Testimony to

The Highways, Transit and Pipelines Subcommittee

of the

House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee

Hearing on

Celebrating 50 Years of the Eisenhower Interstate Highway System

by

Tom Lewis

Professor of English, Skidmore College

and author of

Divided Highways: Building the Interstate Highways, Transforming American Life

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At 11:15 on Monday morning July 7, 1919, a three-mile caravan of Army motorcycles, cars and trucks, 260 enlisted men, 35 officers, and the 15 piece band provided by the Goodyear Tire & Rubber Company, set out from Lafayette Square in Washington for Union Square in San Francisco, 3000 miles away. As they traveled westward through cities like Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Canton, Ohio; South Bend, Indiana; Chicago, Illinois; and Cedar Rapids, Iowa, people came out in force to greet them. In the Rockies of Wyoming and Utah and across Nevada, they went where few automobiles had gone before. At Carson City, Nevada they bivouacked on the statehouse lawn. And when the convoy reached California, the governor met it at the state line, and rode on in triumph with the men to San Francisco.

It took 62 days for the soldiers to cross the country; they averaged but five miles an hour. Some days they went as few as three miles. Breakdowns and accidents were frequent; in the Sierras a truck rolled into a steep ravine.

One twenty-eight year old Army major on the trip described it as a journey "through darkest America with truck and tank." The condition of the roads ranged "from average to non-existent." America, the officer said in his report to superiors, must have better roads. Thirty-seven years later, on June 29, 1956, that Army officer, Dwight David Eisenhower, now President of the United States, signed into law the legislation creating the Interstate Highway System. That signature changed the landscape of America and helped to bring about the extraordinary economic engine that has enabled this nation to remain the preeminent economic power in the world.

The statistics of this construction feat are staggering. Imagine if you will the state of Connecticut knee-deep in earth; we moved that much to build the Interstates. Imagine enough concrete to lay six wide sidewalks to the moon; engineers poured that much for the Interstates. Think of the state of Delaware; we acquired that much land to construct the 46,000 miles of Interstates. Imagine so many massive drainage culverts that they would serve six cities, each the size of Chicago; we placed that many beneath the ribbons of concrete and asphalt of the Interstates. Without question the Interstate Highway System is the greatest and the longest engineered structure ever built.

But such statistics are the least interesting part of this story of the roads that transformed the face of America and the way we Americans live and act. The highways have served as a vast stage on which we have played out a great drama of contradictions that accounts for so much of the history of our nation. On this stage we see all our fantasies and fears, our social ideals and racial divisions, our middle class aspirations and our underclass realities.

It took more than forty years--not thirteen as specified by the legislation President Eisenhower signed into law--to build the Interstate Highway System. In that period the

Soviet Union launched the first artificial satellite and humans walked on the moon; the federal government extended civil rights to all Americans and a civil rights leader who held the Nobel Prize for peace was slain; one president was assassinated and another resigned in disgrace; two new states, Alaska and Hawaii, entered the Union; the population of the nation rose from 165 to 290 million; scientists virtually eliminated polio, while a new disease, Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, began; and the number of professional baseball teams increased from 16 to 26, most playing in new ballparks accessible only by automobile.

Some of the new roads did mean an end to the past: Route 30, the old Lincoln Highway, the road built by Carl Graham Fisher, the visionary who knew that good roads meant good business, would merge in many places with Interstate 80; Interstate 70 would take over much of old Route 40, the National Road that Thomas Jefferson had planned; while old Route 66, the road from Chicago to Los Angeles, made famous by John Steinbeck in The Grapes of Wrath, and more recently by a popular song, would now be succeeded by a new road, Interstate 40. The new Interstates would make hundreds of small towns into ghostly derelicts.

The story of the Interstates have deep roots in our desire for freedom and movement, and our knowledge that we are at liberty to resolve our destiny in our vast landscape. Sometimes exploring and migrating, always roaming and circulating, we have shaped our lives by moving across and about three time zones, twenty-five degrees of latitude and forty-five degrees of longitude. Always prizing freedom of movement, we have realized it by taking new jobs in distant places, moving to new houses and apartments, and driving hundreds of million of miles each year in automobiles. Moving, always moving onward.

For centuries we Americans have relentlessly celebrated our mobility. Our nineteenth-century heroes sang of the open road or piloted a fugitive raft down the Mississippi; while our twentieth-century antiheroes celebrate being "On the road" or acting out a Bonnie and Clyde outlaw fantasy across the broad landscape. "Tonight the night's bustin open, these two lanes will take us anywhere."

America's forbears from Europe and other continents came to invent and reinvent themselves in unfamiliar spaces. Eight decades after they formed a union, they took pain to manumit those whom they had brought in chains and, in limited ways, granted the newly emancipated the freedom to go forth and invent themselves also.

