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THE DECISION TO BUILD THE NATIONAL SYSTEM
OF INTERSTATE AND DEFENSE HIGHWAYS

by

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INTRODUCTION

The building of the multi-billion dollar Interstate Highway System marked a major change in the Federal System, involved a significant expenditure, as well as caused a palpable effect on America's economic and social development. It will be the intent of this paper to examine how the decision to build the Interstate System was made. More specifically it will examine how the issue was resolved by the Eisenhower Administration and what pressures were placed on the House Public Works Committee as it sought to formulate the bill.

There were several questions which guided this paper. Why was the Interstate Highway System built? Why did a basically conservative Republican administration initiate such an expensive public works project, and why were few efforts made to prevent this huge expenditure? In seeking to determine the answers to these questions it seemed necessary to view the documents which President Eisenhower used in making this decision. As a result a careful study of the papers dealing with the Interstate Highway was undertaken at the Eisenhower Library. To discover what groups sought to influence the writing of this measure and the impact of Congress on it, an examination of the Hearings of the House Public Works Committee was undertaken.

A major hypothesis for this paper was that a program of this magnitude would be expected to come as a result of dynamic Presidential leadership and that vigorous opposition to it would develop. The data showed just the opposite to be the case. Even though President Eisenhower endorsed the Interstate System, it appears to have developed because of the impetus of earlier programs and the pressure brought by groups who had a great deal to gain from its construction. Thus, the President was not an active force in the decision, and no major opposition developed against the Interstate because influential groups in society favored its construction.

In an effort to determine why the Interstate Highway System was built the paper will examine its historical development. Then it will explore how the Eisenhower Administration proposed to deal with the issue. Finally, it will examine what the witnesses before the House Public Works Committee wanted the highway bill to contain.

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE HIGHWAY SYSTEM

Because of the size of the United States the question of how to move goods from farm to market has always been significant. At first the dirt trails used by the Indians provided the answer. However, the need for more than dirt trails became essential as the automobile replaced the horse and buggy in rural America. Cities and towns used various materials to make their streets passable in wet weather; by the end of the nineteenth century a better surface for farm to market roads also became essential. In 1893 the Office of Road Inquiry was established in the Agriculture Department to enable the Secretary of Agriculture to ascertain the best method of road building and to disseminate this information to the Agriculture Colleges.¹

The federal government became more deeply involved in the planning and engineering needed for the construction of highways. In 1916 the federal government became involved in helping to finance the construction of highways as a result of the Highway Act of 1916. The 1916 Act established the procedures used to the present day in the construction of highways with federal funds. Each state selects its own routes and highway designs, constructs the highway, and pays for it. The federal government reimburses the states for the

construction costs for the percent agreed upon, usually 50 percent. The federal government retains the right to prohibit its funds from going to highway construction for which it does not approve.

Under the 1916 Act each state was required to establish its own department of highways which worked with the federal government in planning projects. Problems developed because of lack of coordination between the various levels of government. This resulted in certain roads ending in the middle of nowhere. The problem was corrected by legislation in 1921 which required that all federal highway aid money be spent on a designated system of connecting roads. Thus the federal-aid primary system was pretty well established by the early 1920's.

During the Depression the federal government became more deeply involved in federal aid to highways. In some cases 100 percent of funds for highways were provided by the federal government through the Works Progress Administration. Slowly the emphasis on building highways was shifted from farm to market roads to interconnecting links between major cities. This concept was first enunciated by Congress in the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1938. This act directed the Chief of the Bureau of Public Roads to examine the feasibility of six interstate roads three going north-south and three east-west. The report submitted to Congress in 1939 showed that a need for such an interstate system existed.²

President Roosevelt in 1940 directed the Federal Works Agency, the Advisory Commission to the Council of National

Defense, and the War and Navy Department to make a joint study of the nation's highways in terms of national defense. Specifically they were to examine the strength of bridges, the width of strategic roads, and the difficulty or ease of moving personnel and material into or out of urban centers. The Public Roads Administration submitted their report to President Roosevelt in February, 1941. It contained two recommendations: one concerned highway improvements needed to ease the movement of the military, the second was the improvement of a 75,000 mile system of connecting strategically important areas.

The Defense Highway Act of 1941 was inspired by the report submitted by this joint group. It designated certain highways for troop, war material, and supply movement and emphasized the construction of good access roads to military installations. Using the rationale of national defense the ratio of federal-state money was increased from 50-50 to 75 percent federal money and 25 percent state money. During the war most non-strategic highway construction was stopped and the number of automobiles declined.³

In 1942 the President appointed a National Interregional Highway Committee to examine the need for a system of express highways. Their report submitted in January, 1944, recommended a system of 34,000 miles of highways to meet the needs of defense and the economy. The proposed system followed the earlier federal-aid highways plan quite closely as far as connecting of cities was concerned. From this study Congress

passed the Federal-aid Highway Act of 1944 which required the designation of a national system of Interstate Highways to connect as directly as possible the principle urban and industrial centers, as well as serve the defense of the country. This interstate system was not to exceed 40,000 miles.⁴

The Highway Act of 1944 also provided for what is known as the ABC system of funds for highways. It authorized federal funds on a regular basis for a system of secondary, or B, highways, plus arterials in urban areas, the C portion of the system. The primary or regular portion was known as the A part of the system. The federal funds were divided so that 45 percent went to the primary system; 30 percent for the secondary system; and the remaining 25 percent for streets in urban areas. These funds were to be matched on a 50-50 basis with state funds and marked the first time Congress provided federal funds on a regular basis for highways.⁵

Because of lack of funds the Interstate portion of the Highway Act of 1944 was not undertaken. However, the wheels were put in motion by the Act which eventually resulted in the Interstate System. In 1948 Congress again asked the Bureau of Public Roads and the state highway departments to cooperate with the Defense Department and the National Security Resources Board in conducting a survey of the nation's defense needs in relation to the highway system. They reported in mid-1949 that the nation's defense required a higher percentage of federal money in the federal-state ratio. By the end of

1949, some 40,000 miles had been incorporated into the Interstate System. In 1952 Congress authorized an additional expenditure of \$25 million for the fiscal year ending June 30, 1955, for construction and improvements on the System.

In 1954 Congress responded to the upsurge in vehicle registration and the deterioration of the various highway systems by directing that a comprehensive study of all phases of highway financing be undertaken. This Report (H. Doc. No. 120) was submitted in March of 1955 and estimated highway construction for the years 1955-64 at \$101 billion. An earlier report by the Bureau of Public Roads had recommended that the traditional 50:50 sharing be changed to 75 percent federal 25 percent state financing due to the national importance and the nature of the Interstate System. In 1954 Congress changed the ratio to 60:40.⁶

DEVELOPMENT OF EISENHOWER'S PROGRAM

On December 1, 1953, the Under Secretary of Commerce for Transportation, Robert B. Murray, Jr., in an Office Memorandum reported that "the deficiencies on the National System of Interstate Highways are being rapidly overcome in most states." He went on to explain that the Interstate System serves the needs of national defense, and the primary needs of intercity and interregional highway transportation, and thus is of major interest to the national government. Since a great deal of local traffic made use of these highways they were also of major concern to local and state governments. The Under Secretary stated that \$2.5 billion in state funds and \$0.8 billion in federal funds have been expended or committed to the Interstate System or to roads which parallel the System. He predicted that this expenditure on the Interstate System would continue.

The Under Secretary went on to explain that, "The Department of Defense has gone on record as stating that the Interstate System provided 'the principal system of connecting highways to serve the national defense.'" Since most of the states had the capability of correcting the deficiencies on the Interstate System, he recommended that federal participation be limited "to those segments of the national system of Interstate highways that are certified as essential to national

defense by the Department of Defense."

