Highway Madness!:
Politics and Citizen Participation in Postwar U.S. Traffic Safety Technology and Policy

by

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ABSTRACT

Modern U.S. traffic safety policy is largely guided by three overarching principles that have influenced governments, industry, and community and citizen activists since the 1940s. The terms, education, engineering, and enforcement, detailed in the Action Program for Traffic Safety were developed by engineers and U.S. federal government traffic safety experts in response to growing concerns around rising traffic fatalities. In these guidelines, and the iterations that developed from them, responsibility for traffic safety shifted between drivers, policy makers, and the automotive industry. My dissertation examines the evolution of traffic safety policy, specifically looking at solutions to reach zero fatalities, over multiple decades. The traffic safety experts, including the auto industry, federal government, and community activists, striving for zero fatalities have reshaped traffic infrastructure, automotive regulation, and consumer perceptions of risky behaviors in an attempt to solve a major public health issue. Broadly following four themes, infrastructure, institutions, technology, and behavior, each chapter highlights how these actors mitigated risks and defined safety in order to find solutions to highway fatalities. To safety-concerned government officials and industry leaders, central actors in the development of federal traffic safety policy, traffic safety encompassed engineering, education, enforcement, citizenship, humanitarian, and moral issues. On the other hand, to women’s community and activist groups, like MADD, traffic safety’s focus was the education of drivers and pedestrians, and the prevention of crashes through educational and public health approaches. However, to working class white males, government mandated safety was viewed as an infringement upon their freedom as individuals to choose how to be safe and how to define their level of safety, regardless of its effects on others. Through analysis of these narratives emerges a more complete picture of the public health, education, and social policy implications of twentieth century traffic safety, the role of citizen activism in traffic safety policy development at the local, state, and federal levels, and the ways in which the traffic safety solutions have shifted over time.

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Highway Transportation Remakes America

“Freedom of the highways is a basic human right,” begins a document created in 1940 by the National Highway Users Conference. The document continued to paint a picture of a nation with a massively growing – and increasingly safer – transportation infrastructure which more and more relied on the highway system and automobiles for movement, commerce, national defense, and freedom and individuality. Organizations like the National Highway Users Conference, whose membership consisted of the automotive and related industries, heavily influenced the course of traffic safety throughout the early twentieth century, prior to World War II.

These early industry-led organizations helped create the postwar traffic safety plan to more heavily focus on driver behavior, as behavior was the most unstable and unknown factor in the puzzle. Automobiles and roads were considered safer than drivers because safety was about reliability. Driver behavior was not always reliably consistent, while roads and automobiles, though failure was possible, were trusted. This definition of safe slowly changed in the 1950s along with the perceptions of the fatality problem. Automobile fatality numbers were consistently high throughout the twentieth century, but in the postwar period, the key political actors saw fatalities

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2 The National Highway Users Conference merged with the Automotive Safety Foundation, another auto industry traffic safety focused organization, in 1970 and still exists as the American Highway Users Alliance, an organization that has similar values to the ones stated during its founding in 1932. They serve “as the united voice of the transportation community promoting safe, uncongested highways and enhanced freedom of mobility.” American Highway Users Alliance, accessed August 16, 2017, http://www.highways.org/
as an issue that could be solved with policy intervention at the state and local level, not with federal regulation of the automobile.

Figure 1. The basic tenets of highway transportation from the National Highway Users Conference, an organization of auto and related industry representatives. National Highway Users Conference, "Highway Transportation Re-makes America, (Washington, D.C.: National Press Building, 1940).
Traffic safety policy is largely guided by three overarching principles that have influenced governments, industry, and community activists since the 1940s. The Three E’s of traffic safety, education, engineering, and enforcement, detailed in the Action Program for Traffic Safety\(^5\) were developed by engineers and government traffic safety experts in response to growing concerns about rising traffic fatalities.\(^6\) In these guidelines, responsibility for traffic safety shifted between drivers, policy makers, and the automotive industry and the car throughout the postwar period. Education and enforcement remained in tension as policymakers focused on driver behavior. At the same time, the policy focus on engineering emphasized road development and eliminating hazards from roadsides. As traffic safety thought shifted toward a focus on the automobile and the relationship between driver and car, engineering took on new meanings and encompassed automobile design and styling as well. At the same time, enforcement and education have been in tension as policymakers have had differing views on how best to address driver behavior and traffic safety.

This dissertation examines the evolution of traffic safety policy, unofficially and officially, and at the local, state, and federal levels, from 1946 to 1990 in the United States.\(^7\) For the most

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\(^5\) The Action Program for Highway Safety was a traffic safety plan created by safety experts for state and local governments to follow in order to reduce traffic fatalities to zero. Proponents of the Action Program believed that, if all sections of the Program were followed, cities and states would see a dramatic decrease in fatality rates.


\(^7\) I chose to use these dates as 1946 was the first President’s Highway Safety Conference, convened by President Harry Truman, and was also when the Action Program, the foundational document for traffic safety for the second half of the twentieth century, was created. I ended at 1990 as the 1990s were a turning point for traffic safety on multiple fronts. By this time, the American Big Three car companies had agreed to install air bags in their cars and seat belt use was steadily rising, there was a shift in both American public perceptions of how to be safe in a car and American auto industry willingness to install safety features. After this, the focus of the auto industry was safety features and the United States began a new traffic and automotive safety era in the 1990s. My traffic safety periodization mostly aligns with the periodization set by Peter
part, the underlying goal of all traffic safety initiatives is zero traffic fatalities. This goal became more explicit in later decades, particularly after the federal government officially created a regulatory infrastructure for automotive and traffic safety. The traffic safety experts striving for zero fatalities reshaped traffic infrastructure, automotive regulation, and consumer perceptions of risky and unsafe behaviors in an attempt to solve what they saw as a major public health issue – traffic fatalities.

In each chapter, I highlight how various actors mitigated risks and defined safety throughout the second half of the twentieth century. To safety-concerned government officials and industry leaders, central actors in the development of federal traffic safety policy, traffic safety encompassed engineering, education, enforcement, citizenship, humanitarian, and moral issues. To federal officials, the humanitarian and moral appeal of traffic safety and reducing fatalities made sense. Civic leaders and civilians alike had a responsibility to themselves and their communities to allocate the time and resources to traffic safety initiatives and also be aware of their own driving behaviors. On the other hand, to community organizations, many of them women’s organizations, traffic safety’s focus was safety education for drivers and pedestrians, and the prevention of crashes through educational and public health approaches. To many of these organizations, creating a safe community and safe traffic safety citizens weighed more heavily than the freedom to choose how to drive one’s automobile. However, to some individuals, many of whom were working class white men, government-mandated safety initiatives were viewed as

an infringement upon their freedom as individuals to choose how to be safe and how to define their level of safety, regardless of its effects on others.\textsuperscript{10}

I also analyze how auto safety technologies, infrastructure development, and public involvement in and understanding of traffic safety and automotive design and regulatory processes illuminate who and what influenced traffic safety, from expanding women’s domestic boundaries to include the automobile and safety of the family to the role of working class masculinity and the tensions between safety and freedom. The focus of the programs and campaigns, safety education, and automotive safety technologies shifted from 1946 to 1990, as regulation developed and public opinion continued to shift. This dissertation analyzes the triangulation of politics, engineering, and the driving public, examining how traffic safety policies emerged and were influenced by the interactions between political actors, engineers, and local community organizations and activists, who garnered support for traffic safety initiatives through grassroots campaigns for safety programs.

\textbf{Chapter Outline and Historiography}

Each chapter centers around a solution to traffic safety; these solutions include infrastructural solutions, institutional solutions, technological solutions, and behavioral solutions. In chapter one, I focus on the President’s Committee on Traffic Safety and its attempt to build a network of traffic safety professionals and experts in state and local government and in community activist organizations. The President’s Committee on Traffic Safety (PCTS), established in 1952 in the wake of the efforts of the annual post-WWII President’s Highway Safety Conferences, acted

as a precursor to the formation of the Department of Transportation and as a centralized location in the federal government for national traffic safety issues. Working with state and local governments and community organizations to address traffic safety issues, these partnerships created standardized traffic safety guidelines that were then disseminated at the community level. Community organizations, many of them women’s groups, who were concerned about safety in their communities, acted as liaisons between the PCTS and their communities, offering suggestions to traffic safety experts, teaching community members traffic safety materials, and creating a system of responsibility for one’s self, family, and neighbors through watching for inappropriate behavior and correcting it. At the time, the PCTS believed that individuals were responsible for their behavior and for the safety of themselves and others on the road, and thus must follow all traffic rules at all times. Community organizations also created new safety programs and advocated for their programs at the state and national level. This first chapter creates the foundational infrastructural traffic safety policy that is necessary to finally bolster enough support for a Department of Transportation with a dedicated agency devoted to traffic safety.

Chapter two addresses the institutional-level responses to traffic safety, a topic that was gaining momentum in the 1960s. Increased awareness of traffic safety issues also meant increased awareness of fatality and injury rates not only from bad driver behavior but from potential faults in the automobile. Fatality and injury rates continued to rise in the 1950s and 1960s, leading to changes in policy and the eventual creation of a Department of Transportation and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), whereas prior to this, transportation was spread across 33 agencies in the federal government. Outspoken activists like Ralph Nader challenged the automotive industry and federal government to impose stricter standards on the automobile manufacturers and designers, implying that there was more to the growing fatality rates on the
highways than “bad” or unsafe driver behavior. With the formation of the Department of Transportation, a federal agency dedicated to transportation and traffic safety, the federal government created new standards and regulations for the automotive industry and defined the major problems in traffic safety for the United States.

After the creation of the Department of Transportation and NHTSA, the third chapter examines the focus on technological solutions to highway casualties that emerged out of the new regulatory environment of the 1960s. This chapter emphasizes the shift toward automotive industry responsibility for driver safety through the development and installation of safety devices in automobiles. New regulations from the federal government created a design-based emphasis on safety. The seat belt and airbag, two safety features meant to protect people inside the vehicle, also created backlash against automotive-based safety systems. While the federal government and automotive industry debated which of these safety systems would save the most lives, consumer perceptions of safety within the automobile helped to further politicize safety technologies as debates raged over whether automobile interiors were considered public or private spaces, and how the federal government could best regulate driver behavior.

The final chapter discusses the behavioral solutions traffic safety experts attempted to employ to create better drivers and, once again, reduce casualties to zero. Specifically, the focus of these behavioral efforts is in anti-drunk driving measures taken both by governments and citizen activist groups, like Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD). While much of the focus of the 1966 federal government regulatory efforts in traffic safety revolved around creating technological solutions to reduce injury and fatality rates, drunk driving reform required intervention into medical discourse on alcohol’s effects on the body and the nature of alcoholism as a disease. At the same time, the drinking and driving problem produced widespread, victim-focused citizen
activism that provided a catalyst to turn drunk driving into a nationally recognized problem that required behavioral, institutional, and technological solutions. Weaved throughout the discourse on alcoholism and anti-drunk driving rhetoric was a focus on uprooting Americans’ relationship to alcohol use and their understanding of its effects on driving and other potentially risky behaviors.

Traffic safety is emerging in the history of technology as an important area of study in the already saturated landscape of automotive history that often focuses on inventors and inventions or labor force in the auto industry. Early automotive history of technology focuses heavily on innovation and important figures in industry, who were most often the white male owners of the car companies. These early comprehensive histories of the automobile included sections on traffic safety and regulatory efforts, but failed to develop the rich depth of materials, technologies, and actors that are key to this story, and often limit its scope to a post-war period in the 1960s when the Department of Transportation was founded. Similarly, other scholars have situated the automobile within the built environment and provided sound context for its role in postwar American life; however, at times this scholarship takes the automobile’s role as central or

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necessary to the creation of postwar life without deep criticism.\textsuperscript{13} At the same time, one of the earliest comprehensive studies of traffic and automotive safety fails to acknowledge the safety contributions of women citizens and community activists.\textsuperscript{14}

My dissertation shifts the focus of and extends existing traffic safety history literature by contributing a different perspective to the current views of traffic safety that examine the regulatory relationship between the federal government and the auto industry and on drivers who are stereotypically perceived as “dangerous” or risky or otherwise exist outside of day-to-day American public driving. These arguments are most commonly seen in published sources related to racing, demolition derbies, hot rodding, and the use of cars for recreation and amusement. The arguments put forth by these scholars tend to focus on the users of automobiles, and how they redefine the car to meet their needs.\textsuperscript{15} They are also heavily gendered, mostly toward men as users and modifiers of technology.