Across the landscape of our continent, we Americans have left the imprint of our movement: paths, roads, turnpikes and canals in the eighteenth century; railroad tracks in the nineteenth; and an ever increasing number of wide roads and streamlined highways in

the twentieth. These signatures of civilization spell out America's notions of progress and above all speed.

The conventional wisdom that the automobile changed America in the twentieth century is true only because of the extraordinary road system that the nation developed. The idea of automobiles without roads is rather like the idea of computers without software.

Today, fifty years after President Eisenhower signed the legislation creating the Interstate Highway System, we can see how these roads have changed our landscape and our lives. If you go west across the nation on Interstate 40 from Wilmington, North Carolina, you will pass through the tobacco country of Greensboro and Winston Salem; the Great Smoky Mountains; the city of Nashville, home to country music; Memphis, the city of W. C. Handy and Elvis; fireworks shacks in Arkansas; oil derricks in Oklahoma, the remnants of old Route 66; the parched dusty towns of the Texas Panhandle; the Continental Divide in New Mexico; the banded purple, scarlet, and pink tints of the Painted Desert in Arizona; and the desolate blur of California before reaching the end of the Interstate at Barstow. Along the way you will see ghostly signs to places like Clinch River, Crab Orchard, and Bon Aqua; Palestine, Beulah, and Lonoke; Canute, Clinton, and Elk City. And you will pass thirty-six KOA campgrounds and thirty-seven Holiday Inns; about a hundred Wal-Marts; forty-six Burger Kings, and eighty-two McDonalds--that's a Big Mac for every thirty-one miles of Interstate.

Think of where our economy would be today if there were no Interstate Highway System. There are approximately 16,000 exits on the more than 40,000 miles of Interstate. With the Interstate Highway, the federal government created thousands of economic opportunities for development at each of those exits. Those exits have functioned in the same way that stops on the railroad did in the nineteenth century, but with one difference: the railroads offered but a few hundred stops or economic opportunities.

Along with global positioning and computers the Interstates form a vital link in "Just in Time" shipment of goods. Just in Time has meant an end to plant inventories of old. American manufacturers and retail sales giants like Wal-Mart and Target have turned these highways into a vast rolling and fluid warehouse that has helped to make their operations more efficient, and cut their costs.

Although some deplore what the Interstate Highway System has done to the nation, few would desire, or could ever imagine, an America without it. When the Century Freeway--one of the last significant sections of the Interstate Highway System--opened in Los Angeles in October 1993, the Governor of California spoke to a very different group than President Eisenhower might have imagined. Those who came to

celebrate--native Americans, African Americans, Latinos, and Asians among them--heard the governor tell them it was their freeway to use and enjoy. An African American minister prayed for the structure that "links us and binds us together." As always, our highways hold the promise of connection.

In building the Interstate Highway System, we revealed on that great stage all our glory, and sometimes our meaness; all our vision, and sometimes our shortsightedness. We revealed all of our democracy's virtues and sometimes its failings. As the American poet Walt Whitman said more than a century ago:

> O public road...
> You express me better than I can express myself.

So let us celebrate all that Dwight David Eisenhower achieved with his signature on June 29, 1956. Though I doubt he realized how momentous that occasion was, the president approved a bill that ranks with Social Security, the GI Bill of Rights, and Civil Rights ;egislation as the most important in the twentieth century.

President Eisenhower's signature brought us to this moment in our history. It is your difficult task as our representatives to take us into the future, to create legislation that preserves and enhances the achievements of the past. It is not an easy moment, but there are steps to take that demand responsible leadership. The nation faces the unprecedented challenge of a dependence on oil provided by foreign countries that often look upon us with hatred and malice. Increasingly we find ourselves at their mercy. We must slip from their grip.

I would ask you to consider an alternative: the gradual establishment over three and a half years of a federal levy of $3.50 on each gallon of gasoline. Think of it not as a tax but a freedom fee, the sacrifice each of us must make to maintain our liberty and our way of life that depends so much on our efficient mobility. Half of the money collected from the freedom fee should go to maintaining the Interstate Highway System and other federal roads, as well as intermodal transportation links which promise to become increasingly important for our economy. The other half of the money should fund meaningful research with the goal of developing efficient automobiles and alternate forms of energy.

Why is it a freedom fee? And why is it so important? Our highways give us the freedom to go wherever we wish and whenever we want. All Americans value their mobility. They complain about increases in gas prices, but they endure them. At the same time they increasingly understand that they are paying high prices to unfriendly nations. Wouldn't we rather pay that money to ourselves so that we can maintain our mobility and our freedom? If such a proposition were put before the American people responsibly with the understanding that freedom is not free but demands the sacrifice of all of us, the majority

of American citizens will respond responsibly.

Thank you and your staff for the opportunity to participate in this celebration of the Interstate Highway System and I welcome any questions you may have.