DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION | NEWS

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REMARKS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY BY SECRETARY OF TRANSPORTATION JOHN A. VOLPE BEFORE THE 1970 INTERNATIONAL AUTO SAFETY CONFERENCE, SHERATON-CADILLAC HOTEL, DETROIT, MICHIGAN, MAY 14, 1970, 7:00 p.m. EST

I am delighted to be here with you for this annual mid-year meeting of the International Automobile Safety Conference. Both FISITA and the Society of Automotive Engineers deserve wholehearted commendation for this continuing effort to save human lives.

I applaud your guidelines for the conference: first, that the automotive engineer have as much information available to him as possible; and second, that public officials concerned with establishing vehicle safety regulations have a full understanding of the need for, and feasibility of, meaningful and responsible regulations.

This 1970 Conference has been -- and will be -- unlike the typical automotive engineering meeting. This is not a hardware-oriented meeting.

Much of what is to be gained from this conference lies in an assessment of exactly where we stand technologically. I think you will agree that in almost all instances, we have the technology to do just about anything we want. The challenge now is to "get off the dime" and do something.

We all know that the world faces an environmental crisis of almost epidemic proportions. One aspect of this crisis can be seen in transportation safety. I am encouraged by growing public awareness that death and mutilation in car crashes is a public health problem of major proportions.

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The people are really concerned now because they know the toll can be cut. We no longer believe that folklore about so-called "accidents" -- phenomena of nature that can't be prevented. People realize that the machine which has given the common man greater mobility than ever before has also brought more misery than ever before.

We are waging a kind of war against ourselves on the highways. Auto crashes have killed off more Americans than all our violent crimes and all the wars in our history. In about five years at present rates we will reach the all-time mark of two million people killed and countless tens of millions injured. The economic loss in this year alone will be more than $16 billion, and the cost in suffering is incalculable.

An extra dimension of the tragedy is that among the 150 lives needlessly lost every day are many young people and others in the prime of their years who might have made a great contribution to our society. It is a startling fact that in this country, automobile accidents are the chief cause of death among young people between the ages of 16 and 24.

Sir George Scott, Deputy President of Great Britain's Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents recently pointed out that, if the pattern holds, children and young people will be the principal victims of the crashes that will occur during the decade ahead.

This dismal equation between mobility and mortality must be balanced out on the side of life. I have confidence that these sessions will take us a long way down the road toward a sane and sensible use of our fabulous technology. We surely have no excuse for not trying.

We have solid statistical proof that laminated windshields, safety harnesses, collapsible steering columns, better brakes and reinforced fuel tanks really do work. The faith that the United States Congress showed in human reason when it passed the two historic highway and vehicle safety acts in 1966 has been full justified. Seat belts alone probably saved three thousand lives in 1969.

From 1962 through 1966, the average increase in fatalities was 6.9 percent per year. However, since the expanded Federal safety program got under way two years ago, this dreadful increment has dropped to 2.3 percent -- in spite of a 6.4 percent rise in vehicle registrations and an 8.6 percent jump in total miles driven. These figures represent a startling drop when you consider that only 10 percent of all cars on the road have the new safety features.

Our projections show that the gross number of crash victims will start to decline around 1972 or 1973. By 1980 we could be within range of an annual traffic loss of only 41 thousand lives -- even though there will be 37 million more vehicles on the road.

We intend to go all out to make these projections a reality. We are examining every conceivable aspect of vehicle safety from anti-skid devices, approach-rate detectors and proximity brakes to energy-absorbing bumpers and periscope rear view mirrors -- from better tires and tire grading systems to non-flammable fabrics for car interiors.

Some safety systems can produce multiple social benefits. Improved bumpers, for example, could cut $1 billion from car insurance premiums and repair costs every year. That would help us fight inflation and cut the waste of our resources.