His report further recommended that the federal government allow the states to collect the tax on gasoline and that the federal government remove itself completely from collection of this tax. This would be tied to the federal government removing itself from non-defense aspects of the Interstate, a major administration goal of returning a basic state function to the states.⁷

At a Cabinet meeting on January 4, 1954, the President stressed the need for "preventing further deterioration of highways, including federal assistance on secondary roads." At the same meeting Secretary of Commerce Sinclair Weeks urged that the Administration not commit itself "to an expensive highway program which could not be put into effect until 1956 or 1957." He urged the continuation of the gas tax.⁸ The President's commitment to the highway program was made evident in his State of the Union Message delivered on January 7, 1954. In this address he stated that the federal government would continue its central role in the Federal Highway Program. He pledged that when the Commission on Intergovernmental Relations Study Committee on Federal Aid to Highways completed its work on the present system of financing highway construction he would "promptly submit it for consideration by the Congress and governors of the states."⁹ In his Economic Report to the Congress on January 28, 1954, under the heading of strengthening the economy, he wrote, "To stimulate the expansive power of individual enterprise we should take action....by strengthening

the highway system..."¹⁰

General John S. Bragdon who served the President as a Special Assistant for Public Works and on the Council of Economic Advisors reported his perspective on the early formation of the Administration's policy on the Interstate Highway:

"I had been in my position on the staff of the Council of Economic Advisors about two weeks when the President sent for me to tell me he wanted me to study the interstate highway problem. He wanted a new broader approach...a truly national system, ignoring state boundaries, for thorough, speedy and safe motor travel from coast to coast, border to border, region to region. He also emphasized his interest in self-liquidating projects. And he wanted the controlled or limited access type such as used on the Pennsylvania and New Jersey Turnpikes."¹¹

On May 12, 1954, Eisenhower's Chief of Staff, Sherman Adams, submitted a memorandum to the Cabinet concerned with the action recommended to the President by his Advisory Committee on Government Organization, chaired by Nelson Rockefeller, and the Bureau of the Budget. Mr. Adams outlined the problem of transportation: "This administration must recognize that the vital interests of this nation require the maintenance of the transportation industry of the United States at maximum effectiveness." He went on to explain that the administration needed to provide effective leadership so that the various forms of transportation are "able to perform fully the role for which it is best suited." The administration needed to develop a national policy and program since little progress had been made in modernizing the transportation system.

Mr. Adams proposed that the Cabinet consider the following points: First, the long-term financial outlook for all forms of public transportation was unfavorable. Second, carriers

could not maintain plants and equipment in peak physical condition and were unable to keep abreast of technological developments. Third, promotional policies, including all forms of subsidies, conflicted with regulatory policies, which in turn provided excessive regulation with regulatory bodies assuming managerial prerogatives. Fourth, the nation's transportation bill had been unnecessarily increased by several billion dollars a year because of deficiencies in policy and organization.¹³ He recommended that a Cabinet Committee be established to "explore and formulate overall policy and organizational recommendations covering the whole field of transportation."¹⁴

At a Cabinet meeting on May 14, the President reported that he received a letter from Secretary of Labor James Mitchell who urged that certain public works especially road building ought to be undertaken. He urged that this construction be done quickly to counteract the decline in manufacturing employment which had occurred because of the decline in military spending. President Eisenhower expressed agreement with this proposal. In addition, Sherman Adams presented the points made in the memorandum mentioned above.¹⁵

Mr. Eisenhower was scheduled to give a major address at the Governors' Conference but because of illness was unable to attend. As a result Vice President Nixon gave the President's address. Mr. Nixon reported that the President believed the existing highway system to be obsolete "because

in large part it just happened," and it was designed for local movement at low speeds. He said, "The President specifically called for a grand plan for a properly articulated (highway) system that solves the problems of speedy, safe transcontinental travel..." Mr. Nixon also called attention to the President's concern for the "loss of life and limb from accidents, the economic cost of congestion, and the clogging of our courts by cases having their origin in traffic."¹⁶ The governors named a special committee to examine the problems of highways at this conference. This committee would receive a report on the highway needs from each governor. The Committee would then give its full report to the President.

After the Governors' Conference a memorandum for the President outlined the steps involved in putting together a National Highway Program. It was suggested that the President name an Advisory Commission on Highways which would consider all the recommendations of the various groups examining highway needs. It would prepare recommendations for the President after consulting all agencies concerned with the highway system. The Commission would make its recommendations to the President and when the proposal was made to Congress the Commission would help convince Congress of its virtues. General Lucius Clay was named as chairman of the Commission.¹⁷

The President's press secretary, James Hagerty, in his diary on December 3, 1954, referred to the progress made

in developing the administration's highway program:

"In the afternoon conferred with Lucius Clay, Governor Kennon of Louisiana, and Jack Marton on the highway program and specifically with the recommendation of the Governors' Conference which Kennon submitted today to the President. This report recommended that the federal government spend \$25 billion over the next ten years on the interstate highway system and feeder roads, leaving the states free to spend their money and the regular federal contributions they receive on primary, secondary, and urban roads.

Since the President had originally announced that the highway program would be \$50 billion over the next ten years, it was important that we point out to the newsmen in the conference after the Governor's appointment with the President that the Governor's recommendation for \$25 billion did not mean that the program had been cut in half or that it would be matched equally by the localities. Actually what is going to happen is that the federal government will take over the responsibility for all the interstate highway systems and reimburse those states which have already built such roads. It is expected that this more or less pump priming system will encourage the states to spend more money and that overall the expenditures over the next ten years will be well over \$50 billion. However, since the Governor's report was going to be submitted to Clay's committee for study and incorporation in their final report which will be due toward the end of December, we could not make public much of the details other than to give the newsmen the text of the Governor's recommendation."¹⁸

The President in his State of the Union message on January 6, 1955, once again mentioned the need for highways and promised a recommendation to the Congress. He stated,

A modern efficient highway system is essential to meet the needs of our growing population, our expanding economy, and our national security. We are accelerating our highway improvement program as rapidly as possible under existing state and federal laws and authorizations. However, this

effort will not in itself assure our people of an adequate highway system. On my recommendation, this problem has been carefully considered by the Conference of State Governors and by a special Advisory Committee on a National Highway Program (Clay Report), composed of leading private citizens. I have received the recommendations of the Governors' Conference and will shortly receive the views of the special Advisory Committee.¹⁹

From these reports he promised to submit a recommendation on January 27.

The President submitted to the Cabinet in January, 1955, a proposed special message concerned with the report he received from the Cabinet Committee on Transport Policy and Organization, chaired by Secretary Weeks. Mr. Eisenhower reiterated a statement made at the time the Cabinet Committee was appointed. In this statement he said that it was in the nation's vital interest that the transportation industry "maintain itself at maximum effectiveness. The government must provide effective leadership so that its policies are designed to aid the transportation industry to perform fully its role." The Cabinet Committee concluded that it was necessary to remove government regulations from transportation and to "assure the maintenance of a modern and financially sound system of common carrier transportation" adequate for the needs of the economy and the nation's security. The President discussed the developments in transportation and emphasized that the government had played a significant role in these developments. He pointed out that the government had provided financial help to every form of transportation but suggested this was done in an effort to encourage private enterprise.²⁰

At the January 28 Cabinet meeting a considerable amount of time was taken up with the proposed message to Congress on transportation. It was pointed out by Secretary Weeks that the message was strongly pro-railroad. He defended this policy because of the need not to fall back "on a dole or government ownership of the indispensable railroad system" When a question was raised if the message did not close out a highway system, Mr. Weeks said the Committee wishes to make a further study of the distribution of costs for the highway. Some discussion followed on using the gasoline tax and the 10% transportation tax and the wisdom of specifically stating that all aid to any form of transportation be eliminated. The President expressed the view that to speak of eliminating aid to transportation "was something of a gratuitous philosophical observation."²¹

The "President's Advisory Committee on a National Highway Program" commonly referred to as the Clay Committee, submitted its report to the President in January, 1955. The report made ten major points. First, a safe and efficient highway network was essential to America's military and civil defense and to the economy, and the existing system was inadequate both now and for future needs. Second, total construction needs of all highway systems during the next ten years are estimated at \$101 billion which would include modernization of the interstate system. Third, the Committee agreed with the Governors' Conference that the federal share should be increased

to 30 percent of the total. Fourth, since the interstate network was predominately national in scope it suggested that the federal government contribute \$27 billion and the states \$2 billion to modernize the system in 10 years. Fifth, it was recommended that the federal share be financed by bonds administered by a Federal Highway Corporation created for this purpose. Sixth, the Federal Highway Corporation should have a board which would act on appeals when a dispute arose between federal and state authorities. Seventh, toll roads built to acceptable standards could be included in the System, however, toll financing was not a satisfactory answer to financing. Eighth, states which had adequate highways to incorporate into the system should be reimbursed provided these funds were used for highway improvements. Ninth, the usual formula for federal grants to states should be continued. Tenth, state statutes should be changed where this was needed to facilitate the Interstate's completion.²²

Press Secretary James Hagerty recorded in his Diary on February 16, 1955, that a meeting occurred between the President, Republican leaders, and General Clay to discuss the highway message the President would send to Congress. At this meeting General Clay outlined the general theory behind the plan and then answered some questions. He explained that the Committee did not favor a significant use of toll roads because "a toll road is actually a luxury transportation" and since in some cases the interstate would be the only road this would cause

a hardship on those too poor to pay the toll. He also explained that states which had already built sections of the highway would get rebates but these could only be used for road construction. The President concluded the discussion with a statement of strong support for the proposal. He said:

"There is not question in our minds, gentlemen, that unless we develop the road structure of our country, unless we develop new roads to handle increased traffic, we will have a terrible condition in this country. With our roads inadequate to handle an expanded industry, the result will be inflation and a disrupted economy. We must build new roads or else we will have an obsolete system. Let me remind you that almost every airfield built ten years ago in this country is now becoming obsolete and cannot handle the increased burden of traffic. We cannot let that happen on our roads."²³

A meeting of the joint legislative leadership was held at the White House on February 21, 1955, the day before the President sent up his message on the Interstate System. Mr. Hagerty recorded that the President opened the meeting by stating that he had always had a great interest in the road program and was particularly disturbed by the condition of America's highways when he returned from Germany after World War I. He continued:

"Gentlemen, highways have an influence on everything we do in our country. We will soon have more than 60 million vehicles travelling our roads and we will have to build up our highways to meet that traffic. Highways are vitally essential for our national defense since they permit quick exits from thickly populated areas and permit mobile columns to move over them in case of any enemy attack. From any standpoint, a ten-year road program will help our nation and will fulfill our great needs.

