

America's Highway Consensus: Its Rise and Fall

Joo, Jeongsuk

Contents

- I. Introduction
- II. Clamoring for Roads
- III. Road Building Before World War II
- IV. The Creation of the Interstate Highway System
- V. Consensus Unraveled
- VI. Conclusion

I. Introduction

This paper aims to examine the ways in which America has accommodated the automobile by building roads, especially express highways, which have had a huge impact on its culture and society. In particular, I aim to look at what could be termed as America's highway consensus, uncritical and at times almost blind support for highway building by examining the actions of the federal government in this regard.

As Mark Foster aptly calls, America is "a nation on wheels" (2003). Ever since its introduction to the U.S., the automobile, has fundamentally changed the nation in every perceivable way. Although not an American invention, it is in this country where the automobile was most rapidly adopted, especially with the mass production of Ford's Model T in the 1910s. It is also in the U.S. where the socio-cultural impacts of the

automobile have been manifested to the fullest with developments such as suburbanization and drive-in culture. Moreover, the vastness of the land as well as poor mass transit has made the automobile seem an indispensable and natural part of America, while Americans' alleged propensity for individuality, freedom and movement seems to make the automobile the most suitable mode of transportation.

If these indicate the centrality of the automobile to American life and culture, America's mass adoption of the automobile is by no means preordained. For its mass adoption, the automobile had to be accommodated by building roadways as its most basic infrastructure, and it is in large part the federal government that spent enormous resources and money to build roads for the private automobile, seeing road building as public goods that individuals and/or private entities could not adequately provide due to the huge costs. Accordingly, without the federal actions to build roads for automobiles, their fate in the U.S. could have been different. At the same time, these federal actions did not occur in a vacuum. Had they not resonated with the outlook of a growing number of Americans who too willingly embraced the automobile, it would have been unlikely for the federal government to continue its supports so long.

Given this, in this paper, I aim to examine America's highway consensus, its long support for highway building to accommodate the automobile, as a crucial factor that enabled widespread automobility in the U.S. In particular, I intend to examine the role and actions of the federal government in building roads and express highways as one of the core elements that shaped and enacted highway consensus. Mark Rose's meticulous documentation on America's highway politics shows that conflict, not consensus, often marked the country's highway scene, as particularistic interests at times pursued their own gains (1990). Yet, I present highway consensus not in a narrow sense of specific policies or

even what goals highways should serve. Rather, I mean a broader outlook that viewed automobiles and highways as virtues benefiting all, thus supporting the continued highway building without seriously thinking about the consequences of this action.

For this purpose, I first present a brief overview of the early agitations and consensus-making for road building before the federal involvement as well as the changes in culture and outlook that paved the way for the automobile's claim for roads. It is followed by the historical examination of some of the major federal supports for highway building as well as their characteristics. I then examine how they eventually coalesced into the establishment of the Interstate and Defense Highway Act in 1956, the most expensive and extensive highway bill ever. Finally, I also examine how highway building came under attack and how highway consensus began unraveling during the 1960s and after.

II. Clamoring for Roads

Before the federal government involved itself as a constant force in road building, several groups, first led by bicyclists, had been agitating for road building, highlighting the virtue of good roads. Bicycles were hugely popular in the late 19th century, but most American roads were slightly better than mud and unfit for the sustained uses by any vehicles. Bicyclists thus organized the League of American Wheelmen (LAW) in the 1880s, a lobbying group funded by a leading bicycle manufacturer Albert Pope. Deploring the pitiful state of American roads, which, according to Pope, were "among the worst in the civilized world and always have been," the LAW launched what could be the first highway lobby, the Good Roads movement (Lewis 1997: 7). Heralding the subsequent private as well as

public endeavors for road building, the Good Roads movement strove to gain support for the need for good roads at its publications, associations, and conventions and lobbied state and federal assistance for road constructions (Murphy 2009: 15).