In the case of postwar traffic safety policy and technology development and use, women emerge as key players. They gained agency as users of the technological system, particularly in this time period, through their association with community organizations that created strong networks and provided women and other marginalized users of the network power to exact traffic safety changes in their communities.\textsuperscript{16} Other studies of women in transportation, not specifically women's role in traffic safety, are relegated to their role as motorists and mechanics in the early twentieth century. This early work is important in expanding the knowledge of women as key contributors to the expansive transportation network, not as passive participants but as active users and shapers of technology and knowledge.\textsuperscript{17} However, the literature examining women's continued use of the automobile in the postwar period, and women activists' role as shapers of the technology and policy of safety, is limited in scope.\textsuperscript{18}

My dissertation shifts the focus of automotive history to incorporate the work and influence of engineers and industry representatives, groups of citizens, and government experts and collaborations that exist between them. Within studies of engineering and engineers, research has emerged on the ways in which teams of engineers and designers collaboratively work together to

\textsuperscript{17} This early literature on women and automobility includes, Georgine Clarsen, \textit{Eat My Dust: Early Women Motorists} (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008); Virginia Scharff, \textit{Taking the Wheel: Women and the Coming of the Motor Age} (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1992).
\textsuperscript{18} They are mentioned in texts as important contributors to the transportation network in the postwar period. Ruth Schwartz Cowan, for example, discusses the productive labor of middle class women's work in the home that extends to the automobile in the 1950s. She stated, "The automobile had become, to the middle class American housewife, what the cast-iron stove in the kitchen would have been to her counterpart of 1850 – the vehicle through which she did much of her most significant work, and the work locale where she could most often be found." \textit{More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave} (New York: BasicBooks, 1983).
create new technologies. Not only that, these studies have also detailed how engineers influence the ways in which technologies become imbued with meaning and use models, through their design. 19 These communities of engineers, or “knowledge communities,” 20 also help create new policy change, based on technological development, and challenge understandings of risky technologies and their normalization and acceptance into society. 21

Further, my dissertation examines the ways in which regulatory decision-making affects citizens and the ways in which citizens, in turn, react to, define, and influence regulatory politics. Community organizations throughout the late twentieth century provide a lens to look at citizen activism and interactions with politics and industry. 22 These community organizations created awareness campaigns in their communities for traffic safety issues, sparking movements for action from governmental agencies. Much of the policy work done by these organizations was not moved

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20 In her study of anti-lock brakes, Ann Johnson refers to the engineering communities that developed as “knowledge communities,” defining them as “a small, informal community of practitioners that aggregates around a simultaneously developing question.” Hitting the Brakes: Engineering Design and the Production of Knowledge (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).


22 Women activists and women’s organizations in the 1970s and 1980s are well-documented for their work on gender- and social-related issues like civil rights, anti-sex discrimination, and education. This work is highly politicized and falls along “issues-related” lines. Women’s activism in traffic safety is less politicized, before the advent of MADD in 1980, but pervasive across the United States in the postwar period. MADD’s activism followed lightly in the footsteps of women’s activism of the 1970s, without being labeled as a “feminist” cause. Joyce Gelb and Marian Lief Palley, “Women and Interest Group Politics: A Comparative Analysis of Federal Decision-Making,” The Journal of Politics 41 no. 2 (1979).
forward by individual leaders in the organizations, but instead by the people behind the scenes. 23 Many of the organizations working for traffic safety were also concerned with other issues, and the women who took up traffic safety as their cause. Over time, community activist organizations have influenced and created local and even national safe driving standards that have, in turn, become institutionalized. The contributions of citizen and community activists in creating a new traffic safety system further contextualizes the complex web of safety experts in the postwar period. 24 Though public contribution in the creation of federal safety standards and regulations increasingly closed, the previous efforts by lay experts continued to contribute knowledge to the design of safety policy and technology and public understandings of and acceptance for it.

At the same time, the increasing scrutiny of auto industry practices created a wavering trust in the ideas of responsibility, freedom, and progress that the automobile represented in popular culture in the second half of the twentieth century. Instead of the automobile as an agent of freedom, privacy, and security for drivers, increased safety regulation created a hyper-regulated, individualized driver that was consistently monitored. This criticism of the regulated driver and driving experience, most notable in the 1960s and 1970s, coincides with labor and working class movements that uncovered and unraveled the sexist, racist, and classist institutions that many Americans relied upon. 25 However, prior to federal regulation of the American auto industry, state

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and local government efforts and the programs implemented by community organizations set into motion the mechanisms necessary to create the monitored driver.26 As automobile ownership increased in the postwar period, new regulations and standards created drivers that were distinctive individuals who fit into predefined categories set by the regulatory agencies, the auto industry, and safety advocates, who were often members of community organizations with a traffic safety focus.27

By analyzing these narratives, a more complicated picture of the public health, education, and social policy implications of twentieth century traffic safety emerges. These implications influence how large-scale infrastructure regulation and acceptance of new automotive and traffic safety technologies and change will develop in the twenty-first century. This is particularly evident in zero fatalities policy initiatives issued by the federal government, and the more local initiatives and the state and municipal level, and in the parallel and subsequent development of autonomous vehicles and their marketing as a solution to highway safety issues and traffic fatalities. Within these emergent traffic safety trajectories are embedded the lessons of postwar traffic safety initiatives.

Establishing a Traffic Safety Regulatory Infrastructure in the 1950s

In August 1935, Reader's Digest published an article that would go on to frighten, disgust, and horrify readers – and also become one of the most reprinted and requested pieces in Reader's Digest's history. The article by J.C. Furnas, titled “And Sudden Death,” put the reality of the consequences of unsafe driving in full view. Furnas noted that in 1935, the fatality rate from crashes was at 36,000 and injuries reaching almost 1 million, but that only publishing these figures did not fully emphasize the nation-wide problem of unsafe driving. He stated, “figures exclude the pain and horror of savage mutilation – which means they leave out the point.”

Through the article, Furnas detailed the consequences of unsafe practices on behalf of drivers and pedestrians and, covertly, the poorly designed automobiles and road infrastructure that aided, instead of hindered, injury and death. In one example, Furnas played to the uncertainty and unfairness of crashes, describing how a driver walked away unscathed but his passenger did not:

This spring a wrecking crew pried the door off a car which had been overturned down an embankment and out stepped the driver with only a scratch on his cheek. But his mother was still inside, a splinter of wood from the top driven four inches into her brain as a result of son’s taking a greasy curve a little too fast. No blood – no horribly twisted bones – just a gray-haired corpse still clutching her pocketbook in her lap as she had clutched in when she felt the car leave the road.

Furnas’ multiple, detailed examples of the lasting effects of crashes on the American public, helped usher in a new era in responsibility and blame for casualties.

Traffic crashes were not isolated, single instances that onlookers witnessed in horror, driving by aghast. Furnas impressed upon readers that crashes were happening every minute, somewhere in the country, and that they, the readers, might be next. He instilled fear in them with descriptions of crashes and what happened to the people involved. This fear crept into the national

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29 Furnas, “—And Sudden Death,” 23.
consciousness, exploding in that same year in outbursts of anger and resentment toward the mounting death tolls and the possibility for restrictions on automobiles and driving.\textsuperscript{30} The same messages would later be resurrected in the new post-World War II driving landscape after the wartime driving restrictions were lifted.\textsuperscript{31}

What safety experts had in the post-war period was the inkling of proof that their pre-war programs had begun to work and that they could get public opinion on their side to make them even more effective. In the 1920s and 1930s, as cities began to restructure themselves around automobile use, blame for crashes and casualties – whether of automobile passengers or pedestrians – was given to the automobile. On the non-standardized, unregulated streets of America, the new automobile added chaos to a transportation system that included pedestrians, bicyclists, and animals. Little care or effort was given to changing the habits and behaviors of users of the new infrastructure, particularly pedestrians, and many critics blamed the automobile for injuries and fatalities. The auto industry attempted to change public opinion of the automobile by working with industry-created traffic and auto safety organizations to educate and shift the focus of traffic safety to behavioral solutions.\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{30} In his book on traffic safety in the 1920s and 1930s, Peter Norton notes the fervor with which the American public took Furnas’ message, with many Americans calling for safety changes within the automotive industry and a loss of faith in the road engineer to build safety into the expanding highway network. Reader’s Digest reprinted “—And Sudden Death” for community organizations and clubs across the country, emboldening local citizens’ organizations to take on traffic safety projects as part of their community activities. Norton, \textit{Fighting Traffic}.

\textsuperscript{31} The President’s Report to the Automotive Safety Foundation in 1950 noted calls for “tougher weapons” to “deal with the death march of accidents on highways,” with some attendees calling for the “legal imposition of governors on cars to check speed, or other equally drastic mechanical penalties.” President’s Report, Automotive Safety Foundation, April 11, 1950, “Automotive Safety Files, Jan. 1950-Sept. 1950,” Box 38, Walker A. Williams Files, Benson Ford Research Center.

\textsuperscript{32} Norton, \textit{Fighting Traffic}.
Chapter 1

But if the battle of the first half of the twentieth century was between changing infrastructure and technological responsibility, the beginning of the second half focused heavily on driver and pedestrian behavior and easing the economic constraints of crashes and congestion. New automobile technologies became secondary to the new dominant focus on behaviors by governments, organizations, and citizen groups; however, just as quickly as they established a well-rounded program centered around behavior, traffic safety officials and citizen organizations began to include automobile and road safety technologies in their all-encompassing view of traffic safety organizing activities. The focus on driver behavior and trust in technology was indicative of the pre-regulatory traffic safety era.

In the 1930s, before the US entered World War II, highway fatality rates dropped as many city and State governments began adopting new traffic safety techniques to prevent crashes.\textsuperscript{33} However, in the initial years after the end of World War II, fatality and injury rates rose dramatically,\textsuperscript{34} worrying government officials and non-government organizations. The dominant transportation narrative of the 1950s, that of massive highway expansion under the federal aid to highways act of 1956, of engineers and road building projects, and suburbanization, fails to take into account the integral component of traffic safety. In particular, traffic safety integration into the postwar transportation infrastructure expansion heavily involved citizen input and organization.

\textsuperscript{34} In the 1950 President’s Report to the Automotive Safety Foundation, traffic casualties in the first half of the twentieth century were totaled at approximately 33 million, included in this figure were hundreds of thousands of individuals who were severely permanently injured. Most of these casualties occurred after 1925. President’s Report, Automotive Safety Foundation, April 11, 1950, “Automotive Safety Files, Jan. 1950-Sept. 1950,” Box 38, Walker A. Williams Files, Benson Ford Research Center.
In the years before the creation of the Department of Transportation in 1966 and the federal regulation of traffic safety through the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, traffic safety policy focused more on creating and enforcing good driving and pedestrian behaviors and standardizing the national road system, tenets of the Action Program's plan, with less emphasis on automobile technologies that would protect drivers. In the postwar period, developments in traffic safety were not in line with the larger federal-state-local transportation policies already in place, policies that often relied on matching funds from states to complete road engineering projects.35

Road infrastructure after World War II had fallen into disrepair due to lack of funding from the federal level, which states had not received since 1941. Deteriorating infrastructure and lack of new construction between 1941 and 1956, combined with the postwar increase in new drivers and automobiles, trucks, and buses, rapidly worsened road conditions throughout the late 1940s.3637 As highway death tolls mounted, it became increasingly clear to government officials and safety advocates in industry that some sort of federal level traffic safety policy was increasingly important and necessary.

In 1946, President Harry Truman called together 2,000 public officials, safety experts, and concerned citizens to convene the President's Highway Safety Conference to address the rising post-World War II traffic fatality rate. Truman was concerned that, since fatality rates rose quickly in 1946, the fatality trend for the rest of the decade would be astronomical. The conference participants pulled together local and State expertise in traffic safety, creating a nation-wide

inventory of techniques and practices that effectively aided in reducing fatalities. They streamlined this information into the Highway Safety Action Program, later shortened to the Action Program, an annually revised document for States and communities to use as guidelines for better traffic safety practices.\textsuperscript{38}

The Action Program was first developed by the President’s Highway Safety Conference (PHSC) of 1946 by safety professionals and industry leaders, based on their collective experiences in traffic safety. The Program was a series of guidelines established and technical recommendations, meant to be used for traffic safety policy by state and local governments, citizen groups, and individuals.\textsuperscript{39} The creators of the Action Program believed that consistent effort by public officials and citizen organizations encompassing all aspects of the Program would eventually lead to a safer, more efficient transportation system. If one section of the Action Program wasn’t given enough care and attention, the entire program suffered. Traffic safety experts emphasized that each complex section needed to work together to create solutions to highway casualties.\textsuperscript{40}

The consensus among conference attendees included an increased emphasis on citizen involvement in traffic safety by promoting increased awareness and understanding, and also

\textsuperscript{39} Report of the Committee to Popularize the Action Program, to the Advisory Council of the President’s Committee for Traffic Safety, “Committee to Popularize the Action Program,” Box 155, Records of the President’s Committee for Traffic Safety, LBJ Library.
\textsuperscript{40} Implementing the Action Plan, “Action Program Summary Reviews,” Box 76, Records of the President’s Committee for Traffic Safety, LBJ Library.
through being good traffic citizens both as pedestrians and drivers. Each of the activities in the Action Program requires public support and understanding.

The Action Program was based around three overarching themes and long-standing themes, known as the three E’s of traffic safety – education, enforcement, and engineering – guiding their traffic safety goals. Though they overlapped in some areas, each section contained specific recommendations to be carried out for uniform traffic safety policy and the gradual reduction and eventual elimination of traffic fatalities. Education encompassed, for example, driver education classes in high schools and safety education at all school levels, while engineering involved uniform traffic signs and signals and the development of adequate roads. Under enforcement fell the duties of police and courts, adoption of uniform traffic laws, licensing and examinations, and motor vehicle inspection.