It will help the steel and auto spare parts industry and I urge you to consider very seriously the plan we will propose. I've asked General Clay to come here today to tell you about it but before he does, I want to tell you that we plan to have a ten-year road program which will not add to our national debt. In drafting this plan, General Clay has sought the advice and counsel of the Governors' Conference and many other interest groups. I would be the last to say there are not errors or mistakes in the plan but I will say that we must push ahead on it without adding to our debt. I am sure that everyone in this room will agree that it is something that the United States needs. I am going to send up my message on it tomorrow."²⁴

Mr. Hagerty indicated that all the members seemed convinced that a highway system was necessary, but that obvious differences were apparent between the Democrats and the President. He noted the major point of disagreement seemed to be over the way the project would be funded. The Democrats objected to the \$30 billion that would be required to pay off the interest on the bonds. The problem of financing was ultimately settled by the establishment of the Trust Fund.²⁵

THE EISENHOWER PROGRAM FOR INTERSTATE HIGHWAYS

On February 22, 1955, President Dwight D. Eisenhower sent a special message to Congress in which he outlined a \$101 billion program to upgrade the nation's highway system.²⁶ This message became the basis of the 41,000 mile Interstate Highway System which became law with the President's signature on June 29, 1956. Today it is evident that this system encouraged the consumption of large amounts of gasoline; it affect the growth patterns of the urban areas, and has been important in the way the nation's resources have been used.

Mr. Eisenhower recognized the significance of this act but his perception of it was somewhat different from the perception of those who live in an energy conscious time. In his memoirs the President wrote:

The reasons for urgency were incontrovertible. Ours was a nation on the move. Much of merchandise moved by truck. We took to the roads for recreation. And we needed roads for defense. The weight of the nation was shifting. More people were leaving the farms, and flocking to the cities (those who stayed behind, it was obvious, could produce more food and fiber than we knew what to do with). And the rush carried people not only into the cities but cut into the areas just beyond them, creating suburbs. With these movements and the burgeoning automobile population, the requirement for an efficient arterial network of roads, a true concrete and macadam lifeline, had become acute.²⁷

He went on to explain "that accidents were taking the lives of thirty-six thousand persons a year and injuring more than a million." Further, the poor condition of the roads was boosting the cost of operating motor vehicles by \$5 billion a year. A constant theme of the President was that this Interstate System was needed as a means of escape in case of a nuclear attack or a natural disaster.²⁹

The points Mr. Eisenhower made in his memoirs closely paralleled those he made in his Special Message to Congress in 1955. He began the message by saying that "our unity as a nation is sustained by free communication of thought and by easy transportation of people and goods." Without this the nation would be a "mere alliance of many separate parts." The highway system is one of the nation's largest items of capital investment and its impact on the economy and society is incalculable. However, the present system is inadequate for the nation's growing needs. This was recognized by a Special Presidential Commission headed by General Lucius Clay and at a meeting of the nation's Governors. President Eisenhower then listed four reasons for the specific program on highways he was proposing: the economic and human cost of automobile accidents, the high cost of road construction, in case of nuclear attack the automobile must be able to move large numbers of people quickly from the cities, and the projected number of vehicle miles by 1965 was 814 billion which would result in massive traffic jams if the highways were not improved.

The President then went on to explain why he believed the correction of the highway system was the responsibility of the federal government. He pointed out that the highway system was a public enterprise. The government had a continuing responsibility for "management that promotes the economy of the nation and properly serves the individual user." The expenditures on a highway program are a "return to the highway user of the taxes which he pays in connection with his use of the highways." This system needed to be upgraded and the federal government was the only one capable of carrying this responsibility. The President wanted the program financed through bonds which would be paid off with the money collected from gasoline and diesel oil taxes as well as a limited use of tolls.²⁹

The bill that President Eisenhower proposed in February, 1955, was passed by the Senate but was killed in the House of Representatives. At an April Cabinet meeting, Louis Rothschild, Administrator of the Maritime Board, reported Senate disfavor with the administration bill. He and Secretary of the Treasury Humphrey both expressed the belief that administration pressure should be concentrated in the House. A plan to build public support for the bill was discussed. The emphasis of the public relations campaign would be that roads built under this program would be serviceable for the next twenty years, the plan involved no increase in the gasoline tax, and it left funds available for other highway projects.³⁰

Administration's efforts to convince Congress that its program should be adopted were not made easier by the disagreement within the Administration. The major point of contention concerned the way the Highway System should be financed. General Bragdon's Papers make it very clear that he favored a system of toll roads and a memorandum from Dr. Arthur Burns, chairman of the Council of Economic Advisors, to General Bragdon indicates Dr. Burns had similar misgivings about the proposed system. Dr. Burns wrote:

"Mr. du Pont's position has always been that the politics of the road problem were such that it had to be dealt with politically, i.e. the Interstate part had to be a state-dominated plan but paid for by all federal money. I fear this has boomeranged. It has ben so political that the bill is being taken over by the Democrats, with all the objectional features of the Gore plan."

He stated he believed a properly presented toll road system would have been acceptable to the Governors.

"This whole road situation has been misguided. The only hope for it is to modify the financing features on the basis of newly developed data, which points the way to toll road financing...it will then remain the administration's program and relieve the taxpayer of a gigantic new debt increment."³¹

Shortly after the failure of the Administration's bill in Congress a new Cabinet Advisory Committee, chaired by Secretary Weeks, was authorized to examine the program the President would submit to Congress in 1956. At the October 28, 1955 Cabinet meeting Secretary Weeks reviewed the Committee's study and said that the bond proposal had been eliminated, and that a small tax should be placed on gasoline, tires,

trucks and buses. Secretary Humphrey indicated he believed that the bond proposal had been a mistake because it would have required that Congress commit itself too far into the future. It was pointed out that the increased taxes would be used solely for highways and that a compromise could be ironed out on the matter of compensation to states which had already built part of the system. The Cabinet gave its general agreement to this program which was to be presented to the Governors' Highway Committee.³²

At a legislative leadership meeting in December, 1955, the strategy for passage of the highway program was discussed. Several warnings were voiced on the efforts of the opposition to pin the responsibility for increased taxes on the Republicans. Senator William Knowland, Republican from California, suggested that the President merely cite the need for roads and call for a bill with "adequate financing provisions." The consensus was that the question of financing should not be raised in the State of the Union Message. Rather, it was suggested that exploratory discussions should be opened with Democratic leaders.³³

In his 1956 State of the Union Message Eisenhower pushed for the enactment of the plan he submitted the previous year. He stated,

Legislation to provide a modern, interstate highway system is even more urgent this year than last, for twelve months have now passed in which we have fallen further behind in road construction needed for the personal safety, the general prosperity, and the national security of the American people.

During the year, the number of motor vehicles has increased from 58 to 61 million. During the past year over 38,000 persons lost their lives in highway accidents, while the fearful toll of injuries and property damage has gone on unabated.³⁴

He continued, "If we are to ever solve our mounting traffic problem, the whole interstate system must be authorized as one project, to be completed approximately within the specified time. Only in this way can industry efficiently gear itself to the job ahead." To avoid waste and confusion, he said, "there must be an adequate plan of financing the system"³⁵

At a legislative leadership meeting at the White House on June 5, 1956, the Administration articulated five points it wanted in the Highway bill. First, it wanted to maintain the system at 40,000 miles unless funds were provided for a mileage increase. Second, it wanted a general statement of policy rather than a rigid formula for apportionment of funds. Third, it would avoid reimbursement for toll roads. Fourth, it would maintain the Senate provision which would make apportionment contingent on tax collection. Fifth, it would maintain one person or body as the final arbitrator in wage disputes.³⁶

Between this meeting and June 29, when President Eisenhower finally signed the bill, some minor changes were made but its provisions were basically set. President Eisenhower did not appear to have been too upset with the system of financing that was finally adopted. He wrote, "I grew restless with the quibbling over methods of financing.

