

Q: What happened to
these remarks?

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Draft Remarks Secretary Card

Lifesavers

DECADE OF PROGRESS

Henry Ford once said "History is more or less bunk. It's tradition. We don't want tradition. We want to live in the present and the only history worth a tinker's damn is the history we make today."

Mr. Ford, you're right and you're wrong. Right, if we mistakenly settle for the traditional as the best we can possibly do. Wrong, because the lessons of history contain clear directional markers for our trip into the future--if we but look.

Right, if we stop making salutary new history every day.

Wrong, if we view history as an achievement, rather than a messenger.

This is a historical Lifesavers Conference, the 10th. A time to pause; and a time when constructive reflection seems entirely in order. For me this is Lifesavers 1, my first conference, so I enjoy the special aura of anticipation that accompanies new situations and new experiences.

I bring two sensations to the conference: One is gratitude, because I have the opportunity to become your partner in something which obviously is very big and very important. The second is admiration, that the nation could forge a bond of concern so cohesive and so resilient that the cause of highway safety has worn well during these turbulent 10 years of challenge and experimentation.

One thousand or more of you are here today.....one thousand points of light in the very specialized firmament that is highway safety. One thousand points of determination, and 1,000 points of talent. Best of all--1,000 points of action.

Mr. James O. Mason, assistant secretary for health and head of the U.S. Public Health Service, recently noted that the average life expectancy in America has increased by 25 years in this century alone. That's a 50 percent gain.

And it was recorded during exactly that period when the passenger car was growing in numbers and influence in our economic and social spheres.

Passenger cars brought the sad reality of traffic crashes, and for many years I am sure that traffic crashes may have been holding down the years of life expectancy, because so many of those who died in crashes were the young and the vital. The specter of war always comes to mind as a metaphor for highway crashes, because the consequences are so alike.

But the Lifesavers era, that 10 years since 1982, brought some unusual happenings. I was about to say "unexpected," but that would misrepresent the expectations that the cooperating agencies which sponsor Lifesavers had at the inception.

Some of you were there then; and I am sure your hopes were high that a national focus might indeed achieve gains that states and local agencies operating alone could not attain.

In 1982 that eloquent symbol of status, the highway crash death rate, hung suspended--at a level which had moved only modestly lower during the previous eight consecutive years. In 1983 the rate plummeted sharply; a larger drop in that one year than recorded during the previous eight years combined.

And from that moment on, improvement flourished, nurtured by the Lifesavers network, now reaching out through every state to stimulate, exhort, and assist.

In 1991 the figures startled even us: Traffic deaths down to an estimated 41,350--the lowest figure in 30 years. The death rate at an estimated 1.9 fatalities per 100 million miles of travel, not only the all-time low, but beneath that mystic 2.0 mark--which only a few years ago seemed beyond reach. Now we understand that even 1.0 should not be considered outside of our orbit.

These numbers are the gloss; how the vehicle looks after the behind-the-scenes work of washing, waxing and rubbing. What went

into making these numbers deserves our recall, particularly as we celebrate this historically significant 10th anniversary year of Lifesavers.

For example: Lifesavers focussed on the astute selection of targets, and the careful choice of weapons. Lifesavers mounted the attack on impaired driving, moving on many fronts.

The marching orders were: Make it uncomfortable and unpopular to be a drinking or drugged driver.

Strip away the veneer of sympathy which for so long shielded the alcohol-impaired driver. Take away the things most prized--driver's license, money, freedom, and ultimately--status.

Then, accept another challenge, that of dramatically increasing safety belt use. Convince America with logic and with law. Put child safety seats and safety belts No. 1 on every driver's pre-trip check list.

Espouse belt and safety seat laws in every state; then encourage traffic police to elevate belt law enforcement to senior priority.

And assign special emphasis to the companion legions in the highway safety parade: motorcycle, pedestrian, and bicycle safety among others.

The message of this spectacular decade is that the building blocks have fit together very well. The safety barricade works.

The impact of the drinking driver began to diminish as the legal and enforcement pressures went up. In 1982, five states (and the District of Columbia) removed driver's licenses administratively for alcohol-related driving offenses.

Today 29 states employ this extremely effective technique. In 1982 17 states (and D.C) limited the use of all alcoholic beverages to those age 21 and above. Today that standard is universally observed in America.

Ten years ago 24 states (and D.C.) set a blood alcohol content of .10 as conclusive evidence of being under the influence. A decade later that number has grown to 41 states. And five other states have dropped that permissible blood alcohol level to a maximum of .08.

Reinforcing this tightening noose of strictures is the network of penalties which, like a spider's web, cling and deter. The most recent additions to the penalty agenda are fees or charges assigned to the drunk driver for police, fire and ambulance services made necessary by the subject's misadventures. Confiscation of the drunk driver's vehicle and license plates is another.

The combined net effect scrolls out the favorable numbers. In this Lifesavers Decade, more than 7,500 young lives have been spared by the 21-year minimum drinking age.

The percentage of teenage drivers who were intoxicated and involved in fatal crashes dropped sharply, from 29 percent to 19 percent, the biggest decline of any age bracket.

The overall proportion of traffic deaths involving alcohol decreased from 57 percent as the decade opened, to just under 50 percent now. (slight pause here)

Safety belts were a fad when Lifesavers met for the first time. The 14 percent who wore them in 1982 knew they were right--even if belts had not yet become the style. The 86 percent who didn't wear them simply weren't paying attention.