Officials believed that multiple and diverse threads, all related to the Three E’s of traffic safety, occurred together to most effectively reduce traffic fatalities. In the report on Public Information for the 1946 PHSC, commission members wrote "permanent reduction of the accident rate comes from impartial enforcement of traffic regulations; from modern engineering of roads and vehicles; from education of drivers and pedestrians; from uniform rules of the road."

In 1949, President Truman wrote in the opening to The President’s Highway Safety Conference Action Program updates that, in the three years since wartime driving restrictions had been lifted in 1946 and crashes were increasing rapidly, the adoption of the Action Program by

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42 Norton, Fighting Traffic.
43 The President’s Highway Safety Conference, Report of Committee on Public Information.
44 The President’s Highway Safety Conference, Report of Committee on Public Information, 2.
State and local governments helped road fatalities decline. He stated that through the safety programs, “almost 11,000 lives” were saved “and nearly 400,000” injuries prevented.\footnote{The President’s Highway Safety Conference, \textit{Action Program} (Washington, D.C.: June 1-3, 1949): II.} In 1949, the President’s Highway Safety Conference convened and issued updates to the Action Program. By this time, the fatality rates were rising as more people were traveling for work and leisure. Travel in 1948 was at an all-time high, with 61 billion more miles traveled than the highest pre-war record of 1941, but fatality rates were at an all-time low of 32,000.\footnote{The President’s Highway Safety Conference, \textit{1949-1950 Inventory and Guide for Action} (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1949).} This increase in travel combined with the lower fatality rates prompted the 1949 PHSC to call on more delegates and hold regional conference sessions across the United States to gain uniform support and usage of the Action Program in all 48 States.

The PHSC members acknowledged their accomplishments, putting the lives saved into numbers, and noting that more could be done through a unified and all-in approach to the tenets of the Action Program. In the three years since the inception of the Action Program, the annual traffic fatality rate lowered nationally from 11.3 fatalities per 100 million vehicles to eight fatalities per 100 million, which equaled roughly 11,000 lives. Also, experts claimed that in that time period nearly 400,000 people had been saved from serious injury thanks to the efforts of the Action Program implementation, both numbers used by President Truman to bolster acceptance and momentum for traffic safety. This was not uniform in every state, some states had very low fatality and injury rates, thanks to their high buy in of the Action Program, while others still suffered from high fatalities because they chose to pick and choose how to implement the program.
Federal government traffic safety experts were concerned that fatality rates would rise out of control without proper consideration for the Action Program’s techniques and methods. They were concerned with the projections for the year 1960, which estimated 50 million cars, trucks, and buses traveling 500 billion miles per year. At that rate, they imagined fatality rates, and associated economic costs, that could critically harm the safety and security of the United States.47 Traffic safety experts in the immediate postwar period considered crashes to be a drain on national energy and resources. They often used words like “carnage” to describe traffic fatality rates, drawing parallels between road deaths and war deaths.48 At the same time, driver responsibility factored heavily in crashes. Experts referred to the high traffic fatality rate as the ‘accident problem,’ as driver behavior was the weakest link in the highway traffic infrastructure. To some, particularly in the auto industry, road and automobile engineering were continually updating and incorporating new methods and techniques, while drivers stagnated and caused errors.49

In the early 1950s, and the end of Truman’s Administration, the new postwar traffic safety movement called for three major efforts to address traffic safety, most of which had already begun

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48 American traffic fatality numbers in the postwar period were often compared to fatality numbers from military conflicts. In a 1965 “Chat with the Editor” about their article on Highway Deaths in Changing Times, the editor, Robert W. Harvey, remarked that he had recently read in the newspaper two side-by-side articles about deaths – one said “17 Americans injured in Saigon” and the other “12 die on highways in state.” He continued, stating that after that the letters to the editor column continually mentioned the 17 Americans killed in Saigon [now known as Ho Chi Minh City], but none mentioned the 12 who died on the highways. Harvey pondered why there was a seeming lack of concern, stating that “homicide and suicide and assault just don’t seem to stir us up as much when the weapon is an automobile.” He continued, implying the general apathy for the traffic safety movement, “Oh, sure, we definitely deplore the situation. Another crash? Terrible. But after all, what can I do about it? Besides, I drive carefully. It’s those other guys.” Article, Robert W. Harvey, Chat with the Editor, Changing Times June 1965, Ex SA 2, WHCF, Box 3, LBJ Library.
in the last years of the 1940s. First, the traffic safety experts in the National Committee for Traffic Safety (NCTS), which helped coordinate the traffic safety activities of national organization members of the committee, called for “stimulating action in States and cities.” The NCTS focused efforts in four states as a test; each state established the guiding structure of the Action Program in an attempt to gauge its effectiveness in different geographic areas of the United States. These states established a coordinating committee of officials, an annual State highway safety conference, and State-wide public support groups for traffic safety issues, all in an effort to gain further public support for traffic safety efforts.

Second, the NCTS created two guides for use by States and national organizations. The first, “Traffic Safety—Organizations with Field Services,” was a manual that established a mission, policy guidelines, and field contact information for a number of national organizations whose main objective was traffic safety. Finally, the NCTS provided for more guidance to the national organizations. Early in 1950, the NCTS provided organizations with confidential information gathered from the Inventory of Traffic Safety Activities of National Safety Council, the National Pedestrian Protection Contest of the American Automobile Association, the National Driver Education Awards Program of the Association of Casualty and Surety Companies, and the technical and Progress Reports of the President’s Highway Safety Conference. This information

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50 Traffic safety experts called upon by the President’s Highway Safety Conference were governors and state government officials, including heads of the public roads bureaus of states. These men were often either engineers or members of the military, as road building’s purpose was for efficient and cost effective transportation and national defense.  
52 The second, “Building Traffic Safety into Residential Developments,” was the results of a four-year study of traffic safety design for residential subdivisions conducted before the NCTS focused solely on public support for traffic safety initiatives.  
provided organizations with information on how to further aid States in traffic safety activities and garner local public support.

The NCTS considered national organizations working for traffic safety “public support organizations” and documents like the “Traffic Safety” manual and the organizations confidential information allowed those organizations who asked “We’d be glad to work for traffic safety, but what can we do?” with the answers they need to begin.54 All three efforts outlined by the NCTS were tied to a larger goal of a standardized and comprehensive national traffic safety network and emphasized the importance of public support and engagement with traffic safety activities, which would be the implicit underlying structure of traffic safety efforts in the 1950s under President Eisenhower.

**Transition to the President’s Committee for Traffic Safety**

President Eisenhower established the President’s Committee for Traffic Safety (PCTS) in 1954 to promote the Action Program’s use by state and local governments. The initial President’s Committee for Traffic Safety, also occasionally called the President’s Action Committee for Traffic Safety, was comprised of seven chairmen who participated in President Eisenhower’s White House Conference on Highway Safety in February 1954.55 This traffic safety work had already begun, as the Action Program was in use since its 1946 creation at Truman’s Highway Users Conference. The PCTS was also charged with the task of bolstering the efforts of community organizations in support of the programs and messages of the Action Program, and creating stronger networks of community-based support where the work of the Action Program could take place.

Chapter 1

After the first meeting of the President’s Committee for Traffic Safety in April 1954, Chairman Harlow H. Curtice\(^{56}\) wrote to 25 national organizations\(^{57}\) with traffic safety programs. In this letter, he further emphasized that traffic safety efforts should continue to occur within organizations that currently focused on traffic safety at the state and local level. The PCTS, he said, was there to “stimulate and coordinate efforts of organizations already active in the traffic-safety field.”\(^{58}\)

In general, the national organizations called for an intermediary between the President, Congress, and the Cabinet, and the State and Local governments making traffic decisions. They considered the job too large to be undertaken by only the PCTS, and instead wanted the task to be shared amongst the national organizations – a role the organizations already had prior to the establishment of the PCTS. The worry of many of the professional industry organizations was one of influence over the nature of traffic safety policy, and with the PCTS as intermediary between the federal and state governments, where would the interests and expertise of the organizations fit into this structure.

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\(^{56}\) While serving as chairman of the PCTS, Harlow H. Curtice was also President of General Motors (1953-1958).


\(^{58}\) Summary: Replies to H.H. Curtice Letter, June 14, 1954, “Replies to Curtice Letter, 6/14/54,” Box 155, Records of the President’s Committee for Traffic Safety, LBJ Library.
The PCTS also asked for further involvement from the organizations in the development of traffic safety programs. Harlow Curtice wrote to the leaders of the organizations, “two needs are paramount at the outset. They are 1. Technical counsel to State and community groups interested in creating or strengthening civic safety organizations. 2 Service to public information media, particularly small daily and weekly papers, which are anxious to help do the vital public information job.” Curtice, and the PCTS, wanted more civic engagement in traffic safety activities, spurred by national organization activities and promotions, in order to establish in communities the normalcy of safe traffic behaviors, laws, and standards.

The PCTS believed that the responsibility for traffic safety was best left to state and local government officials. No centralized regulatory body existed for traffic safety and transportation regulation in the 1950s, and the PCTS, through the programs of the Action Program, laid out a foundation for standardized traffic safety policy. However, state and local governments and some organizations worried that the PCTS and the federal government were exerting too much control over traffic safety infrastructure. In an address to the Public Officials Traffic Safety Conference in 1957, Governor William G. Stratton of Illinois stated, “the responsibility for traffic safety is ours because local and state governments are best fitted for the responsibility. I realize fully there are, nevertheless, those who are concerned lest the drift toward federal intervention...may mean some type of federal policing of the highways in the state.”

At the same conference, Connecticut Governor Abraham Ribicoff stated that, with state intervention, traffic crashes could be diminished, saving 20,000 lives per year. He called for all

Governors to fully back traffic safety efforts in their states, and for them to lead those efforts. To the conference-goers, he stated, “The governors must spearhead the highway safety campaigns in their states...Policemen, judges, motor vehicle commissioners, and other officials can’t function properly unless their Governor backs them up. If they know the Governor is on their side, they will do a first-rate job.”

At the local level in the 1950s, cities were inconsistently applying the standards of the Action Program. By the end of the 1950s, cities with population of 10,000 or more were only applying roughly half of the Action Program standards. The number one priority was to reduce traffic crashes and thus, fatalities. And, leaders recognized that citizens were not apathetic to the problem. Rather, citizens were aware and engaged in an attempt to understand traffic safety issues and how they could help reduce traffic fatalities in their communities.

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The Public Call for Safer Driving

Figure 2. Diagram depicting how the sections of the Action Program work together to provide the best services and reduce highway casualties. Implementing the Action Plan, “Action Program Summary Reviews,” Box 76, Records of the President’s Committee for Traffic Safety, LBJ Library.

For traffic safety experts in the 1950s, the approach to traffic safety was addressed as a problem to be tackled by the federal government first and for state and local governments to then adopt these policies uniformly. Without uniform adoption of standards in all states, they argued, fatality and injury rates would not diminish.

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In the 1950s, the Action Program placed responsibility for safety in the hands of the individual. The guidelines stated, "in highway safety, the individual is supreme. He can, by his act in the fraction of a second, either fulfill the mandate to be a safe highway user or nullify the effort, which has been expended to safeguard lives and property. There is no substitute for individual caution, and no excuse for individual carelessness." Pamplets published by governments and community organizations appealed to individuals by showing them examples of "bad" drivers and pedestrians. Not only did those people cause themselves harm, but they ultimately caused harm, and annoyance, to those around them. These publications focused on instilling the correct traffic behaviors in people of all age groups, though throughout the 1950s much of the discussion around traffic safety would focus on teenagers and young children.

State traffic safety officials also created and disseminated popular culture ephemera like comic books to teach children traffic rules and the consequences of not following them. In these, cartoon character depictions of children who did not cross the road at intersections were tragically hit by motor vehicles and killed. Others were reprimanded for unsafely playing in or near streets. These comics also used popular cartoon characters like Bugs Bunny to make important messages about safety and following parents' rules. Most importantly, they cautioned children, and even adults, that not following traffic laws could, and most likely would, result in fatality, and that it was the responsibility of individuals to keep out of the streets, keep vehicles maintained, and obey rules in order to keep everyone safe.

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By the late 1950s, focus on the individual shifted as safety experts reprioritized the larger traffic problem. Many public officials saw the traffic safety problem as consisting of two major aspects: crashes and congestion. According to experts and public officials, safety was inseparable from efficient highway transportation. As a result, they placed more emphasis on engineering road systems for safe and efficient travel. Control over the design of the highway system, traffic flow,

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and the general movement of people was better placed in the hands of experts like traffic engineers, road designers, and law enforcement.\textsuperscript{66} At the same time, though, traffic safety experts recognized the continued importance of citizen input and support for understanding traffic safety and its effects on individual communities and included public input in the traffic safety network development framework.

Government officials also recognized that public approval for traffic safety activities and programs was not the same as public support. Safety experts wanted to produce programs that appealed to drivers’ sense of themselves as “good drivers.” They acknowledged two factors in their reports, first that they believed citizens thought that they were good drivers and others, not themselves, were to blame for traffic problems and second that citizens thought traffic safety programs should focus on ‘the other fellow,’ because again, that person was the problem and needed to be taught how to follow the traffic rules.\textsuperscript{67} Citizens saw themselves as good drivers and thus, traffic safety experts in their own right.