I wanted the job done." When these differences were resolved, the measure moved quickly through Congress.³⁷

It is apparent from the previous statements that President Eisenhower had a long standing commitment to the improvement of the nation's highways. He saw it as needed for the growth of the economy as well as for national defense. In his memoirs he mentioned that he was impressed with the German Autobahnen, "which offered the chance to drive with speed and safety at the same time. I recognized then that the United States was behind in highway construction...In the middle 1950's I did not want us to fall still further behind."³⁸

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC WORKS TESTIMONY

Having examined the role of the Eisenhower Administration in the development of the Interstate System it seems apparent that strong Presidential initiative and commitment was lacking. The President favored the Interstate but its enactment was not due to vigorous Presidential leadership. In an effort to determine what pressures were placed on Congress concerning this measure an examination of the House Public Works Committee Hearings would seem to be an appropriate next step.

The tone of the House Committee on Public Works was set by its first witness, Secretary of Commerce Sinclair Weeks. He began his testimony with a reiteration of the need for an expanded highway program, which he said was "definitely established by representatives of farm organizations, industry, labor and other organizations." Further, he reminded the Congressmen that the President had repeatedly urged an expanded highway system as "vital for both economic development and national defense, as well as, to reduce traffic deaths and injuries."³⁹ It is quite apparent that the Commerce Secretary assumed that the need for such a system was beyond question.

Weeks spent a considerable amount of time in his prepared statement urging that the Interstate Highway Program be funded as a complete program rather than in a piecemeal approach. Further, he said that it was necessary that the Interstate System be completed in ten years not thirteen as Congress was considering. He urged that each state be given funds paid in a ratio to the estimated cost of completing the entire Interstate System. He also agreed that federal funds should be on a 90 percent federal 10 percent state matching basis, and that traditional state autonomy over such things as speed limits, maintenance and general highway use remain a state function.

The administration favored giving the federal government the authority to acquire rights-of-way, including control of access, in an effort to facilitate the building of the system. They also wanted to continue to provide funds for the improvement of other highway systems. An area of some concern to the administration was the matter of reimbursement to states for toll roads that could be incorporated into the interstate system. Although this concept was supported by the President's Advisory Commission, Weeks indicated the administration felt the present toll roads were on a sound financial footing and that "obviously more roads can be completed if those already built are not bought."⁴⁰ Under rather sharp questioning from some Congressmen representing states with toll roads, the Secretary seemed to harden his position that the intent was

to build a complete Interstate System as a unit, and not take in features that were already in existence.

A major concern of Secretary Weeks was that the roads be completed within ten years. When questioned about the need for speed, he replied, "I think some time has passed since we started in the discussion of this, and the need is increasing all the time. I think it is just obvious that the sooner we get this done, the better."⁴¹ When tied to the question of financing Weeks commented,

There are three ways to finance the project. Either borrow the money, or deficit financing, or pay as you go. If you are going to pay as you go, I again come back to the fact that the quicker you can get it done, the better. If you drag it out it will not, I do not think, work as well, and we need the roads very badly. The people who use these roads are insisting it be built. The people who use the roads in the cost of operations with wear and tear on their physical apparatus are going to save an awful lot of money. It has been estimated and I have seen the figures that they will save as much as four cents a mile in operating a car on this type of an Interstate System."⁴²

During the questioning of the Secretary's top aides, a number of issues were raised. A major concern was the question of federal versus state or local control over various aspects of the highway system. These issues included federal requirements for rights-of-way, whether public hearings should be required in states, and a major question concerned reimbursement to states with toll roads if those toll roads were incorporated into the Interstate System. It was brought out that the bill as constituted did not provide money to reimburse the states that had already built part of the system,

butaides to Secretary Weeks indicated this was a decision that Congress would have to make. Since most of these matters were brought up earlier in Week's testimony the questions centered around clarification of minor points. There may also have been an attempt by some members of the committee to pressure the administration into rethinking its original ideas. This forum also allowed the Congressmen the opportunity to get their particular concerns on the record.

The first non-federal official to appear before the House Committee was Rex M. Whitton, President of the American Association of State Highway Officials, along with some administrative officials of that organization. This association was composed of the highway department of the forty-eight states and the territories. It was pointed out by Whitton that it had much to do with the beginning of federal-aid for highways and in setting up the Federal Bureau of Public Roads. Whitton said that his statement represented the "considered opinion of the executive committee of our association."⁴³ He pointed out that close relationship between the Association, the States, and highway construction.

The thrust of the Association of State Highway Official's statement was a ringing endorsement of the proposed Interstate System. The Association believed that a delay in launching the Interstate Highway would cause an upturn in the rate of fatalities and in economic loss, "because as roads become more crowded and more obsolete, congestion and accident rates

increase in a geometric rate." Delay also made future planning difficult. They favored 90 percent federal funding and the federal government taking the initiative in beginning the program. It was pointed out that these roads were vitally needed for the movement of troops and for the evacuation of critical targets, and that this was a federal responsibility. They did not support reimbursement of already built highways but were in favor of allowing the federal government the power to acquire right-of-way to speed up the building process.⁴⁴

Much of the questioning concerned Mr. Whitton's opinions about federal standards versus states standards on such things as weight of vehicles, speed, and width of the road. He said the association favored giving the states the power to make these decisions. Questions were raised concerning the building and maintenance of rights-of-way for utilities, which were paid for by the federal government. Also, what should be done about the prevailing wage rate? They said they wanted this to remain a state matter. A number of times throughout the questioning it was stated that even if we knew we were never going to war again, the Interstate Highway System was still necessary for economic growth and the safety of passengers.

The American Municipal Association sent as its spokesman, Mayor Ben West of Nashville, who strongly supported the Interstate Highway proposal. He reported that the highway situation in the cities was desperate, and stated that if

certain questions were too controversial they should be postponed so that the building of the highway could get under way. An example of such a question would be the reimbursement for highways already built. Mayor West explained that a number of projects within cities, concerned with urban renewal, civil defense and highway links, had been stalemated because Congress had not provided the assurance of a well planned and financed Interstate Highway System. The cost to cities of the highways under the proposed system would be approximately \$14 billion. However, the cities could never afford them even though these highways were badly needed.⁴⁵

The Municipal Association favored a ten year program and the construction of a complete system. They also wanted the Federal government to provide 90 percent of the funds. Mayor West reported that the Association had conducted a series of field meetings concerning the highways in five cities. He said, "We have found from these meetings that the people at the grassroots level are solidly behind the expanded highway program and that they are willing to pay higher user taxes to get these highways now."⁴⁶ He ended his formal statement with a call for Congress to act to make the dream of a modern highway a reality.

Some of the information contained in the survey of the cities mentioned above was reprinted after Mayor West's testimony. The report closely paralleled West's statement; the major thrust of it was that the federal government's delay

in building the Interstate System had adversely affected new construction at an estimated cost of \$5.5 billion. The report quoted some sixty city officials as they expressed their concern for the slow movement of Congress on this issue.⁴⁷ It appears that the report from the American Municipal Association would have been convincing from a political standpoint since it quoted leading political figures from many states.

The Committee next heard from Senators Newberger and Morse from Oregon, Wesley D'Ewart, assistant Secretary of the Interior, and Edward Cliff, Assistant Chief of the Forest Service, all of whom spoke in favor of building access roads into the forests. The testimony of Senator Morse was accompanied with letters of support from eleven leading United States Senators who strongly supported expenditures for forest development roads and trails. At a later session E. L. Bartlett, delegate from Alaska, and Congressman John Rhodes from Arizona spoke before the committee concerning their support for these access routes. Mr. Bartlett also made a strong plea to include Alaska in the highway system but not the Interstate System. The remainder of the fourth day of testimony was consumed by members of the committee discussing the particular concerns of their districts.

Congressman Charles Bennett from Florida spoke of his concern that municipally owned utilities should be reimbursed when they must relocate because of the construction of federal highways. His amendment was aimed at the states which placed

a road through an area of the city where utilities were located without reimbursing the city or utility. In the course of the questions and answers it became apparent that this type of requirement was already in the proposed law. New York's Congressman Becker, with the other New York members of the committee in agreement, made a forceful plea that states who had already completed part of the System should be reimbursed. He pointed out that the Bureau of Public Roads said that 15 percent of the Interstate System was already completed.⁴⁸ He pleaded for reimbursement on the grounds of fair play, since the people of his state and others had already taxed themselves as high as they could. He also pointed out that the New York highway was engineered with defense in mind, pointing to the fact that in a number of places the highway was wide enough for planes to land. Thus, the New York Turnpike fit into the general scheme of the system and the state should be reimbursed.⁴⁹

Much of the fifth day's testimony dealt with whether the various industries involved in the construction of the system could provide the supplies that would be required. The first witness to deal with this question was J. N. Robertson, President of the American Road Builders Association. Mr. Robertson said his association had been asked by the Clay Committee to make a study of the supply needs for the highway. At the time of the Congressional hearing they were making a second study. He pointed out that the association was a

non-political group whose primary concern was "to gather and disseminate reliable information on all aspects of highway transportation."⁵⁰ Mr. Robertson informed the committee that his association as a whole believed that Highway Act was a good bill and that it was very much needed. He went on to document the number of people killed and injured, and the great property loss within the previous year, since the committee first considered the measure. In spite of bottlenecks in certain areas, he expressed a strong conviction that the industries involved could meet the requirements for the highway project.