The first safety belt law became effective in late 1984; use perked up a bit the next year, to 21 percent. As more state laws came on line the use rate grew--to 30, 42, almost 50 percent.

Today, 41 states and the District of Columbia require safety belt use. All of them became believers during the Lifesavers Decade.

The growth curve for child safety seat laws began earlier and achieved 100 percent agreement when the last state signed on in 1985. Another triumph for this Decade of Decision.

And the benefits again shout the importance. More than 25,000 deaths prevented by safety belts; more than 1,300 children under 5 spared by safety seats. Belts alone are saving nearly 5,000 lives per year now.

The falling death rate, and the rewarding decrease in the number of crash deaths obviously are attributable in considerable part to the accumulating gains of these safety measures.

Ten years of Lifesavers could as easily be described as 10 years of lifesaving, because that was both the objective and result. Lifesavers has done the job.

Winston Churchill before his famous years as prime minister sat in the House of Commons. He observed on one occasion that then-prime minister Stanley Baldwin would be judged wrong by history. The puckish Churchill winked and added "I know it will, because I shall write the history."

The Lifesavers community needs no such assist. Because the history already lies revealed, a success story there for the observant.

A few weeks ago a letter published by the Washington Post described in elaborate detail the author's assessment of the highway crash situation.

The author noted that "our roads are becoming a nightmare...", "current fines and penalties for serious violations, including drunk driving, are too minimal to serve as a deterrent....", and "prevention of these needless deaths and injuries will not occur by continued rhetoric but by a serious program of education, enforcement and prosecution."

The writer's recently crystallized concerns about highway safety suggest the potential to become a valuable contributor to the

highway safety program, yet I was troubled that the stunning progress of the past decade had escaped someone who clearly cares.

There is a program, and it is working.

There are dedicated people involved, and they are busy.

There are realistic answers, but they must be applied.

There are some resources, but not enough.

There is growing grass roots commitment, but not enough.

There are loyal partisans at the community level, but not enough.

And there is skilled, intelligent, indomitable leadership. And that, my friends, is what you are: one thousand points of leadership, the people who will take us to tomorrow, and through the next decade, and into the exciting unknowns of the 21st century.

You will decide whether a number of Americans, with every right to greet the new century, won't get to, because they died in a traffic crash instead.

How many of these can we save? Especially given that the tools for saving many are available.

I make two assignments today. One carries the stamp of immediacy. It is the completion of a challenge set forth by President Bush two years ago. And even though I have been on your turf a very short time, I was well aware of this goal long before I joined the Department of Transportation.

The President said he wanted 70 percent of American passenger vehicle occupants buckling up regularly by 1992.

The campaign began in earnest last spring, built on a coalition that included state and local police agencies, government, industry, schools, safety organizations, business. And of course that meant everyone in this room was involved in some fashion.

By early fall, when the state surveys had been tallied, safety belt use in America was touching the 60 percent mark. And holding to it through the winter.

Now, as the last act begins, a massive renewal of the linked enforcement/information campaign that worked superbly in 1991, we know precisely where we are headed and precisely what it takes to get there.

And the leaders come from this room. That is the high priority task of the moment. Please grasp it eagerly, apply energy and the wisdom born of experience, and bring us down to year-end with the 70 percent buckle-up rate a reality.

That effort has my absolute endorsement, backed by my pledge that the Department of Transportation will continue to invest our energy and our people in the cause. And all the resource materials that are within our capacity to provide.

The second assignment is more far-reaching and ultimately more demanding, because the challenge of this second Lifesavers decade is to take charge and move out. You are here because you are leaders in highway safety, and leadership requires boldness, imagination, and historical perspective.

Perhaps that is the crux of Lifesavers 10. This capsule view of history, even though spanning one brief decade, looms much longer in our planning because so much that was so good happened in this 120 months.

We draw strength and renewed resolve. And as leaders you should be drawing reassurance from the lessons of 1982 through

1992. The well we drew from was amply supplied. It certainly has not run dry.

I doubt whether we need to rely on the strategy employed by the mother mouse, as she led her troop of young mice through the field, looking for food. Suddenly appeared a large and ferocious looking cat. Defenseless and with no place to run, mother mouse stood on her hind legs as tall as she could, and said in a loud voice: "BOW WOW WOW WOW WOW!"

The confused cat turned tail and fled. (Pause) Which shows you the value of having a second language. Perhaps we don't need a second language. Simply a vigorous dialogue in the language we know.

Early on April 12, 1945, Vice-President Harry Truman received an urgent summons to the White House, still unaware that President Roosevelt had died in Georgia. He was ushered quickly to Mrs. Roosevelt's sitting room, where she gently told him the news.

The stunned Truman was silent for a moment, then asked if there was anything he could do for Mrs. Roosevelt. She said no, softly adding:

"Is there anything we can do for you? For you are the one who is in trouble now."

History thrust Truman to heights of trust and responsibility he did not expect. A nation's expectations were high, as they always will be for leaders.

The nation holds us to account as leaders of the highway safety effort. Will we reward the national trust? A decade of history says that we will.

But promise must be fulfilled by action. That is the challenge you face for this second decade. Will Lifesavers continue to be LIFE (pause) SAVERS? Only you can provide the answer.

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