But local and state government traffic safety experts bristled at being told how to control traffic by citizens or community groups, as J.W. Bethea, executive secretary of the President’s Committee for Traffic Safety, stated “no chief of police relishes being told where his squad cars must patrol, and no traffic engineer wants laymen locating new traffic signals.”\textsuperscript{68} Traffic safety programs had to strike a balance between appealing to citizens’ sense of inclusion in the program,

\textsuperscript{68} Bethea, “Organizing for Safety.”
while also appealing to the law enforcement and government officials who saw themselves as responsible for carrying out the program’s implementation.

The PCTS worked with many community groups in order to disseminate traffic safety information. Much of this material focused on how to follow the established traffic laws. Some went further and focused on how citizens could help their local police and courts through record keeping, sitting in on court trials, and talking with the police to ask if they need assistance with any traffic safety activities. Many of these groups were local, state, and national women’s organizations who took this information to their clubs and used it to create traffic safety programs that made sense for their communities and within their values. Some of these organization’s leaders were part of the PCTS Women’s Advisory Group, but many were merely part of the larger PCTS network of organizations dedicated to safety. Within these groups, they took the traffic safety information from the Action Program and modified it to meet the needs and goals of their groups and their communities, coming up with thousands of projects. In turn, their experiences influenced public policy on traffic safety issues at the state and federal level.

Post-war traffic safety experts focused on driver behavior and driver characteristics, attempting to find patterns of behavior that could be changed, more than they focused on the development of the road systems or changes to automobile design.\textsuperscript{69} Many of the efforts to address driver behavior were at the state level of government, as no federal government traffic safety authority existed. State and local governments attempted various types of programs, many guided

\textsuperscript{69} Traffic safety experts were concerned with the development of the highway system insofar as they were concerned with the layout of roadways, implementation and standardization of signs and signals, and motor vehicle laws governing how roads were used. In other words, their first concern was highway user safety.
by the principles in the Action Program, aimed at changing or deterring what they considered
dangerous or risky behavior while driving.

In one example, the state of Connecticut devised a new, specialized program in the late
1940s to target specific bad driving behaviors. They called their program the Point System.70 In an
article written by Jerome Beatty, a member of the Connecticut House of Representatives, he
documented his own experiences with and journalistic investigation of the new traffic safety
infrastructure system in Connecticut. In addition, he introduced the concept of the Point System,
driver reactions, and Connecticut statistics on problematic drivers. The Point System went beyond
warnings, tickets, and legal action, and required that drivers who acquired a certain number of
points meet for a conference with a member of the Connecticut Motor Vehicles department.71

What Beatty expected to find in his investigation was also the gender disparity present in
stereotypes of bad drivers at the time – that most women were incompetent, poor drivers. Beatty
notes that in call after call, and appointment after appointment, very few of those accumulating
enough points to be deemed “dangerous drivers” were women. Instead, the largest number were
young men. Beatty stated, “Rarely do they [women] get into enough trouble to be called for a
conference. Frequently, they write the Commissioner, thanking him for the warning letter and

70 At the time, Connecticut had one of the best overall driving safety records, due in part to their
traffic safety programs, like the Point System. The Points System ranged behaviors on a scale
from 1 to 10, with violations at 1 point ranging from a Police Warning or “Accident Involvement
Responsibility, no conviction” to 10 points for “Fatal accident involvement if held responsible”
or “Operating under the influence of liquor, etc.” In the middle range were violations like
violating the rules of the road 2 points, speeding at 3 points, reckless driving 4 or 6 points,
operating under suspension 7 points, and racing 8 points. At 3 points accumulated, drivers
received a warning letter from the Commissioner of Motor Vehicles, at 5 points they were
required to call for a conference with a Motor Vehicles representative. At 6 points, drivers were
required to call for a formal hearing. Jerome Beatty, “They Talk You Out of Wreckless Driving,”
American Magazine, 151 (January 1951).
71 Beatty, “They Talk You Out of Wreckless Driving.”
assuring him that they will never get another point. Maybe we men are wrong about women drivers!" 72

72 Beatty, “They Talk You Out of Wreckless Driving,” 84.
Figure 4. Quiz in magazine article noting behaviors that may lead to a crash. Note a discerning individual penciled in their own answers at some point. Beatty, “They Talk You Out of Wreckless Driving.”
Mobilizing Public Opinion for Safety

In 1954, President Eisenhower stated, in regard to traffic safety, “In a democracy, public opinion is everything. So if we can mobilize sufficient public opinion, this problem, like all those to which free men fall heir, can be solved.”\(^{73}\) Eisenhower’s proclamation on traffic safety was already a common theme amongst traffic safety organizations. In a 1950 report titled “It Can Be Done!,” the National Safety Council laid out a plan for community involvement in city and state traffic safety programs. In one section on public education, the NSC harkened to the lessons of the Furness article from 1935, using the example of a man and his son, “A business man witnessed a horrible highway collision, when two speeders, ignoring intersection warnings, crashed into each other. He brought his reckless, only son – a college boy – to the spot the next day, for an object lesson. To his amazement the object lesson had vanished.”\(^{74}\)

The example was specific yet generic, relatable to any parent who may see their teenage or college age child as someone who made poor choices while driving. Not only that, the passage eluded to other issues in traffic safety that required addressing before a fully effective program would emerge in every state. The drivers were both speeding, they were approaching an intersection, they did not heed warnings or, possibly, the signage or intersection layout was inappropriate. From the “business man’s” perspective, if all of these issues did not exist, the drivers would have gone through the intersection with ease.

The mini-lesson between father and son further stated similar arguments to Furness. The NCS noted that few drivers saw serious crashes and people did not visit the morgue of their own


volition. Few judges sent drivers to visit their crash victims at hospitals or morgues. And, news reporting on crashes was often “terse, dry, emotionless.” The lesson emphasized the moment of the traffic crash, highlighting that an underlying fundamental issue is in American perceptions of crashes. Crashes occur in a moment, but those moments are comprised of decisions and actions and are all tied together.

This lesson was also emblematic of the newly growing shift to change public perceptions of crashes. Instead of crashes as something unavoidable and out of the control of drivers and pedestrians, traffic safety program activities taught that crashes were caused by preventable actions and could be avoided through safe, diligent behavior. In the National Safety Council’s prevention activities guidelines, they stated “we must become prevention-minded rather than punishment-minded, because prevention removes the need for punishment – both man’s punishment and nature’s punishment, which is death or injury.”

Women’s Involvement in Traffic Safety

The postwar family became a private unit, where political, social, and other issues remained firmly in the realm of the home. The Cold war brought the front line of civil defense

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75 National Safety Council, It Can Be Done!, 12.
76 National Safety Council, It Can Be Done!, 3.
77 In her book, “Civil Defense Begins at Home: Militarization Meets Everyday Life in the Fifties,” Laura McEnany discusses the privatization and a-politicization of family life in the postwar period. In her example, this is cause by the threat of nuclear war and communism and a need for national security, and pushed families to address national security as an issue of personal responsibility. At the same time, traffic safety emerges as a major threat to the lives and wellbeing of Americans at home, with fatality numbers often compared to various wartime casualty numbers. Traffic safety activism takes on the same cause, advocating for personal responsibility against continuously growing fatality rates, road usage, and reliance on cars and highway infrastructure in the 1950s. Laura McEnany, Civil Defense Begins at Home: Militarization Meets Everyday Life (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Elaine Tyler May, Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era (New York: BasicBooks, 1988).
to the front yards of American families, contributing to preparedness and alertness for traffic safety concerns in the home and community, particularly through participating in community organizations and clubs. Public officials’ reliance on women’s organizations in particular followed a similar pattern of 1950s views of women’s roles in public life. Similar to traffic safety, national security officials, attempting to make the family the first line of defense on the Cold War home front, looked to women to influence their families. In her book, Civil Defense Begins at Home, Laura McEnany writes that one public official stated that only women could “make a greater contribution to developing informed public opinion and high morale in all segments of our national life.” This point of view pervades 1950s family life, particularly in the establishment of the suburban nuclear family and the roles of “homemaker” and “breadwinner” that stereotypically define the time period.

The Presidents Committee for Traffic Safety officially created a Women’s Advisory Group to help facilitate communication between clubs, community organizations, and governments working on traffic safety issues. In a November 1957 letter, Mrs. Raymond Sayre wrote to a number of prominent women community leaders, asking them to join the Women’s Advisory Group of the President’s Committee for Traffic Safety. The group was founded in 1954 to encourage women’s organizations to take a more active role in traffic safety issues and also provide a way for groups to informally communicate ideas and act as a clearinghouse of women’s organization activities. Mrs. Sayre led the Advisory Group and was an active and important member of the Presidents Committee for Traffic Safety, which otherwise consisted of industry men like GM President Harlowe Curtice and newspaper heir William Randolph Hearst. In 1960,

78 May, Homeward Bound.
79 McEnany, Civil Defense Begins at Home, 97.
80 May, Homeward Bound.
when Mrs. Sayre was honored by the Warren County Iowa Farm Bureau, T.S. Peterson, President of Standard Oil and PCTS member, wrote to her, “Your many achievements and your dedication to the work of the great women’s organizations and programs of our country are so well known as to need no embellishment on my part. I should like to say, however, that you perhaps more than any of us have contributed to what progress we have been able to make in the field of traffic safety and in your support of the President’s Committee.”

The Reports of the Action Program committees emphasized the importance of community institutions and organizations for understanding traffic safety issues and the implications they have for communities and individuals, particularly emphasizing the moral aspects of traffic safety that resemble the missions of the organizations. “Universal courtesy and good sportsmanship in traffic, and simple manifestations of the spirit of brotherhood, could go far toward eliminating needless accidents. Certainly, there are moral issues involved in the wanton carelessness which has life-or-death consequences for others.”

In the late 1940s, Shell Oil Company’s Women’s Travel Director in the Shell Touring Service debuted its new department head and face of the bureau, Carol Lane. As women’s travel director, Carol Lane’s duties were spread wide, including delivering speeches to Shell Oil personnel and women’s clubs interested in the women’s issues of the company, to be Shell’s official representative when “a Shell woman” was needed, to be aware of new trends in travel and to subsequently keep press and radio interviews up to date with this information, and to report

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81 Letter to Mrs. Sayre, “Mrs. Raymond Sayre,” Box 136, Records of the President’s Committee for Traffic Safety, LBJ Library.
82 The President’s Highway Safety Conference, Report of Committee on Public Information, 4.
trends in women’s club activities back to Shell. Carol Lane was sought out by radio programs, newspapers, and women’s clubs daily for appearances and interviews and kept a very busy schedule, also fitting in her normal travel duties to Shell to create women-focused travel programs, documents, and tips. However, Carol Lane was not a real person.

Who was Carol Lane? She was a representation created by Shell to appeal to the women of America. Though outwardly known as Carol Lane, in the late 1940s and 1950s, the namesake was taken over by three different women. Through Carol Iverson, Carol Lane became a household name, appearing in magazines, news articles, radio spots, and making women’s club meeting appearances across the country on an almost daily basis. Though Shell stated they were providing the “fifty million adult women in America” with a service they couldn’t get elsewhere – namely women-focused travel advice – their ultimate goal was to carve out a larger, more faithful customer base that would purchase Shell products over their competition.

Shell Oil marketed the persona of Carol Lane as the leading authority on women’s travel in the United States. Behind the scenes in the Women’s Travel Bureau working to help her were a team of other women who created customized maps for travelers and assembled pamphlets and information on state’s liquor and motor vehicle laws to send along to interested travelers. The Touring Service called these women “Construction Experts,” they kept in constant contact with state and local road commissions, updating their information and maps with the most recent information on highway construction, road closures, detours, and repairs. In 1949 alone, the Shell

83 Letter from Carol Lane to H.L. Curtis, G.G. Biggar, and R.G. Pearson, Work Involved in Women’s Activities of Public Relations, Nov. 3, 1948, “Correspondence, Memos, Reports,” Box 12, MC572 Ackerman, Schlesinger Library.
84 Letter from Assistant to the President – Public Relations to All Vice Presidents, Sept. 6, 1949, “Shell – Memos, Engagement Forms, 1949-1950,” Box 12, MC572 Ackerman, Schlesinger Library.
Women’s Touring Bureau routed over 100,000 American families with their specialized travel services.\textsuperscript{85} Carol Lane, as the female face of Shell Oil, represented corporate safety for women in the postwar era of expansive driving growth, of which women contributed to heavily and throughout the 1950s Shell worked with governments and community organizations on traffic safety issues.\textsuperscript{86}

At the same time, national, state, and local organizations for women, like the National Home Demonstration Council and General Federation of Women’s Clubs, looked to women to create safe environments in their homes and communities. These organizations created idealized images of mothers and homemakers, and inserted them into situations that tested their character and commitment to creating safe, harmonious homes and communities. These images were disseminated through pamphlets.

In one pamphlet from the National Home Demonstration Council (NHDC), titled “Safety Begins at Home,” a young mother is in her home, when she realizes the important role she plays in teaching safety to her family. The pamphlet followed the story of “Jane Jackson,” who is one day at home, ironing and reading a magazine when suddenly she comes to an article titled “Accidents on the highway are caused in the home.”\textsuperscript{87} This caused her to stop and consider her responsibility as a mother to her family, friends, and community and her role as shaper of moral points of view.