Mr. Robertson introduced as part of his testimony the resolution adopted at the American Road Builders Meeting in January, 1956. In the resolution the road builders took a strong stand on the question of federally required wages. The road builders stated:

They do hereby go on record as being unalterably opposed to any law, regulations, or other agency thereof, to determine, establish, and direct the specific rates of pay, hours of work, and other condition of employment for laborers and mechanics employed on highway constructions projects...⁵¹

The committee then heard from the chairman of four task forces whose responsibility it had been to study specific areas of supply needs for the proposed project. All four task force chairmen reported adequate supplies and the ability to meet the needs of expanded highway construction. They found that the production capacity of the equipment industry could more than adequately support a highway construction program of the

magnitude of this bill. Another task force found that the increased need for engineers could be developed despite some shortages. And it found that with the exception of spot shortages of cement the capacity of industry would be increased sufficiently to meet the increased needs. The ability of the highway contractors to increase their productive capacity was not seen as a major problem, since they were operating at considerably less than their capacity.⁵²

It was evident from the questions of the Congressmen that they perceived the statements of these task forces as very significant. They indicated that when the measure came before the entire House of Representatives the possibility of dislocation in the economy, because too much was being used for highways, would be a significant concern to many Congressmen.

The next group of witnesses dealt with reimbursement to states which had already built part of the system. Two people from New York made a strong plea for allowing New York to receive credit for the toll roads they had already built. Also presented was a letter from Governor Averell Harriman which asked that a provision be made so that New York would be reimbursed. Committee Chairman Charles Buckley made the point to the question and answer session that New York paid twenty percent of the taxes for the federal government and "we are only getting 659 miles if we get this credit."⁵³ A member of the New York State Temporary Highway Finance Commission, a bipartisan group, indicated that New York needed to build a

large number of different highways. As a result New York would be taxing itself at such a great rate for these improvements, that it needed the reimbursement of funds for the Interstate to meet these needs.

Albert Wedeking, President of the American Bridge, Tunnel and Turnpike Association, testified before the committee and asked them to consider expanding the construction of toll roads. To support his viewpoint he quoted from a report by the Secretary of Commerce. In it he said:

The present law should be changed to permit the inclusion of toll roads as part of the National System of Interstate Highways when they meet the standards for that system, and when there are reasonably satisfactory alternative free roads on the Federal-aid primary or secondary system, which permit traffic to bypass the toll road.⁵⁴

The association expressed approval of providing credit to those states which had already constructed free or toll highways of acceptable standards. Wedeking expressed the belief that the expenditures for the Interstate would not reduce the amount spent for other roads. Rather, he felt the opposite might be true, since it was guaranteed that the money would be spent for the specific program. He was sidetracked by another question and never got back to an explanation of his position on this question.⁵⁵

The remaining two and half days of hearings were basically concerned with the method of setting the wage of the workman on the project. This issue came up only incidentally earlier in the hearings and was mentioned by an aide, in a memorandum to the President. It was noted earlier that wage rates were

a matter of concern to the labor union. This was the only real issue to cause an extended heated exchange among the members of the Committee. However, even at these points of disagreement the issue was not whether an Interstate Highway System was needed or desirable it was merely the details of construction that were of concern.

The specific issue was whether the federal government, in the person of the Secretary of Labor, should determine the wage or whether it should be left up to the prevailing wage in a given area. Not surprisingly the construction companies favored the prevailing wage, whereas the spokesmen for the unions feared that workers would be brought in from areas where the prevailing wage was low. This would result in undercutting the gains unions had made and upsetting the local wage rates. William Dunn, who represented the Associated General Contractors of America, indicated four reasons why his organization opposed the Davis-Bacon Act or any other provision for federal wage fixing. First, it would cause an unnecessary increase in the cost of the system. Second, "the fixing of improper wage rates could have a disruptive effect on the economy of local communities." Third, federal involvement could cause unnecessary delays and increased expenses. Fourth, it would interfere with the rights of states.⁵⁶

Dunn quoted statistics which showed that those working in highway construction were very well paid compared to persons working in factories. He therefore drew the conclusion that federal regulation of construction workers wages was totally

unnecessary. To permit the federal government to step in and determine wages would merely add to the cost of highways according to the construction companies. It would also cause delays, in Dunn's view, because of jurisdictional disputes requiring possibly 10,000 decisions by the Secretary of Labor a year. He pointed out that the Secretary's decisions allowed no means of appeal and that wide ranging investigations into the construction companies were possible. To these two points he took strong exception. A colleague of Mr. Dunn's mentioned that he knew of no case where companies did not pay the prevailing wage.

Congressman Joseph Clark of Pennsylvania immediately challenged the assertion that a company had never attempted to pay lower than the prevailing wage and pointed to an example in his state. Clark explained that the Nello Terr Company won a contract in Pennsylvania by underbidding its competitors and then brought in people from North Carolina to work at less than the prevailing wage.⁵⁷ The Congressmen became involved in a rather extensive dispute concerned with the need for a way to protect workmen under the Bacon-Davis Act, each pointed to instances of too much government interference, or abuses by one side or the other. The southern Congressmen argued forcefully that the Secretary of Labor should be kept out of issues concerning wages because this was federal involvement and interference in local matters.

George D. Riley and Robert Connerton spoke in favor of having the Davis-Bacon bill incorporated into the Interstate bill. Both men represented labor unions. Mr. Riley said that

the prevailing wage rates were one of the best guarantees of the American standard of living, and were needed to protect the American workers from the minority who would cheat the worker out of a decent wage. He rejected the accuracy of the wage suggested by Dunn, and explained they did not consider the number of hours weather permitted work. Connerton made a strong plea for continuing to allow the Secretary of Labor to determine the prevailing wage, rather than to allow the various state departments of highways to do this. The unions feared that these states would set the wages at the minimum wage, which would be significantly below most prevailing wages. This would allow contractors from outside areas to bring in lower paid workers. Lower wages paid by an outsider would reduce the prevailing wage scale for the area. He argued that since the federal government was putting up at least 90 percent of the funds, federal supervision under the Davis-Bacon bill should be made applicable. In addition, the machinery for the federal government to determine the prevailing wage was already set up and had been used for twenty years.⁵⁸ They did not appear to have had any specific reasons for believing the state highway departments would act unfairly, rather, it seemed merely that they wanted to remain with a procedure that had worked in hundreds of thousands of cases.

On the other side was the question of whether this bill involved a federal contract, or whether in spite of the 90

percent federal funds it was still a state matter. An indication of the degree of the feeling of at least one member, Congressman Alger of Texas, can be seen in the following statement. He accused the union leaders of wanting to destroy forty-eight state highway departments.

I go further and say this, if the Socialist and Communist in this country ever wanted really to close us out a nation, how would they do it? They would get rid of 48 entities and put them in Washington, and then move in on Washington.⁵⁹

Connerton pointed out that the unions were established on a local basis and further they had been in existence, in certain instances, longer than the nation had existed. He also asserted that wages were so low in Texas it was almost like slavery. The general discussion of who should establish the wage rate, went on for a considerable amount of time with each side restating its position.

The last day of public hearings concerned the charge made earlier that the Nello Terr Company brought in laborers at lower rates to work on various projects. Each side presented testimony to prove its point. From this specific case the discussion ranged over other purported abuses and over the general area of wage rates in various states. A personality conflict between a few Congressmen and union witnesses seemed evident; in addition, they seemed to have had different philosophies. It did not seem that the discussion of the last day and a half proved much as far as convincing one side or the other of the argument.

CONCLUSION

It has been the intent of this paper to examine the National System of Interstate and Defense Highways and to see why it was constructed when it was. It was assumed that the decision to build this multi billion dollar project would come as a result of dynamic Presidential leadership and that numerous groups opposed to the highway would develop. The data has shown this was not the case. The Interstate System was built for four major reasons. First, a number of historical precedents -- federal aid to states, a national commitment to individual transportation, federal expenditures to stimulate the economy, highways as a way to move military vehicles, general expectations by highway builders that funds would be available -- all worked to propel the administration to follow the expected outcome. Second, the President seemed to have a genuine concern that the system was necessary for defense. Third, it was perceived as necessary for economic stimulation. Fourth, it was deemed as required to reduce the accident and fatality rate.