The movement soon found its most important allies. Although farmers did not welcome bicycles, a nuisance to them, poor rural roads hurt their access to markets. The Good Road movement won farmers' support, and farmers' organizations such as the Populist Party called for government funding for farm-to-market roads. Arguing that the road was helping "to get the farmer out of the mud," the Good Roads movement argued that roads were public goods to be provided free-of-charge by governments (Gutfreund 2004: 9-10). As the movement gained momentum, politicians could only ignore this movement to their own peril. According to Rose, already in the mid-1890s, both Democratic and Republican parties included highway improvement in their state platform. Railroads, which would later suffer from the competition from cars and trucks, too endorsed the Good Roads movement, expecting that the well-paved roads would serve to bring more loads to railway stations (1990: 7-8). Undoubtedly, the advent of the automobile gave a huge boost to the movement, and the Automobile Association of America (AAA) formed in 1902 soon emerged as its leading voice. With the dawn of the automobile age, it was only a matter of time before the motoring interests would become the most fervent champion of road construction.

In 1893, the Good Roads movement successfully lobbied for the creation of the Office of Road Inquiry (ORI), the first federal agency to survey road conditions. Reflecting the concern for rural roads at that time, it was created under the Department of Agriculture. From the beginning, the ORI was closely aligned with the Good Roads movement. Its director, Roy Stone, was a Good Roads advocate who argued that poor roads cost

Americans “the mud tax,” money lost due to the poor road conditions (Goddard 1996: 46). Due to the limited budget, the ORI depended on volunteers, who were often enlisted from the ranks of the Good Roads movement, to gather information. The ORI survey result was in turn used by Good Roads advocates to support their agenda (Gutfreund 2004: 13). The ORI also promoted road building by publishing and distributing pamphlets and running public education programs. It also constructed “object lesson roads,” short sections of well-constructed pavement. After completing a particular section, the ORI held a “Good Roads Day,” demonstrating what good roads could do (Swift 2011: 16).

In 1910, Logan Page, who headed the Bureau of Public Roads (BPR), the successor to the ORI, from 1905 to 1918, helped further broaden the interest in good roads. He founded the American Association for Highway Improvement to unite and coordinate public and private groups with interest in good roads. President Taft delivered a keynote speech at its first National Road Congress in 1911. In 1914, at Page's urge, state road engineers and administrators, came together under the American Association of State Highway Officials (AASHO), creating another group with vested interest in road building and its maintenance. The AASHO, along with the BPR, joined the Good Roads movement's gospel of free roads, and one of its core principles was that “Free Roads are the Ideal of a Free People” (Gutfreund 2004: 17, 20, 25). It would later work closely with the BPR in establishing road standards and building highways under federal expenses.

City planners and the urban business community in the early 20th century also viewed good roads as central to their interests. It was because they valued automobiles as a clean and efficient alternative to horse-drawn carriages, a salvation from horse manure or a means to suburbanization that provided a relief from unsavory city living. In addition,

planners believed adequate roads would solve the problem of urban congestion and this would in turn upgrade urban living conditions and boost economic productivity by reducing transportation costs. Merchants also advocated public financing for road construction, arguing that road improvements would increase property value and thus property tax revenues for cities (Rose 1990: 6–7).

This growing call for roads was predicated on and required important changes in culture, especially the ways streets were perceived. According to Clay McShane, the adoption of the automobile was preceded, and made possible, by an important change in the way people viewed streets during the latter half of the 19th century. In the mid–19th century when row houses were the leading housing style, the streets primarily functioned as open space to provide light and fresh air and a gathering place for social, recreational and economic activities of neighboring residents. Here, pedestrians were legitimate street users. Yet, this use of streets had to change in order for the automobile age to emerge. McShane sees the beginning of the change in the move to the suburb by the wealthy. As they ventured into the suburbs from deteriorating urban living conditions amid industrialization, a new attitude toward streets began to emerge, seeing them increasingly as a thoroughfare for the vehicles (1994: 57, 63).