\textsuperscript{85} Background Material on Miss Caroline Iverson, “Correspondence, Memos, Reports,” Box, 14, MC572 Ackerman, Schlesinger Library.
\textsuperscript{86} Shell Oil Company also sponsored the Carol Lane Safety Awards, which recognized the achievements of individual women and women’s groups working to create safer communities. Carol Lane Awards, “Correspondence, Memos, Reports,” Box 12, MC572 Ackerman, Schlesinger Library.
\textsuperscript{87} Highway Safety Begins at Home, “1953-1955, Pamphlets on Traffic Safety and Alfred P. Sloan Awards for Highway Safety,” Box 4, G. Donald Kennedy Papers, Bentley Historical Library.
In Jane’s story, she recalled crashes of which she has personal knowledge, realizing they all traced their origins to the home. She realized that not only did the home affect driving behavior, but highway crashes affected family life. For instance, when a family lost a father, where would their income come from? If both parents were killed, what would happen to the children? Her concern turned into the realization that homemakers – mothers – had a responsibility in traffic safety and in teaching their families and communities the tools they needed to prevent traffic crashes.88

The pamphlet continued Jane’s thought process and asked the reader multiple questions about home life and traffic safety. These questions guided the reader, most likely also a mother, to look more closely at the ways in which they interacted with their family, their automobile, and the larger transportation network, including questions on emotional temperament and flouting traffic laws.89

But the Jane Jacksons of women’s club literature represented middle-class white mothers in the 1950s. The women for whom the pamphlets were written were grappling with a new postwar world and traffic safety became one of their major concerns. Community groups and their members used their group’s morals and values to approach traffic safety in various ways. In the National


89 Some of the questions included: Am I always considerate of the other person, or do I feel I must assert my own rights? Do I drive on my own side of the road, or do I take half the middle?; What am I doing to teach my children to respect the rights of others? To be courteous at all times?; Do I lose my temper and do things rashly, and too hastily for safety?; Am I guided largely by emotions? Or by logic and reason?; Do I keep equipment in good repair? Do I teach my family to handle equipment safely, and keep it in good repair?; Do I boast about ‘getting by’ a violation of the law? Highway Safety Begins at Home, “1953-1955, Pamphlets on Traffic Safety and Alfred P. Sloan Awards for Highway Safety,” Box 4, G. Donald Kennedy Papers, Bentley Historical Library.
Home Demonstration Council example of Jane Jackson, the home is the place wherein good safety practices are taught and “the home is a center from which radiate the attitudes, the habits, and the traits of human character which will determine the fate of future travelers.”90 The pamphlet, and others, used stories of women homemakers and mothers to warn readers about the dangers of traffic safety and unbalanced home environments – and encourage them to get involved in traffic safety efforts in their communities.

The National Home Demonstration Council took the traffic safety messages disseminated by the federal government through the Action Program and modified them to make them more approachable to their demographic. Their messages often focused on the home as the central location emphasis of traffic safety dissemination and education. Women’s community organizations saw the home as the place where traffic safety education should be taught because of the home’s link to moral and spiritual values. But, not only that, their example and others like it, made traffic safety both approachable and real, and also create a sense of responsibility for the pamphlet reader. In the NHDC story, Jane worried about her family’s safety, but that extended even further to her friends and neighbors in her community. Associating traffic safety with larger domestic concerns allowed people to associate the post-World War II world of traffic safety – whether it was law, education, or design – with the familiarity of their everyday lives.

After the 1954 White House Conference on Highway Safety, the President’s Committee on Traffic Safety created the Women’s Advisory Group to “encourage women’s organizations to take a more active role in the traffic-safety effort.”91 The Women’s Advisory Group was comprised

91 Women’s Advisory Group of the President’s Committee for Traffic Safety, “Mrs. Raymond Sayre” Box 136, Records of the President’s Committee for Traffic Safety, LBJ Library.
of women from community organizations across the United States who wished to address issues of traffic safety in their communities. Some of these groups were Parent-Teacher Associations, the National Federation of Business and Professional Women’s Clubs, the General Federation of Women’s Clubs, the National Home Demonstration Council, and religious organizations. Women in these organizations took up traffic safety themes in their communities, like driver education in schools, pedestrian safety, and licensing.

Some women working for the traffic safety cause saw it as their moral duty as women to support the official Traffic Safety Program of the United States. Tied to their role as domestic space keepers, prevailing attitudes in the 1950s saw women’s unique role in traffic safety as one of cultivating morality and spirituality in traffic safety. In a report on the 1957 Arkansas Traffic Safety Seminar, Mrs. Robert Bush, Safety Chairman to the Arkansas Congress of Parents and Teachers, wrote:

The Women’s Committee of the President’s Committee for Traffic Safety, offered to the President, in the name of the women of the country, their promise of support of the Traffic Safety Program. The women of our country have a special responsibility and opportunity as creators of attitudes in the home to develop proper attitudes for traffic safety based on moral and spiritual values. 92

Women and parents saw their goal as one of making their communities safer through traffic safety education and local organizational safety committees. 93

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93 Traffic safety discourse is often juxtaposed against gun safety discourse, often to note that American society would allow one behavior but not the other. "Parents wouldn't think of placing in the hands of a teen-ager a high-powered rifle without first teaching him proper respect and use of the rifle, yet many a teen-ager is placed behind the wheel of a high-powered automobile without first getting proper driver-training lessons and a course in traffic safety." Report of Arkansas Congress Safety Chairman – Mrs. Robert E. Bush, Traffic Safety Seminar, May 6-8, 1957, “Mrs. Raymond Sayre,” Box 136, Records of the President’s Committee for Traffic Safety, LBJ Library.
Women were seen as cultivators of proper American citizens. If the postwar ideal stressed the division of labor between men and women and again relegated women to the domestic sphere, women’s organizations and community work expanded their role as domestic caregivers to spaces outside of the home. They were the caregivers of their communities and integral to policy making and integration at that level.

To create safer communities and safe situations for their families, women’s clubs focused on standardizing themes in traffic safety. The General Federation of Women’s Clubs published a pamphlet emphasizing the importance of better licensing procedures. They tied driver licensing, and thus better driving performance, to protecting children’s futures and limiting the danger of community streets. Women’s organizations saw basic infrastructural problems like licensing to be excellent places from which to attack the larger traffic safety problem as a whole. They believed that by standardizing and regulating what they considered the roots of traffic safety, the entire infrastructure would become safer. And, if drivers did not follow the rules, then they should be punished.

To decide which safety areas to tackle, women’s organizations distinguished between driving as a privilege granted by the state and a legal right. Though vehicle codes and laws existed, lax and uneven police enforcement meant drivers had no reason to fear retribution for breaking laws unless they killed or severely injured a person. Some drivers insisted that “driving a car is a basic right which cannot be revoked without abusing the liberties of all citizens.”

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94 Meyerowitz, “Women and Gender in Postwar America.”
drivers, they saw driving as a freedom for all, to do when they wished and how they wished and where they wished.  

**Conclusion**

By the early 1960s, the Action Program and traffic safety activities reflected the shift away from individual responsibility in traffic safety. At that point, the official position shifted away from individuals and organizations and to officials, but the focus remained on changing behavior and engineering good roads. The Action Program stated, “Traffic safety is primarily the responsibility of public officials: Federal, State, county, and city. Their duty is to determine needs and to carry out sound accident prevention programs.” The role of the individual became one of support, and the best way to speak up was through community organizations.

Obtaining public support and acceptance for traffic safety programs had always been a priority, but now the implication was that without this public understanding, traffic safety programs could not and would not be effective. Americans had the responsibility to understand these programs through the organizations of which they were members, a method that had proliferated and worked in the 1950s. Through community work, citizens could join forces to

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96 These drivers also proved difficult to convict under traffic safety laws and through moral judgment at the time. In the General Federation of Women’s Clubs “Passport to Safety” pamphlet, they noted, “So firmly based in the viewpoint that driving is a God-given right that it is difficult to remove from the highway those who have, by repeated violations or accidents, proven their unfitness. Driving today are many who operate a vehicle with blatant disregard of traffic laws or the safety of others. It is almost certain they will kill or cripple innocent people tomorrow. Yet, under present licensing systems, we cannot stop them until they have claimed their victims.” Passport to Safety: A Guide for Improving Driver Performance Through Better Licensing Procedures, “Women – 1959,” Box 136, Records of the President’s Committee for Traffic Safety, LBJ Library.

support the traffic safety policy efforts of government agencies. By creating a place for them to exist in the official discourse, community groups then became the way in which the safety experts and the citizens communicated their ideas, questions, and concerns about traffic safety policy and ultimately largely contributed to traffic safety knowledge creation and distribution in the 1950s and into the early 1960s, before public-minded figures like Ralph Nader emerged to criticize the lack of automotive safety in the equation.

Institutional Traffic Safety Development in the 1960s

On January 9, 1965 at 5:45 A.M., 19-year-old Leslie Roland Bickle crossed a foggy railroad in Sherwood, Oregon in his car, where he was struck by a freight train and killed instantly. Because of the foggy conditions, the train engineer and crew did not realize they’d struck the car, and Bickle died at the scene.\(^99\) As the crossing had no guards or flashing lights, and the fog was heavy, Bickle relied on timing and luck to get across safely. This train, however, was unscheduled and Bickle had no opportunity to react as the train came through just as he was crossing the unmarked train tracks in his car.\(^100\)

19-year-old Susan Jessup died in October 1963 as a speeding driver crossed the center divider on the highway in Burlingame, California, crashing head-on with her car and killing her instantly.\(^101\) Neither Susan nor Leslie had the chance to react to their situations. But what is similar to these two cases are the reactions of their parents.

Leslie’s mother, Mrs. W.E. Campbell, wrote to President Johnson on January 19, 1965 to discuss her son’s death and how to stop deaths like that from continuing to happen. She placed the blame for his crash in the hands of all Americans, and stated that the true cause of his death was neglect from lack of proper safety warnings to help drivers stop in time and apathy on the part of all Americans to fight for mandatory crossing warnings. She said, “it’s bad enough to loose[sic] our son but it will be even worse if nothing is done to stop all this slaughter.”\(^102\) Campbell called for flashing light signals at all railroad crossings to signal to drivers that a train was approaching

\(^99\) Article, Sherwood Youth Dies in Crash, Ex ME 1-3, WHCF, Box 84, LBJ Library.
\(^100\) Letter, Mrs. W. E. Campbell to the President, 1/19/67, Ex ME 1-3, WHCF, Box 84, LBJ Library.
\(^101\) Article, Safe Driving Crusade ... Memorial to Susan, Ex SA 2, WHCF, Box 3, LBJ Library.
\(^102\) Letter, Mrs. W. E. Campbell to the President, 1/19/67, Ex ME 1-3, WHCF, Box 84, LBJ Library.
and to keep more drivers and pedestrians alive. If they had already existed, "we may have our own son because he'd have seen a train was crossing. It was unscheduled freight. But he'd have seen the light and had a chance."  

Campbell called for a federal law requiring flashing lights at railroad crossings. She called upon President Johnson to "be a President of all the people," a statement he previously publicly made, and take a public stand against traffic deaths. She looked to the federal government for leadership on traffic safety and to end the continually rising fatality rates.

Charles Jessup, Susan’s father, began a citizens’ movement for traffic safety as a memorial for his daughter. His program, called Alert Crusade, encouraged drivers to be alert and aware of not only their surroundings but of themselves and their automobiles. Jessup, like other citizens concerned with traffic safety issues, campaigned for greater awareness of automobiles as deadly weapons that came with consequences from misuses, like violating traffic laws and being irresponsible drivers. Through Alert Crusade, Jessup self-published bulletins for members with tips on contributing to creating a safer traffic network and reminders that while traffic deaths seemed to happen to someone else, they could easily happen to you or someone you loved.

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103 Letter, Mrs. W. E. Campbell to the President, 1/19/67, Ex ME 1-3, WHCF, Box 84, LBJ Library.

104 In the official response from Douglass Cater, Special Assistant to the President, to Mrs. W. E. Campbell, he stated that highway safety was integral to the President’s new highway program, but emphasized her point that drivers had responsibility to prevent crashes whenever possible. He also mentioned to her the work already being done to mark railroad crossings with lights and signs, but that the massive number of them throughout the United States meant that there was still much work to be done to fully address the issue. Letter, Douglass Cater to Mrs. W. E. Campbell, Ex SA 2, WHCF, Box 3, LBJ Library.

105 In one bulletin from early 1964, Jessup correlated highway deaths to gun deaths and the need for those concerned to work together on both issues.

106 Article, Safe Driving Crusade ... Memorial to Susan, Ex SA 2, WHCF, Box 3, LBJ Library.
Charles Jessup and Mrs. W.E. Campbell were two of many parents who wrote to the President and to other federal government officials. Parents, both those who lost loved ones in traffic crashes and those who did not, were actively engaged in traffic safety concerns at the behest of individuals like Jessup and Campbell. They voiced their concern to the federal government and also worked individually to find solutions to highway traffic fatalities, whether they were due to driver behavior or infrastructure design.

