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REMARKS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY BY DEPUTY SECRETARY OF TRANSPORTATION WILLIAM J. BECKHAM, JR., TO THE HIGHWAY SAFETY SYMPOSIUM, MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY, JUNE 24, 1980

I read recently that a "talking car" is now technologically possible and may be available as early as 1982. Through a voice synthesizer hooked to an on-board computer, your car could warn you when you are running low on fuel or driving too fast.

The idea is intriguing, but I question how it will sell. While a voice might be a pleasant alternative to today's bells and buzzers, motorists who dislike back-seat drivers probably are not going to take kindly to a talking dashboard, even if the advice is for their safety and protection.

Yet we continue to wrestle with the constant, seemingly incurable problem of highway safety. We seek some way to further prevent or at least reduce the high costs of highway travel, paid in lives lost, injuries incurred and property destroyed. It is some consolation that, over the years, you and everyone involved in safety programs have made real progress in bringing the fatality rate down and in raising the level of safety consciousness on the part of the motoring public. But one hundred-forty traffic deaths a day -- 50,000-plus each year -- make it uncomfortably clear that for all of our efforts, highway safety in America remains an imperfect art.

In this symposium you deal with the human part of the safety equation. Your concerns are with what can be done through human resources to reduce the risk of death and injury on the highways. These are the areas of greatest challenge -- and greatest promise. Because, more often than not, it is human behavior, not the behavior of the machine, that is flawed. It is the individual who suffers the mental lapse, makes the error in judgement or commits the foolish act that results in the tearing of metal and the breaking of glass -- and the shattering of lives that often follows.

I commend each of you, and especially the members of the National Safety Council, the National Association of Governors' Highway Safety Representatives, the Michigan Office of Highway Safety Planning and the officers and staff of this University, for sponsoring this symposium and for focusing on the positive actions that can and must be taken to make highway travel safer.

Yours is a vital contribution, as you work to meet the growing manpower and career development needs of traffic education, law enforcement and administration, and community support. We know something of your problems, and your frustrations, as we press for greater compliance with the 55 mile per hour speed limit, more effective child restraint systems, and state motorcycle helmet laws.

But the driver is not always the culprit. We must also attack the problem from the perspective of the vehicle. The car is our greatest convenience; yet it can also be a killer. Ever since the motor car claimed its first victim, eighty years ago on West 74th Street in New York City, industry leaders and consumers alike too often have taken a detached, almost casual attitude toward safety.

The manufacturers, perhaps understandably, have been reluctant to promote safety, on the theory that any allusion to death and injuries would detract from sales. Except for Ford's brief fling with safety packages back in the mid-50's -- padded dashboards, "deep-dish" steering wheels and "lifeguard" doors -- most of the safety modifications on today's cars have come as a result of government prodding and government regulation.

Today, because the U.S. auto industry has fallen on hard times, there is some sympathy for a relaxing of Federal regulations to allow the industry to recover its financial equilibrium and regain some of the sales lost to the imports. In fact, at President Carter's direction our Department, and other Federal agencies, have been engaged in an appraisal of all government actions that impinge on the auto industry. Our purpose is to develop a set of options that will enable the President to take or recommend measures designed to stimulate sales and relieve the short-term economic pressures on the nation's automakers. I would caution, however, that while regulations -- fuel economy regulations, emission regulations, safety regulations, even noise regulations -- are all a part of those considerations, there is little likelihood that our existing safety regulations will be softened or compromised. And for two very good reasons:

1. As our cars get smaller and lighter, the risk -- in the event of collision with larger cars or trucks -- grows greater.
2. Relaxing safety standards would not give U.S. manufacturers a competitive advantage, because all cars sold in volume in the United States must comply with those standards.

The industry has, in fact, an opportunity to incorporate advanced safety features in its cars, as a part of its long-term retooling and product improvement process. The conversion from the large, powerful cars of before to the small, fuel-efficient cars of the future will be costly -- involving capital expenditures of 70 to 80 billion dollars. General Motors alone expects to spend \$40 billion over the next four years, in addition to the billions already spent for downsizing since 1976. Fuel economy standards originated as a Federal initiative, but it is consumer demand, not government regulation, driving the industry today. In the scramble for sales and to compete with the imports, the nation's automakers want to beat, not just meet, the Federal fuel economy standards and timetable. As the U.S. industry becomes more competitive in the small car field -- and the 1981 models will surely help in that regard -- the automakers may be in a position to steal a march on the imports in terms of product safety.