Peter D. Norton also argues that until the 1920s, automobiles were seen as “intruders,” “a nuisance” or “uninvited guests” at best. Accordingly, blame for two growing auto-related problems, traffic accidents and congestion, were most often placed on motorists who represented a “misuse” of streets. Yet, as this limited the prospect for automobiles—especially in cities where those problems were more acute—amid looming market saturation in the mid 1920s, the automotive interest mounted a campaign for “social reconstruction” of streets and tried to redefine motorists as legitimate users of streets. It shifted blame for

traffic accidents and congestion to pedestrians now defined as “jaywalkers” as well as some reckless (but not all) drivers and advocated motorists’ claim to streets in terms of freedom and individuality that were dear to Americans (2008: 1–17). In short, the automotive interest, even while pressing for road building, had to redefine uses and misuses of streets as a prerequisite for physical accommodation of automobiles.

III. Road Building Before World War II

Amid the changing conceptions on the uses of streets and the mounting demands for road building from the bottom up, the highway issue gained national prominence from 1910 to 1915 (Goddard 1996: 60). This eventually led to the federal involvement in highway affairs, the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1916. While the federal government had long been occupied with railroads as the nation’s major transportation means (Gutfreund 2004: 8), the Act indicated the beginning of the federal supports that would eventually shift the balance between railroads and automobiles.

Based on the bill submitted to the Congress by the AASHO, the Act allocated \$75 million over the five-year period. As the first federal road bill, it set several important precedents for later federal legislations. It put the BPR at the center as the administrator of the fund, which, Bruce E. Seely argues, indicated the Progressive era belief in supposedly “apolitical” experts and specialists (1987: 3–7). It established a federal-state partnership, requiring states to match federal grants on a dollar-for-dollar basis and to create highway departments that would decide the location of highways in the state and build them in accordance with the guidance from the BPR. It reflected federalism or America’s concern over centralized

power, while also involving the transfer of authority from counties that had built roads thus far to states (Seely 1987: 72). Indicating the influence from the Good Road movement, the bill focused on rural roads by stipulating to help states “in the construction of rural post roads” for “rural free delivery of mail.” It also forbade tolls on the federally-funded roads. Thus, road constructions were to be funded by public funds (Gutfreund 2004: 17, 21).

Yet, the highway construction under the 1916 bill proceeded slowly impeded by poor state-federal partnership, the slow evolution of state highway departments and the outbreak of World War I. Thomas MacDonald, former president of the AASHO and director of the BPR from 1918 to 1953, managed to break through the stalemate and renewed road building by strengthening the federal-state partnership. As a fervent promoter of free roads, he saw road building as a public responsibility to be funded by government. He continued the promotion of good roads through the Highway Education Board and the newly established Highway Research Board. Under his long directorship, the BPR was to further nurture its reputation for apolitical expertise and professionalism in highway building and research. By the end of 1921, MacDonald and the BPR restored road building to the above prewar level (Lewis 1997: 8; Murphy 2009: 52; Gutfreund 2004: 25).

As a vote of confidence for the BPR, the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1921 significantly increased federal funds to \$75 million for one year (Seely 1987: 62). In particular, unlike previous road building concerned with rural post roads, the 1921 bill attempted to link states by including a provision expected to “expedite the completion of an adequate and connected system of highways, interstate in character.” It required each state to designate roads that would receive the federal aid, which could not be more than 7% of its total road mileage. They would be primary

(interstate) or secondary (inter-county rural) routes and linked to similarly designed highways in neighboring states (Murphy 2009: 27, 33; Swift 2011: 74–5). Although these were nothing like the interstate highways today, they allowed truckers to haul freight beyond their usual limits imposed by road conditions, generally about 20 miles, and challenge railroads' dominance in this regard (Goddard 1996: 91).