By the 1960s, the “triumphal era” of highway and transportation growth that occurred in the postwar period turned into backlash against the focus on highway building and traffic – what many considered to be “anti-environmental, anti-urban, and racist” issues in transportation.107 The general public awareness of traffic safety issues that emerged though large-scale individual community efforts, like those by Campbell and Jessup, and state government planning transitioned into indictments of the auto industry and traffic safety experts who, according to consumer advocates like Ralph Nader, colluded with manufacturers to create subpar, defective products and place blame for crashes solely in the hands of users. The publication of Ralph Nader’s Unsafe at Any Speed, with its case study on the perceived defects in General Motor’s Chevy Corvair, and other books condemning the auto industry like Jeffrey O’Connell and Arthur Myer’s Safety Last: An Indictment of the Auto Industry, a general swell of contempt for styling concerns over safety issues began to foment among American consumers and the driving public over the relationship between the federal government and the auto industry.108

107 Rose, “Reframing American Highway Politics.”
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Government and Industry: Working Together?

While Campbell and Jessup campaigned the federal government for infrastructure improvements and awareness of traffic safety dangers, the overall structure of traffic safety and transportation was changing on a much larger scale. President Lyndon Johnson made traffic safety concerns an integral part of his proposed federal highway program, stating publicly that he had encouraged his colleagues in the Senate to take action on traffic safety 10 years prior.\(^{109}\) Johnson continued to advocate for heavy state involvement, though with national-level safety standards. To the Governor’s Subcommittee on Traffic Safety, he drew the distinctions between what states could do and what the federal government could do, and how together they could reduce traffic fatalities to zero.\(^{110}\)

This structural shift in transportation resulted in the creation of the Department of Transportation, with a dedicated safety agency within it, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Congress also passed the National Traffic and the Motor Vehicle Safety Act of 1966 and Highway Safety Act of 1966, both which required the federal government to set regulatory standards on motor vehicle design and state-controlled infrastructure, respectively.\(^{111}\) Both Acts helped shift the focus of traffic safety from one of driver behavior to the relationship


\(^{110}\) In this speech, Johnson said to the governors, “You have the practical responsibility. You — not the federal government — license the drivers. You — not the federal government — inspect the vehicles. Your state troopers enforce the traffic laws. What you don’t have are the resources necessary to meet all of your responsibilities. That is what we are trying to get for you here in Washington.” Remarks of the President to the Governor’s Subcommittee on Traffic Safety, June 3, 1966, “Traffic Safety – Labor Day Statement.” Office Files of William R. Sparks, Box 21, LBJ Library.

between car and driver, with even more emphasis on the engineering of the car. The focus on driver behavior still existed, but now there was a growing emphasis on engineering safety features into new car design and standardizing highway infrastructure across state lines. Subsequently, the auto industry also went from relatively unregulated for safety to heavily regulated in a short time period. Now, a wide variety of actors – federal government agencies, insurance companies, and consumer groups – all had a say in decisions that were previously made only by those within the auto industry.

The auto industry continued its involvement with traffic safety issues, despite growing concern from the public and political leaders that their product contributed to the traffic safety problem. In 1965, Secretary of Commerce John Connor wrote to the President regarding meetings held with representatives from the Automobile Manufacturers Association, General Motors, and Ford over traffic safety concerns and the development of an industry-government coordinated highway safety program. From these meetings, Under Secretary of Commerce for Transportation Alan Boyd formed an Interdepartmental Highway Safety Task Force and began reviewing the federal government’s traffic safety efforts in order to create a “fully coordinated

112 This also included an industry-created committee, the Auto Industries Highway Safety Committee, which was composed of representatives from Ford Motor Company, Firestone Tire and Rubber Company, the National Automobile Dealers Association, and National Tire Dealers & Retreaders Association. The members were also often executives or involved with governmental affairs, and wished to work with the federal government on proposed federal-level transportation issues. Letter, John McKee to Bill Moyers, 7/31/64, Ex SA 2, WHCF, Box 3, LBJ Library.

113 Prior to the Department of Transportation, transportation-related activities at the federal government level were dispersed amongst multiple federal agencies, with many under the Department of Commerce.

114 Governmental organizations that were tasked to participate included the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, the Department of Defense, the General Services Administration, the Bureau of Public Roads, the Bureau of Standards, and, additionally, States, motor vehicle administrators, police, the National Safety Council.
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safety program."115

To continue the cooperative momentum, Boyd and members of the task force planned a meeting with executives from the major auto manufacturers to explain the current federal-level traffic safety programs and for task force members to visit each manufacturer. In the latter visits, task force members determined what each company was currently doing in terms of engineering, design, and research in safety, noting to keep the efforts of the task force secret until the program gained solid footing or outright failed, mostly because of the sensitive nature of safety to auto manufacturers.116

Creating a Department of Transportation

In 1964, President Johnson commissioned an outside task force on transportation policy, chaired by George W. Hilton.117 In the cover letter to the report, Hilton stated that the task force found that American transportation was, to date, deficient in two major areas. First, in rate regulation and restriction on competition for domestic and foreign manufacturers. And the second, on transportation investments that have not been "wholly in accord with the public interest."118

The latter point mostly referenced the static nature of the current transportation industry and the

115 Letter, Secretary of Commerce John T. Connor to the President, 7/21/65, Ex SA 2, WHCF, Box 1, LBJ Library.
116 Letter, Secretary of Commerce John T. Connor to the President, 7/21/65, Ex SA 2, WHCF, Box 1, LBJ Library.
117 In her article “Presidential Task Force Operation during the Johnson Administration,” archivist Nancy Kegan Smith discusses President Johnson’s use of confidential task forces to help formulate policy for his Great Society programs. The 1964 Task Force on Transportation Policy, one of the first task forces commissioned under Johnson, was an outside task force consisting of members from outside government whose recommendations would contribute to transportation policy and finally the eventual creation of the Department of Transportation as a separate entity from the Department of Commerce. Unlike the work of commissions, including the PCTS, task forces were to be confidential and not meant to garner public opinion. Nancy Kegan Smith, “Presidential Task Force Operation during the Johnson Administration,” Presidential Studies Quarterly 15, no. 2 (1985).
118 1964 Outside Task Force on Transportation, Task Force Reports, Box 2, LBJ Library.
need for a Department of Transportation and transportation policy to be dynamic and constantly evolving. Similar to the main point of the Action Program, the Hilton Task Force also noted that total commitment to a new transportation program must happen or it will not succeed. Most of the Hilton task force recommendations focused on economic regulatory structure; however, they recognized the general themes in traffic safety and automotive transportation which dominated the 1950s and incorporated those thoughts into their report, along with a relaxed view on regulations for the automotive industry.119

A second task force, headed by Don K. Price from Harvard and comprised mostly of academics, suggested reorganizing the executive branch, ultimately creating a place for Transportation.120 The Price Task Force on Government Reorganization also laid out the rationale for and units within their proposed Department of Transportation. Because of transportation’s spread across various agencies, the organizational and administrative nightmare of current transportation planning was ineffective, and the Department of Commerce, where most of the transportation planning was done, had done little to rectify the situation. The Price report suggested creating a separate Transportation department to handle non-economic or regulatory transportation functions. Instead, this proposed Department would aid other programs in integrating economic and regulatory functions into transportation. Overall, the goal of a Department of Transportation, based on this report, would be to define federal planning for transportation initiatives and help “provide a way for the president to formulate national transportation policies.”121

119 1964 Outside Task Force on Transportation, Task Force Reports, Box 2, LBJ Library.
120 This task force operated under the Bureau of the Budget and was instructed to “study the structure of the executive branch without regard to the political aspects of organization;” only top officials knew of the results of the report in the end. Emmette S. Redford and Marlan Blisssett, Organizing the Executive Branch: The Johnson Presidency (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 47.
121 Redford and Blisssett, Organizing the Executive Branch, 47.
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The two task forces on Transportation ultimately led nowhere. However, the foundations of their work were later used in the formation of the Department of Transportation in 1966, including combining various transportation interests, along with investment policies and providing the president with authority to act in national transportation matters.\textsuperscript{122} Consolidating the power of various transportation regimes also involved breaking up the highway superpower that developed in the 1950s and was led by state and federal road building agencies.\textsuperscript{123} In the new DOT, the power of the engineer and auto industry in transportation matters would slowly be replaced by the power of the politician and interest groups, also helping to shift the traffic safety focus away from driver behavior to an integrated focus on the relationship between driver and car.

When the Bill to create a Department of Transportation\textsuperscript{124} was drafted, President Johnson pushed it to both Houses of Congress, urging it to pass, stating it would “contribute greatly to the public safety and convenience.” Johnson considered transportation to be one of the most important systems in America and also one of its greatest paradoxes. The American transportation system in the 1960s was considered “the largest and best developed system in the world,” however it was “wasteful of lives and resources and inadequate even for the present generation.”\textsuperscript{125}

The duties laid out for the new Department included promoting safety programs, research and development, and corporate investment in new safety technologies without changing the fundamental structure of the Interstate Commerce Commission, where many of the previous safety

\textsuperscript{122} Redford and Blissett, \textit{Organizing the Executive Branch}, 47.
\textsuperscript{123} Rose, “Reframing American Highway Politics.”
\textsuperscript{124} This was not the first time the creation of a Department of Transportation was proposed in the federal government. In one form or another, a DOT was under consideration 17 times previously in the 92 years prior to the introduction of this bill in April 1966. The first Secretary of Transportation was Alan S. Boyd, former Under Secretary of Commerce, who held the office from 1967-1969.
\textsuperscript{125} Administrative History of the Department of Transportation, Vol. III, p. 31, Box 6, LBJ Library.
efforts were monetarily based. Johnson was concerned with safety issues and reducing the high fatality rates from highway deaths each year. By the mid-1960s, highway fatalities were on average 50,000 per year. He believed that a dedicated safety program housed in a Department of Transportation would help slow fatality rates.\textsuperscript{126}

During the House discussions on whether to create the new DOT, statements made in favor of the new department reasoned that no further progress toward reduction of fatalities would occur without a centralized, rational planning effort. In his testimony before the House Committee on Government Operations, Charles Schultze, Director of the Bureau of the Budget, noted that safety issues were becoming more prevalent in the 1960s, and that “recent technological and social changes had made the inter-relationships within the system even more important.”\textsuperscript{127}

In the end, the Department of Transportation’s final organizational structure included thirty-one transportation programs\textsuperscript{128} that previously had operated independently or semi-independently. These programs existed across seven agencies in the federal government and now operated under the umbrella of a “department of transportation” that managed to successfully preserve the original intent of these programs, many of which were long-standing. Much of the DOT’s operating budget in the first year was dedicated to Federal Highway Administration, approximately 5 million of their 6.6 million dollar budget. Within this, the focus was on the federal government’s role in “safety and promotional activities in transportation.”\textsuperscript{129}

\textsuperscript{126} Administrative History of the Department of Transportation, Vol. III, p. 31, Box 6, LBJ Library.
\textsuperscript{127} Administrative History of the Department of Transportation, Vol. III, p. 56, Box 6, LBJ Library.
\textsuperscript{128} Twenty-six additional agencies or parts of agencies with transportation-related functions were not included in the final Department of Transportation. Administrative History of the Department of Transportation, Vol. III, p. 56, Box 6, LBJ Library.
\textsuperscript{129} Richard W. Barsness, “The Department of Transportation: Concept and Structure,” The Western Political Quarterly 23, no. 3 (1970).
Incorporating the PCTS and NHTSA into the new DOT

With the creation of the DOT, and a safety agency within it, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), came federal regulatory efforts in traffic safety and increased scrutiny of the relationship between driver, car, and road infrastructure. The new federal law on traffic safety, the National Traffic and the Motor Vehicle Safety Act (MVSA) of 1966, required federal regulation of the automobile and road infrastructure and programs to better control driver behavior. The Traffic Safety Act also officially defined motor vehicle safety as “performance of motor vehicles or motor vehicle equipment in such a manner that the public is protected against unreasonable risk of (1) highway accidents occurring as a result of the design of motor vehicles and (2) death, injury or property damage occurring when highway accidents do occur.”

Despite the immense loss of life associated with traffic crashes, and the amount of property damage, injury, and environmental issues attributed to cars, governmental programs struggled to mobilize public opinion and change national behavior.

The MVSA established safety standards for new cars starting with the 1968 model year. When the new 1968 models were introduced in the fall of 1967, not only were they styled differently than in previous years, but they offered 17 federally-mandated safety features. These features were based on existing technologies that the auto industry currently used in high end

\[\begin{align*}
130 & \text{NHTSA changed its official name in 1970 and was first initially known as the National Highway Safety Board} \\
132 & \text{Prior to this official definition, traffic safety or motor vehicle safety referred heavily to reliability of all factors in the traffic safety system. To traffic safety experts in the interwar period, the driver was the most unreliable part of the equation and much emphasis was placed on creating and maintaining reliable human behavior.} \\
\end{align*}\]
models only and offered as extras in lower-end models. After the regulations were in place, all models were required to have the mandated safety features, which included seat belts, padded visors and dash boards, recessed control and instrument knobs, safety door latches and hinges, impact-absorbing steering columns, dual braking systems, standard bumper heights, and glare reduction surfaces. The initial regulations did not require new safety technologies from the auto industry yet, just a uniform extension of existing safety features across all vehicle lines.
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Almost five decades ago, Walter P. Chrysler’s dream of a safe, attractive, comfortable ‘engineered’ car came true. In January 1924, the Chrysler Six made its debut in the lobby of the Commodore Hotel. The nearby New York Automobile Show had refused space for this revolutionary model featuring a six-cylinder high-compression engine with a seven-bearing crankshaft and four-wheel hydraulic brakes. All were features never before offered in a medium-priced car.

