

106

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

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE HIGHWAY PROGRAM	3
3. DEVELOPMENT OF EISENHOWER'S PROGRAM	8
4. THE EISENHOWER PROGRAM FOR INTERSTATE HIGHWAYS	19
5. HOUSE COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC WORKS TESTIMONY	26
6. CONCLUSION	40
FOOTNOTES	58
BIBLIOGRAPHY	64

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