The first point that the Interstate developed because of the impetus of earlier events, appears to be the most significant reason for its construction. The examination of

the development of President Eisenhower's program revealed that no strong single overwhelming reason was given for it. It is also apparent that no strong Presidential leadership was evident. Eisenhower favored the construction of the Interstate but his commitment did not result in a vigorous Presidential effort to obtain Congressional approval. In fact, the pressure to force Congressional action came more directly from pressure groups outside the administration. Those who spoke before Congress in an effort to pass the Interstate legislation had a great deal to gain from its construction. These groups had actively supported road construction legislation for decades. They provided funds for political campaigns and knew the significant Congressmen as illustrated by the friendship between Congressmen and witnesses at the Hearings of the Public Works Committee.

The federal government's involvement in highway construction goes back to 1916 when the federal government accepted the responsibility of assisting states construct highways. In 1916 there were three and one half million automobiles.⁶⁰ This policy was consistent with earlier federal transportation concerns which had provided massive financial aid to railroads.

During the Depression funds were provided by the federal government for highway construction which totaled as high as 100% of the expenses. These funds were as much to help meet the problem of unemployment as they were to build highways.

However, the principle of federal financing of highways was established. During World War II the nation's concern for national defense provided another rationale for federal involvement in highway construction. During the War as much as seventy-five percent of the cost of highways needed for defense was born by the federal government.

In addition to the growing percentage of federal expenditures for highways, the two lane system of connecting major cities developed as a result of studies made for the 1944 legislation.

An expanded highway program was underway to which federal funds were committed. By the mid 1950's it was assumed by virtually all political leaders that the federal government had an obligation to provide adequate highways.

Thus the decision to build the Interstate Highway System was politically easy to make. The administration was able to stimulate the economy, win support from those who wanted to see defense strengthened, and make an effort to reduce traffic fatalities, all without losing political support. In fact because of the pressure of past precedent and the power of the construction and labor lobbyists the administration and Congress were merely following the path of least resistance.

If President Eisenhower had any strong commitment to the Interstate System it was because of the way he perceived the relationship between defense and highways.

As noted earlier studies concerned with the nation's defense needs relative to the highway system had been made since before World War II. President Eisenhower usually spoke of the movement of troops and supplies as well as evacuating the cities when he expressed his concern for upgrading the highways. This concern appears to be genuine, however, it seems doubtful that the need was overwhelming. The House Public Works Committee did not give any serious consideration to this issue and did not seem to take the defense concern very seriously. They did not call any witnesses to testify about defense and it was only mentioned occasionally after other issues had been explored. Even General Bragdon acknowledged that the defense needs of the Highway System had been exaggerated. He wrote in a memorandum to General Clay, "The Department of Defense has said that this system would meet its needs, but its representative has also stated that the entire 40,000 miles are not necessary. Several studies in the office of the Chief of Transportation have indicated that a system of 18,000 or 21,000 miles connects all the main defense installations and major munitions production centers necessary for defense." He noted that other studies mentioned 20,000 to 25,000 miles as needed for defense.⁶¹

Whether or not the Interstate System was built for the nations defense seems a valid question in light of the way the highway was constructed. During the first four years of

construction more than 2,000 bridges and underpasses were built that were too small for most of the nation's important weapons. In July, 1956, the Secretary of Commerce and a committee of state highway officials decided that a fourteen foot clearance all along the system would be adequate. Even in 1956 some of the weapons needed a higher clearance and two and a half years later a seventeen foot clearance was required.⁶²

As part of the claim that the System was needed for defense it was suggested that the Interstate would allow for the evacuation of the cities in case of a nuclear attack. This was put to the test in April, 1968, in the District of Columbia. When large numbers of people sought to escape the riots in Washington, D.C. the bridges across the Potomac and all major arteries in the city were jammed. Fortunately, the military used the air to move the troops. A spokesman for the Military Traffic Management and Terminal Service calculated that 80 percent of military personnel passenger miles were transported by air, and most on the ground went via the railroads.⁶³

Throughout the paper references have been made to the need to stimulate the economy. The President mentioned the building of highways as a part of a number of economic messages to Congress. Frequent references at Cabinet meetings tied highway construction and the economy together. The Congressional Committee was deeply concerned about how the building of highways would affect the national economy as well as their own

districts. It was noted at the Public Works Hearings that the Interstate would touch or cross 406 of the 435 Congressional Districts.⁶⁴ Thus most Congressmen would have had a difficult time explaining to their constituents why they voted against such a project.

The testimony at the Congressional Hearing clearly showed the wide support given to the project by corporate executives and labor leaders. When questions were raised about the Interstate they were not concerned with whether it should be built, but rather how it should be constructed. The conflict between labor and management over the Bacon-Davis provision of the legislation clearly showed that each side was aware of the economic impact that Highway construction had. It was clear to the Unions that if workers could be brought into a region and paid lower than the prevailing wage the Union workers would lose significant wages. Management was equally aware of the significant amount of money available in this project for virtually all segments of the economy.

An indication of the economic impact of road construction and the automobile can be seen from the following information. One fifth of all steel produced is sold for automobiles and highway construction. Two thirds of all rubber produced and nine tenths of all gasoline produced is consumed by the automobile. Of the ten largest corporations in the United States eight depend exclusively or heavily on sales and profits produced by road construction projects and highway travel. In addition a number of labor unions concerned with road

building, automobile manufacturing, maintenance, and teamsters have a great deal to gain from the construction of the Interstate.⁶⁵

In addition to labor and management representatives local officials testified that their cities would benefit substantially both from construction costs and the long range benefits of easy access to other cities. A study prepared for the Economic Development Administration of the United States Department of Commerce in 1968 seemed to confirm this theory. It compared 106 pairs of cities, each pair as much alike as possible except one group was within seven miles of an Interstate and the other was at least sixteen miles from the nearest Interstate exit. The study found that cities near the Interstate had a slight increase in manufacturing jobs over cities further away from the Interstate. In fast-growth regions of the country the distinction was more definite than in slower growth regions like the Northwest.⁶⁶

From the economic standpoint it was extremely difficult to argue against the Interstate System. As mentioned it was supported by labor, management and political figures from the Congressman's districts. In addition it is likely that a number of Congressmen had received contributions to their campaigns from groups favoring the Interstate. Several witnesses before the Senate subcommittee stressed that taxpayers had an obligation to various highway interests to invest in the enlarged highway, so they could continue to make a living and prevent unemployment. It was pointed out that the program

would affect the "little" people -- the gas station operator, tire dealers, car salesmen, auto insurance salesmen and all the others who tried to make a living by working hard.⁶⁷

A Fulbright Fellow at the Swedish School of Economics did a study of the Interstate Highway System as a public investment. This study was limited to an evaluation of the Interstate in relation to other highways, and it concluded that overall the Interstate was a desirable investment. However, this conclusion was tempered with the suggestion that the construction of a somewhat smaller urban Interstate System in conjunction with a mass transit facility would have been a better investment. Further, it was noted that a good two lane system would have been sufficient in many rural areas. This determination could have been made if a more detailed study of each Interstate project had been made.⁶⁸

The fourth area of concern safety, congestion, and cost of transportation were topics to which the public could easily relate. Numerous statistics about fatality and accident rates, projected automobile production and overcrowding were cited by those favoring the building of the Interstate. Usually the accepted rationale was that by building the Interstate crowded conditions and accident rates could be reduced. For example the Bureau of Public Roads claimed that 8,300 lives a year would be saved by the Interstate. It was to be twice as safe as the older roads.⁶⁹

The question of highway safety is a difficult subject to examine, since the amount of miles traveled, number of

automobiles on the road and speed all play a significant role in the way safety statistics are developed. Certain figures can be cited however. In 1955 the number killed in vehicle accidents was more than 39,000, in 1968 over 55,000 were killed and 3.7 million injured. It is difficult to translate how the increase in overall traffic deaths related to the Interstate. However, a report by the Bureau of Public Roads late in 1968 showed that fatalities per 100 million vehicle miles on the completed Interstate numbered 2.89 a year compared with 5.66 deaths for all federal-aid highway systems.⁷⁰

It should be noted that the Interstate has certain definite advantages over the older roads. The Interstate system arbitrarily bans from its rights of way such crash-associated users as bicycles, pedestrians, horse-drawn vehicles, small motorcycles and slower moving trucks and automobiles. Since these types of conveyances are forced entirely onto other highways the accident rate is bound to be lower on the Interstate. Also the fatality rate is based on passenger miles -- that is, miles traveled per passenger per year -- for all roads regardless of type. This rate tends to aid the Interstate because trips on the Interstate result in more mileage over less elapsed time. A more accurate reflection could be obtained by finding the deaths per hours of exposure on the Interstate versus travel on other roadways.⁷¹

A further safety factor is speed. Highway speeds have increased significantly since the construction of the Interstate. In 1960 the average speed of vehicles was 54.8 miles per hour, in 1968 it was 62.8 miles per hour. During the same period

speeds on older and lower quality roads increased from 52.7 miles per hour to 57.3 miles per hour. It seems the Interstate may have encouraged the practice of driving at higher speeds on all types of roads.⁷² The slower speeds mandated by the energy crisis have reduced the fatality rate substantially. This gives some credence to the theory that the speed encouraged by the four lane, divided, Interstate System played a role in the rate of fatality increases.