Ever since that 68-horsepower beauty set a first-year sales record, Chrysler engineers have continued to build our reputation for tough, safety-engineered cars. And they have done beautifully by power, performance, luxury, economy, handling and styling, too.

Chrysler’s safety features come from a long line of engineering greats!

1924—High-compression, high-speed engine + Oil filter with replaceable element + Carburetor air cleaner + All-steel closed body (1927 Dodge)
1925—Enclosed rubber engine mountings
1926—Rubber spring shackles
1931—“Floating power” engine mountings
1934—Balanced weight distribution + Body providing majority of structural strength + Ride stabilizer bar
1937—Built-in defroster vents + Fully insulated rubber body mountings + Safety padding on back of front seat
1940—Two leading shoe front wheel brakes
1941—Safety rim wheels
1949—Self-energizing hydraulic disc brake + Bonded brake linings + Safety cushion dash
1951—Full-time power steering + Forced air cooled brakes
1957—Rearward-facing third seat on station wagon
1958—Automatic car speed warning and control
1959—Swivel front seats + Automatic dimming electronic rearview mirror
1960—Alternating current generator (standard equipment) + Electro-luminescent instrument panel lighting
1963—Airtfoil windshield wiper blade
1965—Master warning light for engine temperature, fuel and oil systems
1966—Chrysler Cleaner Air System for exhaust emission control by engine modifications + Safety front shoulder harnesses + Safety inside door release lever
1968—Hood mounted turn signal indicator

Some of the safety features standard on every 1970 Chrysler

- Electric windshield wipers / speed
- Windshield wipers
- Windshield defroster / deicer
- Vinyl clad, day / night, inside rearview mirror on double-ball-joint mount
- Left, outside rearview mirror
- Dual braking system with warning light
- Automatic brake adjusters
- Turn signals
- Backup lights
- Side reflectors
- Hazard warning flasher system
- Automatic reset airbag brake
- Variable-intensity instrument lights
- Safety Rim wheels
- Extended glare reduction surfaces
- Primary and secondary hood latch system
- Wide sweep windshield wipers

Figure 5. 1970 Chrysler Motors ad from Life Magazine noting the safety features implemented over the life of the company, well before the regulatory infrastructure put in place by the formation of the DOT and NHTSA. Life Magazine, March 20, 1970, 56.
However, some Americans were concerned about the new federal agency and the role it would play in requiring states to have mandatory safety regulations. One citizen, concerned with the confusing nature of differing state vehicle and traffic codes, suggested a standardized set of rules for each state to follow. Government overreach concerned him, though, as creating a new federal agency also meant that some state’s rights could be diminished. He wrote to the President, “Concerned with automobile traffic safety, and looking at various state traffic codes, I find several differences in these state codes which tend to add confusion. I am definitely not in favor of the Federal Government controlling states’ rights. However, on a national issue, the size of traffic safety, I urge you to investigate the possibility of establishing a United States traffic code, one which could be taught in our secondary schools, one which could assure an American motorist of traveling from New York to California without stopping at each border to read that particular state’s traffic code.”

After the DOT and NHTSA took on federal-related traffic safety issues, the President’s Committee on Traffic Safety still existed but mostly promoted the Action Program, particularly in the mid-1960s. Throughout the creation of the DOT, the PCTS went through a transition,

134 Others, however, were happy to see changes to automobile design implemented – including young people. In May 1966, 10-year-old Peter Huke wrote to President Johnson with his plan for a safer car interior. He stated that he’d heard a lot of news about safer cars and had a suggestion for automobile design that would help reduce injury and hopefully save lives. His suggestion said, “Suppose someone is driving a car and all of a sudden the car flips over, and the car is on fire. Now this someone has fastened its seat belt before it started to drive the car. And the person who’s in the car wants to get out before he’s burned. Well you know since the car is up sidedown[sic] then the person is upsidedown[sic]. So the only way to get out is to unfasten the seat belt then he falls down onto the hard roof. If car roofs are cushioned, then the person would not have to split his head.” Letter, Peter Huke to the President, 5/15/66, “Letters Answered for White House 2 of 2,” Box 76, Records of the President’s Committee for Traffic Safety, LBJ Library.

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attempting to both help the new federal regulatory safety agency come into existence and also advocate for its own continued relevance in traffic safety issues.\textsuperscript{136} Much of what the executive members of the committee did in the mid-1960s consisted of working with concerned citizens and community organizations who wrote to the President about traffic safety issues and solutions they came up with. William Randolph Hearst Jr. and other members responded to concerned individuals and encouraged them to embrace the principles of the Action Program and work with their local governments and communities to solve local issues.

PCTS members continued to advocate for the Action Program, even as the new federal agencies moved toward heavy regulation of the auto industry and national focus on driver behavioral issues instead of local-based solutions. In a response to the President of the Beloit, Wisconsin Safety Council regarding their work on traffic safety,\textsuperscript{137} William Randolph Hearst, Jr. wrote that “every citizen must strive to become an informed and effective traffic citizen.” He further elaborated that to do this required taking individual responsibility for protecting one’s own

\textsuperscript{136} However, the section-by-section summary of the Traffic Safety Act of 1966 detailed the new role of the PCTS and how it would be phased out in the Highway Safety section of the new DOT, “This section [401] authorizes the Secretary to carry out the highway safety program envisioned in the Act, and in doing so, to assist and cooperate with other Federal agencies, State and local governments, private industry, and others... New section 401 would give the Secretary a broader directive than now contained in 23 USC 313 to provide unified Federal leadership in highway safety by cooperation with all public and private groups involved in highway safety activities. By repealing 23 USC 313, the limitation of $150,000 from the Highway Trust Fund to support the President’s Committee on Traffic Safety (which is to be replaced by an advisory committee in an executive order planned for early issuance) would be removed.” Section-by-Section Summary Traffic Safety Act of 1966, “Section by Section Traffic Summary, Traffic Safety Act of 1966,” Box 60, Records of the President’s Committee for Traffic Safety, LBJ Library.

\textsuperscript{137} The Beloit Area Safety Council planned a Safety Week in May 1966, inspired by the high rates of fatalities and property damage caused annually by crashes and by President Johnson’s interest in traffic safety. The slogan of the year, “Join the Circle of Safety – Check Your Car – Check Your Driving – Check Accidents,” helped promote “Safety in the Sixties.” Letter, Arthur D. Getman to the President, 5/19/66, “Letters Answered for White House 2 of 2,” Box 76, Records of the President’s Committee for Traffic Safety, LBJ Library.
life and property, and also protecting other drivers and pedestrians on the roadways.

As LBJ and Congress worked to pass the motor vehicle and highway safety laws in 1966, the PCTS began to dismantle; however, its goals and mission were being incorporated into NHTSA. The Action Program continued to be the main PCTS goal. In many letters written to the federal government about traffic safety issues, members of the PCTS responded with the blanket statement,

The President’s Committee for Traffic Safety is responsible for promoting the application of the Highway Safety Action Program – the national master plan to prevent traffic accidents... The Action Program had been developed because of the wide recognition that there was no single solution to the traffic accident problem and that only through a balanced program supported by the public can the desired results be produced... Therefore, we ask your forbearance while the Congress works out the details of a bill to provide a comprehensive traffic accident prevention program for the good of all.138

The PCTS continued to share the Action Program, while also recognizing that the Action Program was only recommendation and not law. The new laws under NHTSA and the federal government would require state compliance for safety programs and automobile regulations.

Critics and Catalysts for Safety

As the new DOT, and along with it NHTSA and federal regulatory structure for motor vehicle and highway safety, began to take shape, growing concern over government overreach and state’s rights began to rise. Public figures like Lewis Mumford and Ralph Nader139 spoke out against what they considered the automobile’s vice grip on American life. Ralph Nader took General Motors to task in his book Unsafe at any Speed, where he detailed what he considered design flaws in the Chevy Corvair – design flaws that made the car more dangerous at the expense

138 Letter, Wm. S. Foulis, Executive Director, President’s Committee for Traffic Safety to Mr. Russell DeMarks, “Letters Answered for White House 1 of 2,” Box 76, Records of the President’s Committee for Traffic Safety, LBJ Library.
of safety. His account mostly detailed the relationships between industry and government that he believed led to lax laws and lack of safety and environmental regulations for automobiles and the traffic safety system. Nader’s book provided the general American public, some of whom had not given considerable thought to the traffic fatality problem, a catalyst for action.

Mumford criticized American’s overreliance on the automobile in the 1950s, particularly in the growing suburbs and the redesign of cities in the postwar period to accommodate cars and not people. Mumford was an ardent critic of postwar consumerism and suburban expansion, of which the automobile played a significant role as status symbol. At the same time, he understood the car’s nuanced role as symbol of American freedom. Mumford’s belief that though the auto industry was responsible for high numbers of traffic fatalities, changing the safety issues within the car or offering safety solutions like seat belts would take away from this fundamental essence of the automobile. He wrote in his review of Nader’s and Jerry O’Connell and Arthur Myers’ books, “Nothing could be worse in the long run for the auto industry than to eliminate the very things that made the automobile, at the beginning, so attractive: the sense of freedom and variety that motor travel once gave.”

Mumford’s commentary was not a call for continued unchecked operation by the auto industry. He criticized the perpetual forward motion of Americans and the growing reliance on technology, most notably obvious in the use and abuse of the automobile and in rampant consumerism that relied upon the automobile. Channeling John C. Keats, he wrote that, “the

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140 O’Connell and Myers book, *Safety Last: An Indictment of the Auto Industry*, provided similar arguments as Nader against the auto industry; however, their book was not as well-known.


142 John C. Keats, *The Insolent Chariots* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1958). Keats’ book was one of a handful of post-WWII books that openly criticized the auto industry prior to the massive popularity of Ralph Nader’s *Unsafe at any Speed*. 
The insolence of Detroit chariotmakers and the masochistic submissiveness of the American consumer are symptoms of a larger disorder: a society that is no longer rooted in the complex realities of an organic and personal world; a society made in the image of machines, by machines, for machines. Under further government regulation and control, both the automobile and the driver would be further regulated and lose their sense of freedom while at the same time becoming further reliant on the systems that require reliance on automobiles and other technology to live in a modern world.

Ralph Nader’s critique of the traffic safety system, or the “traffic safety establishment” as he called it, focused on what he considered the government’s complete focus on the driver. Nader implied that the auto industry colluded with the federal government, mostly through the creation of organizations like the Automotive Safety Foundation (ASF), to push forward the notion that drivers were the sole responsible actor in crashes, and that mechanical failure should rarely, if ever, be taken into account when filing police reports for crashes and creating safety policy and infrastructure. Nader weaved a compelling narrative for the American public: the auto industry and the federal government were in the business of selling more cars, at the cost of American life.

The arguments from lawyers, like Nader, O’Connell and Myers, acted as a catalyst for the political change necessary to create a dedicated federal-level safety agency. The critiques brought

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143 Keats, *The Insolent Chariots.*
144 Nader, *Unsafe at Any Speed.*
145 The ASF was a pre-WWII organization created by the heads of the auto industry as an industry safety institution. They promoted behavioral and road engineering-based policy changes to traffic safety in order to reduce highway fatality numbers, while arguably distorting the safety features of the automobile itself from the equation. Norton, *Fighting Traffic.*
146 Nader, *Unsafe at Any Speed.*
by them, and other political journalists, criticized the homogenous safety messages created for and mobilized by the general American public heavily throughout the 1950s and in the early 1960s. And, the methods through which they levied their analyses of the auto industry and federal government appealed to young, politically inclined people radicalized and interested in social issues.

However, although the anti-industry sentiment gained in popularity, some citizens were not willing to fully place the blame in the hands of the auto industry. Instead, these citizens continued to push for enforcement efforts and more strict driver screening, incorporating previous efforts by the PCTS and associations like the ASF and other auto industry-founded organizations. Though they were critical of the official policy actions taking place in the federal organization of the new Department of Transportation, these organizations and individual citizens wanted to be involved in the process of policy creation and formation.

