries have never had before. And their availability now is making a difference. In almost every city where an ASAP is now operating, arrests and convictions are up. Threatment is up. And second arrests are down.

Our Lincoln, Nebraska ASAP reports that of the 280 pre-sentencing investigations made since January 1, 80 percent of those investigated were alcoholics. Another 12 percent were problem drinkers and 8 percent were social drinkers. Only one of the 280 convictions refused probation in favor of going to jail. Of those who accepted probation, all are participating in special driving schools or alcoholic classes; all have been assigned community counselors in addition to probation counselors; and 85 are taking disulfiram.

The Lincoln experience is not unique. It points up our belief that getting drunks off the road is just half the job. The other half is to get them on the wagon -- and keep them there. And we want to make that process as painless, yet effective, as possible.

In Lincoln, as in other cities, the Local Council on Alcoholism operates a diagnostic and screening center, under contract to our ASAP, to check the medical condition of those arrested. I visited the Wichita ASAP's screening center only a few weeks ago. And that screening process is a key element in the rehabilitation process -- in treating the causes of alcoholism and drunk driving.

These are humans we're dealing with, not machines that can be impounded and scrapped as so much metal. And we must temper our outrage at their driving habits with the knowledge that they can be treated. Abraham Lincoln once wrote: "If we take habitual drunkards as a class, their heads and hearts will bear an advantageous comparison with those of any other class. There seem ever to have been a proneness in the brilliant and warm-blooded to fall into this vice. The demon of intemperance ever seems to have delighted in sucking the blood of genius and generosity."

These are people that can be of great benefit to America. It's our job to see that liquor and the automobile don't steal these talents from us. We're enlisting every means available to do so. Just two weeks ago Dana Andrews, an acknowledged alcoholic, who no longer drinks, joined me in Washington to kick off a massive national information campaign against drunk driving.

He has made some tremendously effective television and radio spots for us -- and this is backed up by a high-impact print advertising campaign as well.

Dana and I hosted a luncheon for newspaper and broadcast executives at my office last month, and we have established a media advisory committee to make sure we get the widest possible exposure.

The basic message of these spots is, "Get the drunk driver off the road -- for his sake and yours". That second phrase is a key part -- "...for his sake and yours". I can't emphasize too much that we are aiming at more than just removing traffic hazards (which is what drunk drivers certainly are.) We want those hazards corrected -- rehabilitated -- so the problem will diminish and transportation can be hazard-free.

A little over a year ago I signed an agreement with HEW Secretary Richardson to get our Departments together on this problem. We're now meeting almost monthly to trade information -- to combine medical and social knowledge with highway safety programs.

This is a challenge that needs partnerships, that needs co-operation, that needs your help. We're delighted to have so many NCA people on our local ASAP advisory committees, in our screening rooms, on our investigation staffs. And I believe in backing up that call for partnership with action. Just as soon as this session is over, I'm going to join your President in signing this memorandum of understanding between our Department and the NCA. There are a multitude of areas in which we should be working together. And we're going to do it.

We're going to lower the highway death toll. We're going to get the drunk driver off the road. We're going to fight alcoholism tooth and nail. And we're going to stay with it until the job is done. That's the assignment President Nixon has given me. It's the challenge I have accepted -- and share with you. By working together, we can do it.

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