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REMARKS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY BY U.S. SECRETARY OF TRANSPORTATION
JOHN A. VOLPE BEFORE THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF WOMEN HIGHWAY SAFETY
LEADERS, SHOREHAM HOTEL, WASHINGTON, D.C., SUNDAY, OCTOBER 3, 1971 6:00 P.M.

Ten months ago I spoke to you ladies here in Washington about the problem drinker and highway safety. Today I want to talk about another pressing problem: our youth and highway safety. Just two months ago the National Transportation Safety Board released the appalling fact that highway accidents cause one-half of all deaths among youths between the ages of 15 and 24.

That's a criminal fact. It's a national tragedy. And I intend to do something about it.

We cannot allow our car seats to become death beds for juveniles. We cannot allow our sons and daughters to be killed for a simple lack of time and attention -- the time and attention it takes to teach, train, and supervise the operation of a motor vehicle.

Shakespeare once wrote something to the effect that "Youth is full of pleasure, age is full of care." No doubt youthful pleasure is as abundant today as it was in 15th Century England. But the outlets for pleasures and exuberance have changed. Fast cars and slow reactions have taken too many kids to an early grave.

Street driving is not a proper outlet for youthful pleasure. It is a studied task that must be approached thoughtfully, soberly and carefully. And that is the attitude we must teach our youth.

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Today, millions of young Americans annually spend millions of carefree -- but not always careful -- hours on our nation's highways. As highway safety leaders, we must insure that all young people are adequately prepared for this responsibility. Age is full of care. I care and you care. And together we must instill that same sense of concern in our children.

In 1970, 16,500 young persons in the 15 to 24 age group died on our highways. That's almost one-third of all highway fatalities. But statistics are somehow inadequate to describe the tragedy of losing a son or daughter, nurtured lovingly and carefully through the long days of childhood, only to be destroyed in an instant by the impersonal forces of crashing metal.

We have a right to be outraged by this personal injustice. It is as criminal as death by a mindless bullet. It is more devastating than war. Highway deaths of youth this age have exceeded the number of fatalities -- of all ages -- in every year of the Vietnam war. Now that war is ending. And so must the senseless carnage on our streets and highways.

In 1969, 94 percent of males and 63 percent of females of driving age in this country were licensed and on the road. It is rare indeed to find a young person today -- in some cases only 13 or 14 years old -- who is not learning to drive. It has become a birthright. Children dream of getting a driver's permit just as they dream of owning a pony or riding a fire engine.

And at the very age when reality strikes -- when teenagers learn that ponies can't be kept in the back yard and fire engines serve a very serious purpose -- that first car suddenly appears in the driveway. It is at this crucial stage that driver education must be successfully applied.

The first commercial driver education schools began in 1909, when driving was mostly a matter of grabbing the steering wheel, blowing the horn and hanging on. The first public school driver education courses started in the 1930's. Since that time schools, teaching various philosophies and techniques, have multiplied almost as fast as the automobile itself. Today, we have 14,000 high schools and over 2,000 commercial schools teaching nearly 3 million student drivers annually. Yet the death toll continues to rise and no one really knows the absolute effectiveness of formal driver education courses. This does not mean they are ineffective. It does mean that we need better evaluation. The Federal government now provides about \$8 million a year to assist driver education programs throughout the country. Our own Department has spent \$28 million through 1970 on state programs to improve or expand driver education. We believe that this money is well spent. It must be spent. But it must also be spent better. And we are investing nearly half-a-million dollars to study and investigate driver education techniques -- to make the on-going programs more effective.

It's quite disheartening to discover that in the District of Columbia, 18 to 20 percent of all driver education course graduates fail their official written drivers test. Even more astounding is the fact that 41 to 45 percent fail the road test. Studies in other states and localities have indicated similar results.

It seems clear that there is no total substitute for experience. And young drivers, almost by definition, lack experience more than any other factor. Many of our schools today offer what is called the "30 and 6 course" -- 30 hours of course work and 6 hours behind the wheel. That's not enough.

I suggest you urge the members of your organizations to give their children experience behind the wheel. Let them take you for a Sunday drive. Pile up the driving hours and keep a chart if need be. We find in the aviation field, for example, that there is no substitute for experience. New pilots must fly a certain number of hours before advancing in their flight training. A similar program should be initiated by every family. And I urge you to promote this type of activity.