In the next decade, the unprecedented economic hardship ironically increased the federal support for road building. In a desperate attempt to boost the employment, both the Hoover and Roosevelt administrations expensed huge sums of money on construction projects. Road building constituted more than a third of New Deal work-relief programs. In particular, departing from the previous practices, many of the road projects were found in urban areas, as the unemployed came to cities looking for jobs (Lewis 1997: 22–3; Gutfreund 2004: 30). As work-relief programs, however, most of these projects were not concerned with building well-coordinated highways.

Around that time, an idea of transnational “superhighways” appeared. Roosevelt presented the idea to MacDonald in 1937, or, according to Stephen Goddard, initially in a secret meeting in December 1934. Most road projects, even those funded by the federal relief agencies, were done through state highway departments and thus seen as state programs. Accordingly, Goddard argues, Roosevelt wanted to have the federal government play a more active role in job creation by proposing superhighways (1996: 158–59). Roosevelt envisioned three vertical and three horizontal lines that would traverse the nation and incorporated new features of road building at that time. Unlike the previous two-lane highways, superhighways would be four-lane toll roads (Murphy 2009: 38). In addition, they would feature limited access and grade separations, which not only promised to no longer encumber motorists with stop signs,

intersections and railroad crossings, but relieved them of the blame for car accidents by excluding pedestrians from roads (Norton 2008: 238–40).

In response to Roosevelt's order to conduct a feasibility study of his idea, MacDonald agreed on the need for superhighways, but viewed that toll roads traversing primarily rural areas were not financially feasible. In a report titled *Toll Roads and Free Roads*, he proposed an alternative, the construction of 26,700 miles of toll-free highways connecting mostly cities. Including cities was not only an acknowledgement of the fact that the traffic was most heavy to and from cities, but also an attempt to differentiate his program from Roosevelt's. MacDonald also needed the city-related huge traffic to justify his toll-free, thus publicly funded, highways (Seely 1987: 170; Lewis 1997: 54; Swift 2011: 123, 125). At the same time, the automotive interest lobbied for urban highway building, as the ownership and use of automobiles were low in cities due to traffic congestion. As a result, urban highway building to relieve congestion was seen as a way to motorize cities (St. Clair 1986: 124–30).

In April 1941, Roosevelt created the National Interregional Highways Committee to develop a plan for a highway system based on MacDonald's report. Due to World War II, the Committee presented a blueprint for a 30,000-mile highway system in 1944 that also kept the urban orientation. It became the basis of the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1944 that endorsed the creation of the National System of Interstate Highways extended to 40,000 miles. Yet, it failed to commit funding for the new Interstate Highways, as this required a huge amount of funds to build (Seely 1987: 187–91; Lewis 1997: 55; Gutfreund 2004: 42, 46).

IV. The Creation of the Interstate Highway System

In the prewar years, the federal government emerged as one of the prime actors in making and enacting highway consensus by continuously supporting highway building and promoting the need for it. It also expanded the categories of its support from rural roads to primary and to urban highways. In the immediate postwar years, interruptions in road construction during the war years and the explosive automobile sales worsened road conditions and demanded fast actions. Yet, as the Truman administration, concerned with meeting the housing need, curbing inflation and then the Korean War, put highway construction on hold, a rhetoric of crisis marked the discussions on the postwar highway building (Rose 1990: 35, 61; Gutfreund 2004: 52).

Finally, President Eisenhower, supposedly a fiscal conservative and opponent of a big government spending, came to end this stasis by greatly expanding the federal support through the Interstate Highway Act in 1956, a New Deal-like expensive public work project. From his experience with the Army Convoy's undertaking to drive from Washington D.C. to San Francisco in 1919 and the German autobahn during World War II, Eisenhower developed avid interest in highways. He saw highway building as a measure to shore up the economy during economic downturn. He thought the current level of highway construction inadequate to solve traffic congestion and to serve economic growth and wanted to push for the Interstate, or superhighways, building. Eisenhower unveiled his vision to the leading members of his administration in April 1954 and to state governors at the Governors' Conference in July, asking them to devise a "dramatic plan to get 50 billion dollars worth of self-liquidating superhighways under construction." It was an unprecedented sum of money

when the federal budget was \$71 billion (Goddard 1996: 184; Lewis 1997: 98–9, 113).