The price the consumer pays for the safety features required by regulation is difficult to calculate, but considering what the average new car buyer pays willingly -- even eagerly -- for convenience, appearance and comfort options, safety is relatively cheap. According to Bureau of Labor Statistics figures, less than 11 percent of the increase in new car prices in recent years can be attributed to the safety or emission control requirements imposed by the government.

But I want to talk more about the benefits of safety regulations this evening than I do about their costs because we're dealing -- in many cases -- with human life, and that is priceless.

The advantages, I am convinced, have been greatly understated and largely unappreciated. There are three ways that safety regulations benefit motorists and our society as a whole.

One: in reduced death and misery, and the associated economic loss.

As motorists we hate to admit it, but as safety advocates we must face the fact that automobile fatalities are the sixth leading cause of death in the United States; and, aside from birth defects, the leading cause of death for the 44-and-under age group. Yet, aside from the private investments involved, we spend far more government dollars on cancer research and on heart research than we do to reduce the risk of death by motor vehicle.

Obviously, I am not suggesting that less money be spent to combat cancer and heart disease. But I am suggesting that motor vehicle safety research and regulation are both valid and legitimate functions of government, and in protecting the health and safety of our citizens they are high pay-off areas.

Over the last 14 years, for example, since the first significant auto safety legislation was passed, the highway fatality rate has been

reduced 40 percent. All of the quarter of a million lives that have been saved on our highways since 1966 cannot be attributed to auto safety standards alone, but significant numbers of people are alive today who would not be, without the protection afforded by the government-required devices on post-1966 cars.

Two: the Federal focus on automotive safety has led to more vehicle recalls because of safety defects. In saying this I do not mean to imply that the industry is indifferent to the safety of the people who buy its products. The manufacturers frequently issue recalls on their own. Still, a significant number of recall campaigns have been carried out only after an investigation by our National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. I suspect that without the Federal presence, the industry's safety profile would be lower and fewer cars would be recalled for safety reasons.

Three: safety standards promote technological progress.

Detroit is not quick to admit it, but one of the reasons for the domestic auto industry's current market-share loss is their relative lack of engineering and technical innovations in recent years, compared to the foreign producers. Now our industry is making up for lost time. Today, for the first time in several decades, our auto industry is producing not merely new-styled cars, but cars with meaningful improvements.

I believe innovation is important to the renaissance, and even to the survival of the American auto industry. The Japanese are not selling more cars in the United States than they are in Japan solely on their fuel economy merits. Many U.S. cars compete head-to-head with the imports on mileage. I believe the car-buying public today is more sophisticated, more discriminating and more attuned to value. They perceive the difference between innovation and ornamentation, between technology and cosmetology -- and they are investing accordingly. Some of Detroit's newest products reflect this difference and, for the most part, those are the cars that are selling best.

The industry, in short, is responding dynamically to the consumer desire to save energy. I think there should be a similar response to the saving of lives. In my opinion, we must reduce unreasonable risk -- we cannot fail to take every available action to protect the sanctity of life. We cannot continue the double standard of preaching, on the one hand, the perils of the highway in our driver education classes, and then pretending in the production and marketing of our cars that those perils do not exist.

There are two things we can do, and are doing.

1. We can press the industry to build progressively safer cars; and
2. We can provide the consumer the technical information needed to choose the safer products.

To date more than 50 safety standards have been adopted and implemented, requiring -- among other changes -- laminated windshields, collapsible steering columns, interior padding, lap and shoulder belts, side marker lights, head restraints, leak resistant fuel systems, stronger bumpers, increased side door strength, better brakes and defroster and windshield wiper improvements.

Now, after more than eight years of development and testing, automatic occupant protection systems are available that we have reason to believe will prevent at least 9,000 deaths and tens of thousands of severe injuries a year by safeguarding the driver and front-seat passengers in frontal crashes.

We need these systems for one primary reason: people will not voluntarily use the belt systems already provided. Seat belt usage is, at best, 14 percent and, according to some surveys, much lower than that. The basic problem, of course, is the "nuisance factor."

But the larger problem is closely related to the one that concerns you at this symposium. Because, while we can regulate the vehicle -- its emissions, its fuel economy and its intrinsic safety -- we are not successful at regulating people. Despite the well-proven fact that helmets reduce motorcycle accident fatalities by impressive percentages, motorcycle helmet laws remain unpopular. While I hope that mandatory seat belt usage would be more acceptable than helmet laws, such a law would clearly be difficult to enforce.

