

AMERICAN HIGHWAYS CAN BE SAFER  
by  
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For years the annual highway death toll in America hovered around the 50,000 mark -- sometimes higher, occasionally lower -- but one statistic remained fairly constant. Alcohol-related accidents have accounted for roughly 50 percent of the fatalities. Year in and year out, one American died every 20 minutes on our roads, the victim of other Americans who thought they could drink and drive, and get away with the lethal consequences.

All of that is changing, largely because an aroused public has decided that safety, true to its slogan, is everybody's business.

It's especially our business at the U.S. Department of Transportation. In aviation, in railroading, in marine transportation, in pipelines and in highway travel -- across all modes of transportation. To reinforce the safety responsibilities already within our jurisdiction, we are submitting to Congress our proposal for a National Traffic Safety Administration within the Department, designed to sharpen the Federal focus on a full range of highway safety issues.

Efforts are concentrated on our nation's highways since 92 percent\* of all transportation-related deaths occur there. It is ironic that the system we most depend upon for our mobility is the system that takes the most life out of our society.

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\* According to NTSB statistics, 43,990 of 1982's 48,040 transportation-related deaths were highway-related -- 91.6 percent of the total.

Along with a stronger safety administration, we are initiating or intensifying a series of safety measures designed to improve passenger protection, further reduce the danger of commercial vehicle accidents and make the highway itself safer. None of these measures alone will eradicate risk, and all of them together will not guarantee accident-free travel. But by targeting those areas where the greatest improvements appear possible, we hope to bring the highway death rate steadily downward in the years ahead.

No law made in Washington, or anywhere else, will achieve that by itself. To be effective, safety goals must have popular as well as legislative support. Anti-drunk driving sentiments today have that support. Throughout America, community after community has determined that drunk or drugged driving is no longer acceptable social behavior. In simple terms, the drunk driver has worn out his welcome. He has run out of excuses, exhausting the patience of worried parents, wives, husbands and children.

The rising tide of anti-drunk driving legislation that has poured out of state houses and city halls in recent years is the direct result of concerned citizens who began at the grass roots and did not rest until their cries were heard and their petitions heeded. Last year alone, 37 states and the District of Columbia passed laws increasing the severity of DWI sanctions or plugging loopholes that previously allowed permissive judges to impose only token penalties. To support this groundswell of public rejection of the drunk driver, we are administering a Congressionally-supported grant program which rewards the states adopting mandatory sanctions and imposing stern penalties. At the same time we are funding 10 demonstration projects at sites across the country to help communities adopt comprehensive drunk driving programs. I also talk to youth groups at every opportunity, not to preach against alcohol but to help make young people aware of the dangers of mis-using the drinking and driving privilege. The death rate

among teenagers is alarming. Since alcohol-related car accidents are the leading cause of death for young people in the 15 to 24 age group, I make it a personal priority to meet with and warn young drivers about the incompatibility of alcohol or drugs with the kind of judgment that no license alone can confer.

Another form of highway negligence, less obvious but nearly as deadly, is the motorist or passenger who has access to a safety belt but fails to use it. Together with the private sector we are conducting a nationwide campaign to increase safety belt usage. Much of this campaign is aimed at employers. In a pilot program among our own workforce, we increased safety belt use by threefold -- to over 60 percent -- through a combination of emphasis, education and incentives. And since every one percent increase nationwide would save about 200 lives and prevent 3,000 serious injuries, the potential is enormous. Match our own success rate on a national scale, and we could save 8,000 lives a year.

Even more than adults, infants and young children deserve to be protected when travelling. Forty states and the District of Columbia now have required child safety seat laws, but along with the legal mandate we need better enforcement and increased public education. Many private agencies as well as local governments are helping through loaner programs as well as providing assistance on the proper use of child safety seats. The need is compelling. Seventy percent of the seats are used incorrectly. Car crashes are the leading cause of death and injury for children between the ages of one year and five years. Yet it is reliably estimated that 90 percent of the fatalities and 70 percent of the severe injuries could be prevented through the correct and consistent use of child safety seats. Approved models which can be used for air as well as road travel are now available.

As further insurance for the passenger, we are in the rulemaking process on two equipment proposals -- one for high-mounted "eye level" stoplamps, and one for anti-lacerative windshields. Regarding passive restraints, we are going to take a thorough look at the whole issue to see how technologies have improved and to more accurately assess the relative merits of automatic safety belts versus air bags. One thing that has not been considered in the past, for example, is retrofit technology. We are funding the installation of driver-side air bags in a number of highway patrol cars to increase our knowledge in this area.

In addition to further protecting motorists and their passengers, we are taking steps to make travel safer for all who use our highways. In the months ahead we will be overhauling an interstate computerized system known as the National Driver Register, which aids local officials in flagging problem drivers -- both pleasure drivers and commercial operators; we are encouraging the states to require skill as well as knowledge tests when licensing motorcycle operators; and we are making Federal grants available to states, as much as \$150 million through 1988, for tougher truck and bus safety enforcement. We support the strengthened truck safety provisions in Senator John Danforth's proposed legislation including an annual inspection of trucks by trucking companies and state or Federal roadside inspection of all commercial vehicles. We are also establishing a Hazardous Materials Advisory Committee, to further assist states and communities in safeguarding the movement of hazardous cargo; and providing 100 percent Federal funding for highway improvements designed to reduce roadside hazards and make night-driving safer. Other initiatives will follow as we work with concerned citizens and public officials across the country.

Apart from the specific safety programs in place and underway, the 50 percent increase in Federal-aid highway funding provided by last December's Surface

Transportation Assistance Act is making travel safer by speeding up highway and bridge improvements. The \$12 billion in gasoline taxes being invested this year in highway projects is the highest level of annual expenditures in the history of the Highway Trust Fund.

Over the long run, however, the ultimate success of our crusade to improve highway safety will depend not on how many dollars we spend, but on how many people -- in all aspects of our society -- join the effort. I have been both encouraged and impressed by the extent of voluntary support demonstrated by private organizations, private companies and by private citizens themselves. Good examples are the programs underway in a growing number of states encouraging motorists to report suspected drunk drivers.

In Colorado, where the REDDI ("Report Every Drunk Driver Immediately") program has been in effect since late 1980, more than 21,000 citizen calls have been logged by police and 2,550 arrests have been made. Largely as a result of citizen-involvement, DWI arrests have increased by 20 percent and alcohol-related accidents have declined by 13 percent.

Together we have made progress. The motor vehicle death toll, which dropped a heartening 10 percent last year, has declined another three percent so far this year. But that should be seen only as a road sign to our destination, not the destination itself. In the past week, I have addressed assemblies of police officers, highway officials and a major motor club to plead the cause of highway safety. I have made safety, in all aspects of transportation, my highest mandate. The initiatives we have launched are only the beginning. But we'll need everyone's help to make those initiatives successful. We will need to further enlist the support of every citizen, whether out of anger or

idealism, bitter memory or bright hope. Such allies give life to the law, even as the law saves lives. Through this creative partnership we can achieve the end we all seek -- greater safety on America's highways and throughout our transportation system. And we'll do it the old-fashioned way: through people working together in a cause we all believe in.

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