The main emphasis, of course, must be on occupant restraint systems. The Cornell Crash Injury Research Program analyzed over 14 thousand crashes and found that failure to wear safety-belts increase the risk of death or severe injury by at least 100 percent. And yet, only 25 percent of car occupants use lap belts and only 5 percent use their lifesaving shoulder harnesses. Even 5 percent is an overestimate if what I see on the streets of Washington indicates their popularity. We have concluded that if we are to have occupant restraint systems, our best results will come from so-called "passive" systems -- systems that require no extra effort from the occupant of that seat.

When I came out here to Detroit in January for two full days of briefings, I saw demonstrations which indicate that the money and effort being poured into air bags are fully justified. I was highly pleased to see the enthusiastic acceptance of the air bag concept by industry leaders and to know that European car makers are also interested in these and other passive restraint systems.

As you probably know -- and some of you were there -- on Monday and Tuesday of this week the Department of Transportation, in cooperation with the U.S. automobile industry, co-sponsored the first international conference on passive restraints at G.M.'s proving grounds.

We -- in this country -- have pledged to share our expertise with other nations. We recognize that if we are to move ahead with all feasible speed in perfecting these new devices, such as the air bag, then we must work together to a degree that is extraordinary.

I am delighted to say that the conference was a tremendous success. We look forward eagerly to breakthroughs and progress in the very near future.

Naturally, we can't wait for ideal answers. Doug Toms, Director of the National Highway Safety Bureau, tells me that within five to seven years after we begin to install air bags in both new and used cars, we could achieve a 50 percent reduction in highway deaths and injuries.

That's enough of a reason for me, at least, to justify the commitment in engineering time and money that is involved.

Sure -- the air bag is a new and different sort of device! But don't anyone try to tell me that John Q. Public or John Bull or Pierre or Heinrich or Mario won't accept a punch in the face in order to save his neck. The explosive air bag is going to be a part of our automotive lifestyle from now on; in fact, we propose to make them mandatory for the 1973 models. I'd be willing to wager that within a couple of years car makers will be out-shouting each other in ads claiming bag "X" is better than bag "Z".

Granted, present day automobiles are complex and there may be a limit to how much you can tinker with them. The U.S. Congress recognized that ultimately -- after treating the emergency symptoms -- we would have to build an experimental safety car from scratch. As you probably know, Congress has mandated that the Department of Transportation do so. That program is now building up a head of steam -- (if you'll pardon the phrase -- I don't want to show any bias against the internal combustion engine.)

We hope to award contracts on or about June 30 and could -- optimistically -- get delivery of the first prototypes from within the industry and outside by October 31 of next year.

What we are hoping is to preserve the integrity of the passenger compartment in crashes at speeds up to 50 miles per hour. The safety car will be able to roll over at 70 miles per hour and leave the passenger compartment intact. It will brake and handle far better than any car ever built before. It will provide vastly better visibility, be fire-resistant and -- as an extra added attraction -- be powered by low-pollution engine. It will be designed from bumper to bumper with the ideal of safety uppermost.

I might also note that I think we can make it look good as well, so it will appeal to the consumer. We will build and test a total of 14 of these cars by the end of 1972. We believe that the automobile industry will recognize the value of the innovations and quickly incorporate them into production models.

These all-new vehicles will enable us to set definitive future safety standards for all automobiles offered for sale in this country. The information gathered will, of course, be available to automobile makers in other countries. We can't afford duplication in this field because it would only delay the time of safe passage on the streets and highways of the world.

The air bag and the experimental safety car represent one of the three legs of our current emphasis on automobile and highway safety in this country. The second is to get the problem of the drunken driver under control. In the United States more than half of all traffic fatalities are caused directly or indirectly by alcohol.

People are getting sick and tired of doing battle with drunks on roads their taxes pay for. As the Providence Rhode Island Journal pointed out in a recent editorial, "The lethal potential of automobiles is such that any public safety expert would rather take his chances with a gun-slinging maniac than with a drunken or incompetent driver."