Yet, as Eisenhower never clarified what he really meant by “self-liquidating” other than that it should not affect his budget (Murphy 2009: 53), this left various groups to squabble over the question of highway finance over the next two years. In fact, highway finance had been one of the most divisive issues in the discussions over the superhighways during the war years and after. The major highway interests including auto and related industries, truckers and the AAA organized the Project Adequate Roads (PAR) in 1953 to push for free highways funded by the government with general tax revenues. Yet, as it seemed almost inevitable that motorists would have to pay for highway construction with increased gasoline taxes, the AAA challenged truckers to take a bigger share of the costs and the PAR fell apart. Highway officials, while advocating toll-free superhighways, also suggested that increased gasoline taxes from motorists should pay for them. Most motoring groups then came to support the idea that gasoline taxes should be used exclusively for highway construction. Meanwhile, two factions emerged in the Eisenhower administration, one favoring bond financing and the other tolls (Rose 1990: 41–54).

After several committee reports and failed legislative actions, the National Interstate and Defense Highway Act was passed in June 1956, creating the Interstate and Defense Highway System that finally realized superhighways/the Interstate delineated in the 1944 Federal-Aid Highway Act. The term defense was a nod to the Cold War, since one of the ways to justify this expensive project was that, in case of a nuclear attack, highways were crucial to disperse people from urban population centers. According to Rose, the final bill “incorporated long-sought goals” of all involved and provided “something for everyone,” while asking “few

significant sacrifices.” What helped to accomplish this feat was an unparalleled federal largesse. Under the 1956 Act, the federal government would construct 41,000 miles of new limited access Interstate Highways (increased to 42,500 miles in 1968), scheduled to be completed by 1972 and designed for the traffic estimate of 1975. For this, it would dispense \$26 billion over the next 12 years, covering 90% of the cost, while states would be responsible for 10%. The bill also included the funding for urban highway building as well as the upgrading and construction of the existing primary and secondary routes. It reaffirmed the centrality of the BPR, as the program would be toll-free and administered under its direction (Gutfreund 2004: 55; Rose 1990: 89; Murphy 2009: 69).

In order to fund this massive program, the federal government increased tax on gasoline and diesel fuel and imposed new excise taxes on vehicle, tires, lubricants and parts. While truckers and some motorist groups initially opposed the tax increases and new levies, they eventually concluded that the benefits of the new system far outweighed its costs. In particular, the Interstate and Defense Highway Act mandated the creation of the Highway Trust Fund, under which all the collected taxes would be held separately, and the fund would be released as the construction proceeded. The creation of the special fund removed the need to seek the Congressional authorization for fund, thus protecting highway building from political intervention. More importantly, acquiescing to the demand from the highway lobby to tie gas taxes to highway construction, the fund would be used for highway constructions only, securing the “non-divertibility” of gas taxes (Swift 2011: 184; Murphy 2009: 67).

The principle of non-divertibility was first adopted in Britain in 1909, but abolished in 1926 as “nonsense, absurd and an outrage upon the sovereignty of Parliament and upon common sense.” Yet, nonsense in Britain became commonsense in the U.S. where it was reasoned that, since

gasoline taxes were collected from motorists, they should serve their need and thus be reserved for highway construction (Flink 1998: 374). What seemed to be lost to most Americans was the fact that not all those paying for gas taxes needed or used highways. In any case, the creation of the fund dedicated only to highway building indicates a special status of automobiles and highways in American culture, while also signaling their triumph over mass transit that was excluded from the fund. Ideally, the fund would ensure perpetuation of highway construction, since, as the past experience showed, more highways tended to lead to the use of more cars, and this in turn would generate more gas taxes and then construction of more highways.