Young people today need parental guidance in driving just as in every other field. The influences of modern living in today's youth can make safe driving doubly difficult. Drinking, for example, couples the inexperienced drinker with the inexperienced driver. And that newest of plagues -- experimentation with narcotics and drugs -- can leave youth helpless at the wheel of an auto.

We now have 35 alcohol safety action programs underway across the nation designed to curtail alcohol-related deaths and injuries. We're committing nearly \$82 million in the next 3 to 4 years to get drunk-drivers off the road. These programs focus on identifying and rehabilitating the problem drinker. While young adults generally do not fit into the problem drinker category, their inexperience often makes them excessive drinkers. Their exposure to long drinking-periods at parties, dances and other youthful functions often raises their alcohol intake above safe levels. These are difficult problems for our action programs to tackle. But they must be solved. And I have directed the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration to give special attention to the youthful drinker and his driving habits.

We must impress our youth with the seriousness of the problem -- the potential for death and destruction that derives from drinking and driving. Perhaps our law enforcement could be stronger. Consider these penalties for a drunk-driving conviction: execution by firing squad in San Salvador; or ten years in jail with a \$2800 fine in South Africa; in Australia the names are published in the local newspaper under the headline: "He's drunk and in jail."; in Turkey the driver is taken 20 miles away and forced to walk home under escort.

I don't advocate these punishments. But I do suggest that other nations take the drunk-driving crime much more seriously than we do. And we should consider new law enforcement controls.

Another area for improvement is driver licensing. The National Transportation Safety Board has recommended a two year probationary licensing period for drivers under 21. While licensing is a state responsibility, I join with the Board in urging consideration of the probationary license.

Several states currently issue learners permits that restrict driving except when accompanied by adults, or except for specific trips -- usually during daylight hours only. There are a variety of techniques that could be used to monitor the safe driving skill of young people. And I have directed National Highway Traffic Safety Administrator Doug Toms to explore these alternatives.

Another question is the quality of driving tests. In many cases, passing that test means little more than a five-minute study of road signs and one perfunctory trip around the block. That isn't good enough. These tests must be comprehensive and based on "real world" situations. This problem is especially acute for motorcycle operators who face a unique set of traffic and vehicle circumstances -- and who, incidentally, are primarily young adults.

In 1970, there were 2,330 motorcyclists' fatalities -- an increase of 18.9 percent over 1969. And roughly two-thirds of these deaths were in the 15 to 24 age group. The motorcycle, because of its attainable speeds and because the operator is almost totally exposed, is extremely dangerous from the standpoint of crash survivability. Ask any orthopedic surgeon. He'll tell you stories of broken bones and mangled limbs that are unbelievable. Yet some operators and even some state legislatures continue to resist even the minimal protection of a crash helmet!

All but six states have laws requiring that crash helmets be worn. But some of those states are now attempting to repeal their laws. And I have no patience with that attitude. I will do everything in my power to keep those laws on the books, even if it means withholding highway safety and Federal-aid highway funds. I have that authority and I will not hesitate to use it.

As leaders of women's organizations, I urge you to join me in convincing your friends, your communities, and your officials that motorcycle safety laws must be adopted and enforced. Our concern for human life demands it.

In closing I want to touch on one other aspect of this same younger-generation subject. We must do more to involve youth in our safety programs. I don't know whether or not there is a generation gap in highway safety. But if there is, it must be closed. Our youth today have a viewpoint. They are thoughtful. They know their own minds. And they must be included in the planning of any program -- local, state or national -- that is designed for them.

In January of this year I swore in a 15-member youth committee to advise us on ways to involve young people in a national crusade for highway safety. Under the stimulus of that core group, next week 122 young people from every state in the union will meet in Oakland, California, to discuss highway safety problems and to develop program recommendations.

We know what young people can do when properly organized and motivated. Their enthusiasm, creativity and boundless energy could spark an unparalleled crusade for highway safety. And that's what we're asking them to do.

We need your help in all phases of the safety equation; in promoting local safety programs, in providing state and national leadership in the search for better vehicles and better drivers, and in providing personal guidance to the driving youth of America.

The British philosopher Alfred North Whitehead once wrote that "Youth is life as yet untouched by tragedy." We owe it to our youth to see that the first tragedy does not occur on the highway.

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