We estimate that the use of alcohol by drivers and pedestrians causes at least 25 thousand deaths and 800 thousand injuries each year. The sickening aspect of this tragedy is that so much of the loss of life, limb and property is suffered by people who are completely innocent.

However, public myth has always held that you can't really do very much about the drunken driver. Well, the time has come -- in fact, it's overdue -- for us to demolish this defeatist attitude. But it will take more than a simple breathalyzer test.

We have just set up an office of alcohol countermeasures to direct our top-priority campaign in this area. The job of this office will be to identify the chronic drinker before he becomes a statistic in the morgue -- or kills an innocent victim. The alcoholic, contrary to legend, does have an identity. He is on somebody's book, either as a patient, a bad employment risk, a trouble-maker or a poor insurance risk. Most heavy drinkers are already known to family counselors, welfare agencies, local traffic courts and their long-suffering neighbors.

So, whenever a man is convicted for drunk driving his entire background should be investigated before he is sentenced. The judge should determine whether the offender has ever been arrested before for drunkenness -- on or off the highway. Then he can confront him with two options -- either get treatment and dry out, or stop driving. Period. No leniency, no excuses, no extenuating circumstances. The tough approach has paid off in countries as diverse as Sweden and Great Britain.

It goes without saying that the success of such a program depends crucially upon implementing and enforcing tough implied consent laws. Forty-six of our states now have such laws on their books.

A related safety approach is to demand periodic testing of driver competence -- his eyes, his ears, his reaction time and his knowledge of road rules and signs. That is what Florida is doing in a new driver licensing law which goes into effect July 1.

We also need better licensing enforcement measures, for the American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators estimates that about 10 million motorists are driving blissfully along our highways without a driver's license. Many are dangerous, impulsive, even psychopathic personalities.

It is obvious, too, that no safety program would be complete without considering the third leg of the man, machine, and highway complex. And that is the road itself. Modern highways do return safety dividends in a big way. Since our Federal Interstate Highway Program began in 1956, it has saved one life for each five miles built -- a total of 35,515 lives over 13 years. And the system is not yet complete. We still have 12,900 miles to go and many lives to save. The Interstate System is now a major factor in the better American environment which this Administration is dedicated to.

In an after-dinner speech, such as this, I can only begin to sketch the outlines of the auto safety problem remaining before us in the advanced nations. We need a multi-faceted, sophisticated, systems approach. I don't have projections for Europe or Asia, but I do know that if the trend in this country continues, and we get no further reductions in the death rate per 10 thousand vehicles, some 85 thousand American men, women, and children will die on our streets and throughways in the year 1980.

Can any civilized people tolerate such losses? I say no. We have to press forward with all the resources of engineering talent, money, executive commitment and governmental leadership we can muster in this "campaign for life". We certainly have a long way to go. Most people who are well informed in this field would say that a 10 percent reduction in the death rate per 100 million miles would be remarkable, and yet even if we do that well, we in this country will still lose 43 thousand people per year a decade hence.

The first automotive fatality happened on the streets of New York in the year 1899 when a little girl was run over by a delivery truck. Though there was an immediate outcry and a demand that cars be banned from the streets or be preceded by a man waving a red flag, not enough has been done to stem the ever-rising tide of massacre through mobility.

Until now. Now it will be turned back. It will be turned back by the application of science and common sense, as in this conference. Your published analyses of impact tolerance, interior design, program management and many other technical aspects will take us a long way toward effective information sharing and improved performance in each of our countries.

I am personally convinced that cooperation among the technical societies, the manufacturers and governments can end this long-running nightmare of death and mutilation. But we must be committed to the long haul -- for there is no easier way.

I want to thank you for having come here for this historic conference. I believe it will be fruitful. The hard work you invest here will pay off in a better life for all our peoples.

I wish you all possible success as you return to better and safer streets, highways, vehicles and drivers throughout the world.

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