The cost of the 41,000 mile Interstate System has been a significant concern from the beginning of construction. When Congress established the System its cost was set at less than \$30 billion. However, General Bragdon wrote that he estimated the cost at \$28 billion for only 24,000 miles. In 1959 his Public Works Unit estimated costs might run up to \$48 billion. He indicated that the 1,000 mile increase that Congress made in the Interstate was taken from 8,000 miles proposed by the states. This seemed to General Bragdon to indicate that pressure to increase the mileage of the Interstate would continue. This has been the case.⁷³

By the early 1970's the Interstate had been extended to 42,500 miles and at present funding cannot be completed before 1990. In a speech Senator Jennings Randolph delivered in 1976 he stated the country's financial commitment to the Interstate.

The cost of the Interstate system has increased considerably since 1956 when \$24.8 billion were authorized to build the network over a 13 year period. This year's cost estimates submitted by the Secretary of Transportation places the ultimate price of the Interstate System at \$89.2 billion. A recent study by the comptroller General updated the Secretary's figures to approximately \$100 billion.⁷⁴

The White House Public Works Planning Unit which General Bragdon chaired studied the Interstate System from 1954 to 1960 and made the following major points. First, President Eisenhower's concept was new in that it proposed a unified national network to be completed within a fixed time limit, and preferably directed by a corporate entity that would remove the domination of the various state highway departments. Second, because Congress made it an expansion of the Federal-aid system it lost a certain sense of unity in its direction. It thus became less a national highway serving the interests of defense and the nation and became more piecemeal with authority divided between the Federal and State Governments. Third, the 90/10 share of the Federal Government was acceptable to the nation because of the national, interstate and defense values of the system. Fourth, the Planning Unit was highly critical of the Bureau of Public Roads because its only concern was to speed up the building with no concern for efficiency. Fifth, the Bureau of Public Roads took out of context the phrase "local needs should be given complete equality to the needs of interstate commerce." This resulted in a lessening of the criteria for routing and patterns of construction that has cost the government many billions of dollars. Sixth, there was never any impartial objective study made by the Bureau of Public Roads as to feasibility. As a result no serious consideration to toll financing was developed which could have saved billions.⁷⁵ It should be noted that General Bragdon was a strong supporter

of the use of toll roads throughout the Eisenhower administration.

The idea of tolls was rejected by Congress for two major reasons. First, it would have forced the poor to pay for the use of the highway and in many cases the toll route would be the only route to a given destination. Second, the toll road would have required the government to incur a large indebtedness. The system that was used, the Highway Trust Fund, has insured a continuous fund for highway construction and repair and it is not reflected in the national budget. This pleased the Administration which was concerned with a balanced budget. The Trust Fund increases as the price of trucks, tires and other highway related items goes up, because the tax is based on a percentage of the cost of these items. In addition, the Trust Fund money can only be used to build highways; this often results in unspent money in the highway fund drawing interest from the treasury while public transportation goes begging.

The long term results of the decision to build the Interstate System encompassed some areas that people were only marginally concerned with in the mid 1950's. Specifically environmental concerns and the effect on people living in the pathway of the Interstate were not given adequate study. The lack of concern for the environment can be seen by some statistics that were presented to demonstrate to the public the impressive size of the Interstate. These statistics have a difference significance today. It was stated that excavation

would move enough material to bury Connecticut knee deep in dirt. New rights of way would require one and one half million acres. The sand, gravel and crushed stone needed for the construction would build a wall 50 feet wide and nine feet high around the world. The steel used would require 30 million tons of iron ore, 18 million tons of coal, and 6.5 million tons of limestone. A 400 square mile forest would be consumed by the lumber and timber requirements. Enough culvert and drain pipes were to be used to build water and sewer systems for six cities the size of Chicago. In 1961 it was estimated that for every million dollars of highway construction 121,000 gallons of petroleum products, 99,000 feet of lumber and 600 tons of steel were used.⁷⁶ Thus, in constructing the Interstate System the nation has paid a heavy ecological and environmental cost.

Another environmental impact that was not seriously considered in the mid 1950's was air pollution. In recent years the air alerts, which warn people with respiratory problems to stay indoors, have shown the seriousness of air pollution. It has been estimated that the automobile contributes about 60 percent of the total air pollution. In 1970 there were 108 million motor vehicles registered in the United States, these vehicles annually emit approximately 80 million tons of pollution or about three-quarters ton each. The number of vehicles on America's streets and highways has continued to increase. In 1956 there were 65.2 million buses,

trucks and automobiles and in 1975, 132.9 million vehicles were registered in the United States.⁷⁷ There is little doubt that Americans love their automobiles and this is a significant factor in explaining why so many are sold. However, it is equally true that the federal government's concern for highways has meant that little money or research has gone into public transportation. From 1947 through 1970, the United States Government spent \$58 billion for highways, \$12.6 billion for airports and airline subsidies, \$6 billion for waterways and only \$795 million, or 1 percent, for urban mass transit.⁷⁸

The decision to construct the Interstate resulted in a commitment to highway construction over mass transit that has had and will continue to have a profound affect on pollution levels, use of resources, and America's balance of payments. These consequences have had a particular effect on a segment of society that had virtually no voice in the decision. This was because their economic, social, and educational position in society was such that their views were not sought. To the poor living in the urban centers the decision to build the Interstate meant less money was available for mass transit, more urban land was covered by concrete, neighborhoods were broken up, and overcrowded streets and the resulting pollution became a fact of life. To the poor the billions spent on the Interstate must have seemed like a welfare check to the rich and middle class.

There were a few in society who questioned the wisdom of making such a commitment to the automobile over mass transit, even though they were not called before Congress or heard within the Administration. Urban expert Lewis Mumford had spoken out against unlimited highway construction for a number of years. He pointed to New York as an example of what unchecked highway building could mean -- massive traffic jams, a soiled environment and a spreading suburbia. Even in the early 1950's he urged that automobiles be banned from certain areas within the cities and pedestrian malls be provided instead. Mumford urged all who cared about their future surroundings to "think".

In 1956 Mumford wrote that the most charitable thing that one could assume about the Congressional vote for the Interstate was "that they hadn't the faintest notion of what they were doing." He predicted that "within the next fifteen years they will doubtless find out."⁷⁹

Americans travel about two trillion passenger miles in a year. Nearly four-fifths of this travel is done by automobile and about 85 percent of that consists of short trips. The other 15 percent is overnight trips out of town or trips of more than 200 miles in one day. Most Interstate travel would be included on the 15 percent portion of the total mileage. Thus, the Interstate System serves a relatively narrow segment of American society. In spite of this fact 50 percent of all Federal highway spending goes to the Interstate.⁸⁰

The concerns of Lewis Mumford and a few others fell on deaf ears in Congress and the administration; the commitment to the automobile and all that it stood for was made. President Eisenhower's decision, although reflecting a personal concern for defense, more directly evolved from the pressure to continue the growth of progress as it was perceived in the 1950's. Construction and labor groups had a powerful lobby. When their power was added to the impetus of programs already in existence they produced a force strong enough to convince a willing administration and Congress that this legislation was necessary. Because so many influential groups in society had so much to gain from the Interstate System, and those who had much to lose from it were few in number and not very influential no significant opposition groups developed.

The examination of the events leading up to the creation of the Interstate Highway System has shown that strong Presidential leadership is not always necessary for the establishment of major national policy. If a national program with such long range significance and cost can become law without significant Presidential leadership, the President's role as policy maker seems less important than is often assumed. However Presidential leadership or its absence is important in the final outcome of legislation. Because of the lack of direction given by the administration the Interstate was not well planned. This can be seen by the width of bridges in relation to weapons, the continuing rise in cost, and the

failure to consider how it would affect cities, pollution levels, and the environment.

In sum, the decision to build the Interstate Highway System followed almost automatically from the events of the past and the pressure of lobbyists. The President played a relatively minor role in the decision-making process and did not take an active part in the measure's movement through Congress. This is an example of a major national policy which developed without the Presidential initiative usually associated with such a significant undertaking.

Footnotes

¹Helen Leavitt, Superhighway-Superhoax (Garden City, Doubleday, 1970), pp. 21-23.

²William Shannon, "The untrustworthy Highway Fund" New York Times Magazine (October 15, 1972), p. 120; Leavitt, Superhighway-Superhoax, p. 23.