The Interstate and Defense Highway Act of 1956 ended the deadlock that characterized American highway scenes from the late 1930s to 1956 by greatly expanding the federal spending. It reaffirmed the previous practices such as generous federal support and federal-state partnership, while also incorporating new ideas such as limited access and a new finance scheme that promised to make driving easier and further extend highways.

V. Consensus Unraveled

While the Interstate and Defense Highway Act elevated the federal support to an unprecedented scale, it occurred within the tradition of the decades-long federal actions in highway affairs. The magnitude of these actions can be grasped by looking at the divergent path of railroads and automobiles in the 20th century. The government treated railroads as private entities. As a result, railroads were subject to the strict government regulations and had to build their own costly tracks, while the

growing competition from automobiles and trucks eroded their profits. On the other hand, the federal government saw highways as public goods and built them as a public responsibility (Norton 2008: 7; St. Clair 1986: 100). The Interstate and Defense Highway Act further spelled doom for railroads that had been declining by making a decisive commitment to driving. It meant that the balance of the national transportation scene was forever shifted in the favor of the private automobile. Aided by the federal supports and highway consensus behind them, the automobile came to rule all aspects of American life.

Yet, the 1956 Act ironically turned out to be the beginning of the end of America's highway consensus. Around the time of the passage of the 1956 Act, Lewis Mumford, an architectural critic and historian, wrote

When the American people, through their Congress, voted a little while ago ... for a twenty-six billion dollar highway program, the most charitable thing to assume about this action is that they hadn't the faintest notion of what they were doing. Within the next fifteen years they will doubtless find out; by that time it will be too late to correct all the damage to our cities and our countryside, not least to the efficient organization of industry and transportation, that this ill conceived and preposterously unbalanced program will have wrought (1963: 234).

Initially a lone voice amid the celebration of the Act, Mumford soon proved to be prescient. As the construction proceeded, Americans increasingly recognized its costs and outcomes they had failed to give any serious thoughts.

Not long after the construction of the Interstate began, problems started to arise. In 1958, the construction costs were projected to exceed the

revenue capacity of the Highway Trust Fund, in part because more lands were taken than ever before to build the Interstates and in part because building them through cities pushed up the budget. Although Eisenhower found out about urban Interstate building after the passage of the bill (he intended to build the Interstates around cities), he had no choice but to allocate general tax revenue to the Highway Trust Fund and raise the gasoline tax in 1958 to cover the increased costs. While this increase was scheduled to expire in 1962, the Kennedy administration made it permanent, arguing that the timely completion of the Interstates was “essential to a national defense” (Murphy 2009: 90–91, 95; Lewis 1997: 163).

The construction of the Interstate Highways transformed American landscapes by reclaiming a landmass that was the size of Delaware (Lewis 1997: 1), raising the environmental and ecological concerns. Human and socio-cultural implications of the Interstate Highways were equally crucial. In countryside, the Interstates often halved people’s property, and limited access hurt businesses and towns bypassed by the Interstates. In populous cities, tight-knit communities were destroyed and numerous people were displaced without proper compensation, while the logic of the route selection brought class and racial dimensions of highway building to the fore. Budget limit dictated highway engineers to put urban Interstate routes through the most heavily traveled but the least expensive areas of the cities. This often meant selecting routes through poor neighborhoods of African Americans and other minorities, which was seen to bring an added benefit of “slum clearance.” African Americans, politicized through the Civil Rights Movement, came to criticize what they saw as “white men’s roads through black men’s bedrooms” and “institutionalized racism” built in the route selection (Swift 2011: 147; Rose 1990: 107).