In looking to the future of the auto industry, I think safety will become increasingly important, for competitive as well as protective reasons.

Joan Claybrook's consistent answer to the chronic industry argument that "safety doesn't sell" is that safety has never been sold. I'm inclined to agree with her. While the industry assumes that customers are turned off by safety features, we submit that assurances of protection and the ability to walk away from an accident will increase sales. We no longer live in a Pollyanna world. We know that cars crash and people die as a result. We also know that we have the means today to prevent a significant number of deaths, to lessen injury and to prevent a lot of grief and pain.

I hope that in the years ahead the view that safety has no market value will be disproven in the marketplace, just as the big car syndrome has been. The long-held preference for big cars in the United States was due, in some part, to the innate feeling that bigger, heavier cars are safer in a crash. Now, as cars get smaller, safety looms larger in the purchase decision. And with good reason. In large car/small car smashes, the small car occupant accounts for an overwhelming percentage of the fatalities.

More evidence on the "sale-ability" of safety comes from a survey done for us last year by Peter D. Hart Research Associates. In this poll, three out of four people rated safety and safety features as important to their choice of car. Interest in safety, in fact, was exceeded only by vehicle cost, gas mileage, and repair records as the leading factors influencing car choice. Safety was ahead of such features as interior comfort and style, car size, dealer service, exterior appearance and resale value.

Other surveys confirm these findings. According to a 1978 Harris poll, five out of six people in the U.S. said they wanted improved automobile safety. A Gallup poll showed strong support for airbags, as did earlier and recent General Motors' market surveys.

In NHTSA's new car assessment program, the agency is developing objective criteria whereby automobiles sold in America can be rated for their crashworthiness and occupant restraint performance. This information will allow consumers to judge the relative safety of various cars, not just guess at it. This program should provide a strong incentive for manufacturers to build safer small cars.

We recognize that in the past, the goals of safety and fuel economy at times have been in conflict. The first experimental safety vehicles the government commissioned, early in the 70's, were heavyweights--with all the grace of a Sherman tank and a fuel consumption rate to match.

The technology exists today to build and market cars that are both safe and efficient. We know it can be done because we have produced and tested two research safety vehicles that deliver 29 to 38 miles per gallon and will protect occupants in 50 mph crashes. The whole thrust of NHTSA's Research Safety Vehicle program has been to demonstrate to the public, and to the industry, what is possible--not just in safety design and engineering, but safety integrated with fuel economy, low emissions and the comfort features people want in a family car.

I think there is little doubt that the events of recent years have proven the importance of bringing market strategies into closer alignment with the goals and needs of society. It must be fairly evident by now with the uncertainties existing in today's world and with the influence of political policies on economics, only the most perceptive executives and the most forward looking companies are likely to avoid the pitfalls and exploit the opportunities that spell the difference between success and disaster in the international automotive market. The cost of investing in new technologies to meet the new realities of energy, safety, and consumer satisfaction may be high, but the price of not making those investments could be fatal in today's international competition.

Three and a half years ago a Chase Econometrics study predicted a "buyer's revolt" because of the Federal government's automobile fuel economy standards.

The report was right, but for the wrong reason. The report assumed that consumers would respond favorably to the first round of "downsizing"-- as in the 1977 GM models--but would not accept a further scaling down of the big cars that Americans have always loved and presumably always would love. "Three hundred thousand jobs could be lost," the report warned, "by the public's resistance to fuel-efficient cars."

In that sense, the report was right. Three-hundred thousand auto-workers today, unfortunately, are laid-off. But because of public demand for small, fuel-efficient cars, not resistance to them. The high, and still rising price of gasoline has made fuel economy, industry leaders now agree, a permanent force in the automotive marketplace.

I suspect that those today who deny or dispute the importance of safety in the automotive marketplace may someday be proven just as wrong as the authors of that 1976 study.

The auto industry has a long history of remarkable achievements marred by only a few examples of lost opportunities. It should now take advantage of the opportunities the new technological advances provide to improve vehicle safety as well as efficiency. We have shown we can cut automotive fuel consumption in half. We can be just as determined to cut highway deaths by at least a fourth. By moving toward that goal we can reaffirm our confidence and faith in the future of the car.

Together with what you are doing to bring human resources to bear on the problem, we can make highway traffic safety the success story of the 80's.

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