³Christy Borth, Mankind on the Move - The Study of Highways (Washington D.C.: Automotive Safety Foundation, 1969) p. 243.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Leavitt, Superhighway-Superhoax, p. 26.

⁶Borth, Mankind on the Move, p. 244; Memorandum, John Bragdon to Charles Noble, April 6, 1960, Bragdon Papers, Eisenhower Library.

⁷Memorandum, Under Secretary of Commerce to the President, December 1, 1953, Harlow Papers, Eisenhower Library.

⁸Cabinet Meeting, January 4, 1954, Whitman File, Cabinet Series, Eisenhower Library.

⁹Robert Branyan and Lawrence Larsen, ed., The Eisenhower Administration 1953-1961, A Documentary History, (2 vols.; New York: Random House Inc., 1971) I, "State of the Union Message," January 7, 1954, p. 225.

¹⁰Ibid., "Economic Report to the Congress," January 28, 1954, p. 249.

¹¹John Bragdon, "The Interstate Limited Access 20/10 Federal Aid System with Special Reference to Toll Financing and Intra City Routing," (unpublished book) Bragdon Files, Eisenhower Library, p. 1.

¹²Ibid., p. 2.

¹³Memorandum, Sherman Adams to Cabinet, May 12, 1954, Whitman File, Cabinet Series, Eisenhower Library.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Cabinet Meeting, May 14, 1954, Whitman File, Cabinet Series, Eisenhower Library.

¹⁶Branyan and Larsen, ed., The Eisenhower Administration, "Speech by Vice President Nixon," July 12, 1954, pp. 537-538.

¹⁷Memorandum Advisory Commission on National Highway Programs to Eisenhower, July 22, 1954, Whitman Files, Administration Series, Eisenhower Library.

¹⁸James Hagerty Diary, December 3, 1954, Hagerty Files, Eisenhower Library.

¹⁹Branyan and Larsen, ed., The Eisenhower Administration, "State of the Union Message," January 6, 1955, pp. 455-456.

²⁰Special Transportation Message, January 25, 1955, Whitman Files, Cabinet Series, Eisenhower Library.

²¹Cabinet Meeting, January 28, 1955, Whitman Files, Cabinet Series, Eisenhower Library.

²²U.S. Congress, House, Miscellaneous Documents 1-234, 84th Congress, 1st session 1956, pp. XIII-XIV.

²³James Hagerty Diary, February 16, 1955, Hagerty Papers, Eisenhower Library.

²⁴James Hagerty Diary, February 21, 1955, Hagerty Papers, Eisenhower Library.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶U.S. President, Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States (Washington D.C.: General Services Administration, 1960) Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1955, pp. 275-276.

²⁷Dwight D. Eisenhower, The White House Years (2 vols.; Garden City: Doubleday and Co., 1963), I, 501.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States - D. D. Eisenhower, 1955.

³⁰Cabinet Meeting, April 22, 1955, Whitman Files, Cabinet Series, Eisenhower Library.

³¹Memorandum, Arthur Burns to General Bragdon, May 9, 1955, Bragdon Files, Eisenhower Library. Senator Albert Gore wanted to pay for the Interstate through general revenue taxes; the President wanted it paid through insurance of a bond.

³²Cabinet Meeting, October 28, 1955, Whitman Files, Cabinet Series, Eisenhower Library.

³³Legislative Meeting, December 12, 1955, Whitman Files, Legislative Series, Eisenhower Library.

³⁴Branyan and Larsen ed., The Eisenhower Administration, "State of the Union Message," January 5, 1956, pp. 491-502.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Legislative Meeting, June 5, 1956, Whitman Files, Legislative Meetings Series, Eisenhower Library.

³⁷Eisenhower, The White House Years, I, p. 548.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹U.S. Congress House, Committee on Public Works, An Act to Amend Federal Aid Road Act of 1916, Hearings before a sub-committee on Public Works, House of Representatives, on H. R. 8836, 84th Congress, 2nd session, 1956, p. 9.

⁴⁰Ibid., 11.

- ⁴¹Ibid., 33.
- ⁴²Ibid., 34.
- ⁴³Ibid., 72.
- ⁴⁴Ibid., 72-77.
- ⁴⁵Ibid., 124-125.
- ⁴⁶Ibid., 128.
- ⁴⁷Ibid., 134-140.
- ⁴⁸Ibid., 206.
- ⁴⁹Ibid., 209.
- ⁵⁰Ibid., 219.
- ⁵¹Ibid., 222.
- ⁵²Ibid., 224, 230, 240, 246.
- ⁵³Ibid., 249.
- ⁵⁴Ibid., 255.
- ⁵⁵Ibid., 259.
- ⁵⁶Ibid., 267.
- ⁵⁷Ibid., 275-277.
- ⁵⁸Ibid., 317.
- ⁵⁹Ibid., 338.

- ⁶⁰Leavitt, Superhighway-Superhoax, p. 23.
- ⁶¹Bragdon to Clay, November 8, 1954, Bragdon Papers, Eisenhower Library.
- ⁶²Karl Detzer, "Our Great Big Highway Bungle," Readers Digest, July, 1960, pp. 48-49.
- ⁶³Leavitt, Superhighway-Superhoax, pp. 269-270.
- ⁶⁴Ibid., p. 52.
- ⁶⁵Leavitt, Superhighway-Superhoax, p. 11; Ben Kelley, The Pavers and the Paved (New York: Schribner's Sons, 1971) pp. 4-5.
- ⁶⁶John D. Rae, The Road and the Car in American Life, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971) p. 193.
- ⁶⁷Leavitt, Superhighway-Superhoax, p. 40.
- ⁶⁸Ann Friedlaender, The Interstate Highway System - A Study in Public Investment (Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Co., 1965) pp. 136-138.
- ⁶⁹Kelley, The Pavers and the Paved, p. 10.
- ⁷⁰Borth, Mankind on the Move, p. 248.
- ⁷¹Kelley, The Pavers and the Paved, pp. 10-11; Leavitt, Superhighway-Superhoax, pp. 267-268.
- ⁷²Kelley, The Pavers and the Paved, p. 10.
- ⁷³Bragdon, "The Interstate Limited Access 90/10 Federal Aid System with Special Reference to Toll Financing and Intra City Routing" (unpublished) Bragdon Files, Eisenhower Library, p. 35.
- ⁷⁴Senator Jennings Randolph, "The Highway Program in a Time of Change" American Highway and Transportation Magazine 55, January, 1976, p. 8.
- ⁷⁵Bragdon, "The Interstate Limited Access 90/10 System," pp. 35-37.

⁷⁶Shannon, "The untrustworthy Highway Fund," p. 121;
Leavitt, Superhighway-Superhoax, p. 12.

⁷⁷James O. Wheeler, The Urban Circulation Noose,
(Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishers, 1974) p. 122;
Leavitt, Superhighway-Superhoax, p. 271.

⁷⁸Shannon, "The untrustworthy Highway Fund," p. 122.

⁷⁹Robert Caro, The Power Broker - Robert Moses and the
Fall of New York, (New York: Random House, 1974) pp. 915-917;
Kelley, The Paver and Paved p. 151.

⁸⁰Ibid.; Michael Parenti, Democracy for the Few (New
York: St. Martin's Press, 1977), pp. 112-113.

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THE DECISION TO BUILD THE NATIONAL SYSTEM
OF INTERSTATE AND DEFENSE HIGHWAYS

by

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AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S REPORT

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ABSTRACT

The building of the multi-billion dollar Interstate Highway System marked a major change in the Federal System, involved a significant expenditure, as well as caused a palpable effect on America's economic and social development. It will be the intent of this paper to examine how the decision to build the Interstate System was made. More specifically, it will examine how the issue was resolved by the Eisenhower Administration and what pressures were placed on the House Public Works Committee as it sought to formulate the bill.

There were several questions which guided this paper. Why was the Interstate Highway System built? Why did a basically conservative Republican administration initiate such an expensive public works project, and why were few efforts made to prevent this huge expenditure? In seeking to determine the answers to these questions it seemed necessary to view the documents which President Eisenhower used in making this decision. As a result a careful study of the papers dealing with the Interstate Highway was undertaken at the Eisenhower Library. To discover what groups sought to influence the writing of this measure and the impact of Congress on it, an

examination of the Hearings of the House Public Works Committee was undertaken.

A major hypothesis for this paper was that a program of this magnitude would be expected to come as a result of dynamic Presidential leadership and that vigorous opposition to it would develop. The data showed just the opposite to be the case. Even though President Eisenhower endorsed the Interstate System, it appears to have developed because of the impetus of earlier programs and the pressure brought by groups who had a great deal to gain from its construction. Thus, the President was not an active force in the decision, and no major opposition developed against the Interstate because influential groups in society favored its construction.