Urban highways also facilitated urban decline by further helping the

suburban flight of white people and businesses and thus eroding urban tax bases. In addition, as mass transit declined, poor carless urban Americans were left behind without means to follow the jobs relocated to the suburbs. Ironically, traffic congestion the construction of highways intended to relieve was exacerbated. In a sense, this was not surprising, since the complete dependence on the private automobile for transportation, which the Interstate Highways further facilitated, left few alternatives other than driving.

In the 1960s, Americans increasingly began to see the highway itself, not just some related issues such as traffic congestion, as a problem, and criticism over the Interstate building grew. Americans became increasingly aware of environmental consequences their auto dependence entailed, which led to the growing opposition to the highway construction. After the mid-1960s, some environmental and community groups organized outright revolts and even succeeded in reversing the decision to construct the Interstates in cities such as New Orleans and Boston. Highway opponents questioned the values automobiles and highways represented such as mobility, speed, productivity and growth, trying to redefine the terms of popular discourses on them. At the same time, the authority of highway engineers came under attack for their single-minded pursuit of building highways to serve traffic without regard to their place within the larger human, socio-cultural and environmental contexts (Rose 1990: 106; Lewis 1997: 220-1, 243).

In the early 1970s, things turned from bad to worse. Fuel shortage due to the OPEC oil embargo, the long lines in gas pumps, and the imposition of the 55 mile-per-hour speed limit to conserve energy further reminded Americans of their auto dependence and vulnerability this created. This new reality, along with the continued criticism over highway constructions, rekindled interest in mass transit and led to the major review of the

nation's transportation policy during the Nixon administration. In particular, the Highway Trust Fund took much anger from critics as a culprit for skewed development of transportation modes by reserving gas taxes for highway building.

After a few years of wrangling between pros and cons, the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1973 ordered the limited diversion of the Highway Trust Fund for mass transit from 1975 and allowed local authorities to decide whether to continue highway construction in their region. As John A. Volpe, then Secretary of Transportation who promoted the reform of the Highway Trust Fund, admitted, allowing the diversion of the Fund for mass transit was an indication that the automobile was only one of the transportation modes and it alone could not meet the nation's transportation needs (Rose 1990: 111; Lewis 1997: 224). Ultimately, the breaking of the once inviolable Fund, although its limited nature and delayed implementation did not really help to overturn the dominance of automobiles, was a testimony to the unraveling of highway consensus that privileged automobiles and highways for decades.

VI. Conclusion

America's highway building had long been marked by what could be termed as highway consensus, continued and often blind supports for highway building to accommodate automobiles. In particular, as one of the major expressions of highway consensus, the decades-long federal supports for highway building played a key role in America's mass adoption of automobiles. Although groups with divergent interests at times conflicted over some issues including highway finance and the allocation of funds, they did within broader agreements on the need for and virtues of

highway building. The national consensus over the need and virtues of highways was all the more evident in light of what happened from the early 1960s. As Americans were awakened to the unforeseen costs of the continued highway building, national mood swung against highways, attributing various social ills to them. In an indication of dramatic change in the nation's mood, highway constructions were even halted in some cases. Troubles continued in the 1970s and highway consensus that long characterized America's highway politics fell apart.

America's highway consensus and its eventual fall did not occur in a social vacuum, but were in line with the way Americans viewed automobiles and their society and interacted with the mood, values, and culture of its time. Its rise corresponded to the time when Americans avidly welcomed the automobile for its promises of mobility, freedom, efficiency and convenience, and a whole national economy came to depend on the automobile industry. Likewise, Eisenhower's expensive program reflected the major features of the 1950s such as car culture, economic abundance and Americans' confidence in their country. Ultimately, the continued supports for highway building indicated the values Americans invested in automobiles and highways as much as their willingness to accommodate them both. Yet, from the 1960s, Americans came to be more critical of the automobile not least because of the environmental damage and dependence on foreign oil, which the automobile entailed and highways reinforced. Undoubtedly, this change was helped by challenges to authorities signaled by the Civil Rights Movement and the growing uncertainty wrought by a war in Vietnam. The fuel shortage, energy crisis and the Watergate scandal and cynicism over the national leaders in the 1970s further added a sense of malaise. In short, highway consensus rose and fell alongside the changes in Americans' view of automobiles, their country and themselves, while also reinforcing these changes.

Today, automobiles and highways are still beset with legacies. They promised speed, but congestion has often been the case. They promised freedom and independence, but simultaneously promoted a life dependent on a single mode of transportation and scarce resources. While they helped to reduce travel time, Americans moved farther away and commuted longer distance. Instead of urban renewal, they exacerbated urban problems. Despite these contradictions, Americans still rely on automobiles and highways for many needs and savor mobility and convenience they give, if only because there is no other means available. For better or worse, automobiles and highways have transformed America to the extent that it is now impossible to think of the country without either of them.

Works Cited

- Flink, James J. *The Automobile Age*. Cambridge: MIT P, 1990.
- Foster, Mark S. *A Nation on Wheels: The Automobile Culture in America Since 1945*. Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth, 2003.
- Goddard, Stephen B. *Getting There: The Epic Struggle between Road and Rail in the American Century*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1996.
- Gutfreund, Owen D. *Twentieth Century Sprawl: Highways and the Reshaping of the American Landscape*. New York: Oxford UP, 2004.
- Lewis, Tom. *Divided Highways: Building the Interstate Highways, Transforming American Life*. New York: Viking, 1997.
- McShane, Clay. *Down the Asphalt Path: The Automobile and the American City*. New York: Columbia UP, 1994.
- Mumford, Lewis. *The Highway and the City*. New York: Harcourt, 1963.
- Murphy, John. *The Eisenhower Interstate System*. New York: Chelsea House, 2009.
- Norton, Peter D. *Fighting Traffic: The Dawn of the Motor Age in the American City*. Cambridge: MIT P, 2008.
- Rose, Mark H. *Interstate: Express Highway Politics, 1939–1989*. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1990.
- Seely, Bruce E. *Building the American Highway System: Engineers As Policy Makers*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1987.
- St. Clair, David J. *The Motorization of American Cities*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 1986.
- Swift, Earl. *The Big Roads: The Untold Story of the Engineers, Visionaries, and Trailblazers Who Created the American Superhighways*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011.

Abstract

America's Highway Consensus: Its Rise and Fall

Joo, Jeongsuk

This paper aims to examine the ways in which America has accommodated automobiles by building roads, especially highways. Automobiles require roads as the most basic infrastructure. Given this, I aim to examine what could be termed as America's highway consensus, uncritical and at times almost blind support for highway building, as a crucial factor that enabled the mass adoption of automobiles in the U.S. In particular, the federal government spent enormous resources and money to build roads and highways as public goods. I thus intend to examine the role and actions of the federal government in building roads and highways as one of the core elements that shaped and enacted highway consensus and led to widespread automobility in the U.S.

I first present a brief overview of the early agitations for road building before the federal involvement as well as the changes in culture and outlook that paved the way for the automobile's claim for roads. It is followed by the historical examination of some of the major federal supports for highway building as well as their characteristics. I then examine how they eventually coalesced into the establishment of the Interstate and Defense Highway Act in 1956, the most expensive and extensive highway bill ever. Finally, I also examine how highway building came under attack and how highway consensus began unraveling during the 1960s and after.

Key words: highway consensus, good roads movement, Bureau of Public Roads, Federal-Aid Highway Act, Interstate Highways
고속도로 합의, 도로개선 운동, 도로관리청, 연방 고속도로법, 주간고속도로

논문접수일: 2013. 04. 04.

심사완료일: 2013. 05. 22.

게재확정일: 2013. 06. 17.

이름: 주정숙

소속: 중원대학교

주소: 충북 괴산군 괴산읍 문무로 85 중원대학교 MII 819호

이메일: joojs2001@yahoo.com