The National Drivers Association for the Prevention of Traffic Accidents, Inc, (NDAPTA)

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149 Some young college students saw Ralph Nader as the ‘anti-status quo,’ fitting stereotypes of neither political party. One student from NYU said of his radical point of view, “The mere existence of an institution doesn’t make it right...Nader does not display his moral indignation in the streets because talking about fascist pigs is not his style...While many radicals speak of revolution in terms of violent overthrow of the powers that be, Nader’s dream is to have 10,000 professional persons in Washington to further public policy and to counteract the 15,000 lobbyists who work in Washington.” Marti Mueller, “Nader: From Auto Safety to a Permanent Crusade,” *Science* 166, no. 3908 (Nov. 21, 1969).
150 At the same time, critics of the new regulatory infrastructure decried the loss of individuality, speed, and power in automotive engineering design and styling. Conspicuous mass consumption in the 1950s had provided partial impetus for the large expansion of new and various types of automobile design that permeated the decade, but the worldly realities of the 1960s, including environmental issues, civil rights, and the Vietnam War, allowed for open criticism of the culture of mass consumption that permeated and allowed the auto industry to reach into all expanses of American life. David Gartman, *Auto Opium: A Social History of American Automobile Design* (New York: Routledge, 1994).
a non-profit driver’s education association based in Bakersfield, California, was not one of the organizations that normally partnered with the PCTS; however, they wrote to them asking to participate in the new legislative activities for traffic safety in Washington. In one letter in May 1966, they wrote to William Foulis, executive director of the PCTS, about their stance on drivers, automobiles, and roads in causing crashes. The NDAPTA was particularly harsh in its opinion on driver- and automobile-based causes. In terms of driver causes, they believed that drivers alone could not be responsible for changing their behavior. The organization saw drivers as “scape goats” for the larger traffic safety problem.\textsuperscript{151}

At the same time, the NDAPTA considered the automobile to be a similar scape goat for traffic safety. To them, automobiles were fallible technology. Russell Byrd, President of the organization, stated in a letter to William Foulis of the PCTS, “the vehicle cannot stop all the accidents, even if it is built perfect, which perhaps will never occur.”\textsuperscript{152} To Byrd and his organization, “perfect” cars would not noticeably reduce traffic crashes, like changes in driver behavior and road design might. However, what they considered to be the most concerning problem were roads, and more specifically the removal of hazards from roadsides.\textsuperscript{153} They saw each piece — automobiles, drivers, and road design — as acting separately, not as a cohesive whole, an approach that varied from the holistic one the PCTS and other governmental organizations espoused through the Action Program since the late 1940s.

Similarly, in the wake of President Johnson signing the new motor vehicle acts into law,

\textsuperscript{151} Memo, National Drivers Association for the Prevention of Traffic Accidents, Inc. on Reduction of Traffic Accidents, 5/66, “Letters Answered for the White House 2 of 2,” Box 76, Records of the President’s Committee for Traffic Safety, LBJ Library.
\textsuperscript{152} Letter, Russell Byrd to William Foulis, 5/10/66, “Letters Answered for the White House 2 of 2,” Box 76, Records of the President’s Committee for Traffic Safety, LBJ Library.
members of the American public wrote to Washington expressing their doubts that federal laws and automotive regulation was the right trajectory for traffic safety efforts. One citizen from Florida, Edward Seegers, President of the Burgner Molasses Company, wrote a scathing letter to the President after he signed the highway safety acts into law in September 1966. Seegers further noted that while it was laudable that the federal government, and in particular LBJ, was concerned with crashes, it was “quite lamentable that you have singled out the equipment manufacturers as the culprits, and are following a course of action intended only to make more accidents survivable instead of seeking to decrease them at the source – which is the driver in the collective sense.”

Seegers adamantly pushed for traffic safety to not solely focus on the regulation of automobiles, but to continue to pay attention to driver behavior and heavy enforcement. Seeger, and a growing contingent of others, called for further police enforcement of behaviors like drunk driving and “general incompetence,” which usually encompassed people with multiple crashes, multiple tickets, and any other driving issues. He wrote in his letter to LBJ, “You haven’t mentioned the possibility of collecting the drunks when they leave the bars, before they have a chance to kill themselves, and where they could be bagged like sitting ducks.”

But perhaps the most pressing concern was whether federal regulation of the auto industry would aid in reducing fatalities. As fatality numbers continued to grow, though the rate of fatalities per number of drivers slowed, concern over whether creating safety regulations for cars would help or hinder fatality rates. Seeger continued in his letter, “I greatly fear building safer cars will, in the long run, result in more accidents rather than fewer accidents as well as bringing about a

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marked increase in the violence average due to rapid increase in the percentage of neurotics making up the driving population, who, feeling safer, will use even less restraint in their highway conduct." But to the remaining members of the PCTS, still responsible for federal level traffic safety while the new traffic safety agency formed, driver behavior was still part of the solution, now along with auto regulation, and the transition to the new programs required understanding on the part of everyone. Richard Tossell, assistant director of the PCTS, responding to Seegers, wrote, “For these acts to succeed to their full potential, there is greater need than ever for understanding – on the part of the Governors and Legislatures, who must create and administer the improved State programs the Federal laws seek to strengthen. Also, there must be greater understanding among the millions of drivers, who will feel the direct impact of these programs.”

As the new safety laws went into effect and the PCTS transitioned its duties to NHTSA, general concern over traffic safety issues continued to build. Most concern focused on the new organization and operation of federal agencies and their interactions with states and the bodies they regulated. At the same time, there was concern from the general public that the refocusing of traffic safety issues was a political ploy meant to garner future votes, not to aid in the reduction of fatalities. Traffic safety work had for decades focused on driver behavior, the abrupt change in

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158 Edward Seegers finished his letter to the President with his own opinion on the general state of traffic safety issues, and particularly the shifting focus to automobile engineering issues rather than behavioral issues. He stated, “the only real complaint I have here is that no one tells the truth. It would be so very nice if you would stand up before the Nation on television, put the blame for the carnage squarely where it belongs, and just honestly say there is nothing the President or anyone can do about the matter by attacking it at the source, and still keep his job in politics… It could even be that the shock-value of such a revelation in a time of evasions, half-truths, and outright damn lies originating with Government could have an entirely good political
focus to a federal regulatory system based on car safety uprooted general public understandings of how to address traffic fatality problems.

**Organized Support, Citizen Consciousness, and Safety Competitions for American Pride**

One of the major components of the President's Committee for Traffic Safety involved bringing together local politics and organizations focused on traffic safety issues. In 1964, PCTS chairman, William Randolph Hearst, Jr., worried about the lack of policy action taken by public officials and the new all-time high of over 48,000 traffic fatalities. Working with PCTS members, he called together state officers for national women’s organizations for conferences organized by the PCTS. In a January 1965 conference in New Orleans, women from 35 national organizations came together at Hearst’s behest to “develop specific plans for bringing organized citizen support” to state and local officials willing to create good traffic safety policies.\(^{159}\)

Hearst stated that, “America’s women are mobilizing as never before for a pitched battle against what can well be called public enemy number one – traffic accidents.” He further stated that the problem, while national in scope, could only be won at the state and local level. The goal of the PCTS-organized conferences for women’s organizations was to provide them with the basics of the Action Program. Further emphasizing the need for citizen involvement in traffic safety policy, Mrs. H. H. Kodani, a member of the PCTS, stated that the “meeting will help immeasurably to bring effective citizen support to public officials with traffic accident prevention effect. A lot of people are not as dumb as our politicians and crackpot economists think, and are getting very fed up indeed with the status-quo.” Letter, Edward Seegers to the President, 9/11/66, “Letters Answered for the White House 1 of 2,” Box 76, Records of the President’s Committee for Traffic Safety, LBJ Library.\(^{159}\) Press Release, The President’s Committee for Traffic Safety, 1/15/65, Ex SA 2, WHCF, Box 3, LBJ Library.
responsibilities.\textsuperscript{160} The work of community organizations and the PCTS, who heavily focused on local initiatives, began to be less preferred to the nation-wide, all-encompassing programs that enrolled the American public nationwide to solve traffic safety issues.

Not all organizations embraced, or understood, the work of the PCTS. Reverend Frank Dunn, President of the American Institute of Religion, wrote to President Johnson in 1964 with a litany of requests for the President to help end traffic fatalities. Dunn’s emphasis formed around citizen and institutional contributions to policy efforts in traffic safety. He stated that the people whose family or friends were killed in traffic crashes would be very receptive to an “all-out war” to end traffic fatalities.\textsuperscript{161} Like other citizen-formed plans proposed to the government, Dunn’s plan involved public monitoring of Americans by fellow Americans. However, Dunn’s plan also bordered on extensive breaches of privacy.

In the late 1950s, Dunn’s organization belonged to a Massachusetts state coalition for citizen action in traffic safety called the Massachusetts’ Citizen Organization for Highway Accident Prevention (MCOHAP). They organized religious, fraternal, labor, military, and other groups together to address traffic safety issues throughout their Massachusetts communities. The board consisted mostly of members of religious organizations, including Dunn’s American Institute for Religion (AIR), but also members from the Archdiocesan Council of Catholic Women, B’nai Brith of Massachusetts, and Massachusetts Women’s Christian Temperance Union, as well as organizations like Massachusetts Grange, Massachusetts Federation of Labor, and Knights of Columbus.\textsuperscript{162} To these organizations, a major missing connection in reducing traffic safety deaths

\textsuperscript{160} Press Release, The President’s Committee for Traffic Safety, 1/15/65, Ex SA 2, WHCF, Box 3, LBJ Library.
\textsuperscript{161} Letter, Reverend Frank Dunn to Bill Moyers, 5/16/64, Ex SA 2, WHCF, Box 3, LBJ Library.
\textsuperscript{162} Letter, Reverend Frank Dunn to Bill Moyers, 5/16/64, Ex SA 2, WHCF, Box 3, LBJ Library.
was a lack of citizen engagement and coordinated action by public officials and safety groups. What they, and other citizen-focused organizations, wanted to do, was bring together public officials and citizens concerned with similar issues, particularly citizens who believed highway deaths were a nation-wide problem but did not know how to address the issue locally beyond being a safe driver. To the members of the Massachusetts coalition, the message of the Action Program failed to reach them until they wrote to the federal government, despite their local and state work on traffic safety.

Instead of focusing piecemeal on issues in local communities, traffic safety initiatives in the 1960s focused on issues at a national scale, and Americans concerned about traffic safety issues embraced this concept in their plans to make highways safer and reduce fatalities. One member of the public, concerned that Americans were taking traffic casualties for granted, wrote in with his plan for a nation-wide state-based competition. He stated that “everyone, from the highest echelons of Government to the drivers of the poorest and most dangerous cars on our highways is much too casual about the inevitability of the slaughter which takes place on our highways.” He continued with his plan, noting his perception of the competitive nature of Americans, “we are a nation of men and women who love the competition of sports, games, etc, and fiercely proud of that part of the country in which we make our homes. I suggest channeling this marvelous and typical American spirit and drive into a nationwide activity, an all out contest by individual citizens to reduce death and injury on our highways.”

His plan, similar to one suggested by another writer, involved an appeal to the state-based pride of Americans, sponsored at the federal level. He continued, “a contest, sponsored by an appropriate Federal Official, supported by the President in which the separate states are the

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163 Letter, James A. Van Meter to the President, 6/8/65, Ex SA 2, WHCF, Box 3, LBJ Library.
contestants. The goal—the best record by States, of highway accident reduction by comparison one year with the previous one—the reward—Annual recognition of the winning states Officials and/or citizens by The President in appropriate ceremony as befits any situation in which large numbers of lives are saved.\textsuperscript{164}

James A. Van Meter, a citizen from Texas, and appealing to Johnson’s Texas pride, attempted to sell his “Auto Sweepstakes Plan,”\textsuperscript{165} with a goal of preserving life and minimizing property damage. Regarding the plan, Van Meter stated “the enclosed plan could be the one factor that will cause drivers and pedestrians to behave properly or stay home rather than take a chance and lose a chance to be a winner.”\textsuperscript{166} Here, Van Meter suggested a nationwide reward system for safe driving. He considered this a critical omission from the Action Program and the President’s Committee for Traffic Safety.\textsuperscript{167} Instead of educating and enforcing traffic safety behaviors, Van Meter, and other citizens who wrote to the President, believed that citizens should be rewarded when they follow established laws and rules.

In the plan that Van Meter set forth, citizens who had not caused a crash or had more than one moving violation the previous year would be eligible to participate in the Auto Sweepstakes Plan for the year if they wished. To sign up, drivers would pay a $5 fee per year to the “Drivers Sweepstakes Department,” from which prizes would be dispersed at the end of the year and whose remaining funds would be used for road improvements. Along with their entry, drivers would receive a book with safe driving and walking tips. Each year, all drivers entered would be drawn

\textsuperscript{164} Letter, James A. Van Meter to the President, 6/8/65, Ex SA 2, WHCF, Box 3, LBJ Library.
\textsuperscript{165} In Van Meter’s “Auto Sweepstakes Plan” document, he further invoked the link between military deaths and highway deaths but framing it differently than the usual numbers comparison. He stated that “More auto dead than all our war dead combined. Soldiers die for a cause. Auto traffic victims die needlessly!”
\textsuperscript{166} Letter, James A. Van Meter to the President, 6/8/65, Ex SA 2, WHCF, Box 3, LBJ Library.
\textsuperscript{167} Letter, James A. Van Meter to the President, 7/1/65, Ex SA 2, WHCF, Box 3, LBJ Library.
from at random, and after careful checking, winners from each state would be announced. Prizes would include vacations, home items like televisions, and automobile insurance. Van Meter predicted that not only would those not entered be envious of the potential prizes and enter the following year, but that overall, drivers would become more conscientious, causing less crashes, because of the drive to be entered into and win the final sweepstakes.168

The “Auto Sweepstakes Plan,” and similar citizen based plans sent to the President and the PCTS in the early 1960s, relied on a rewards system instead of a punishment system. These plans often appealed to what these citizens considered the American public’s natural affinity for gambling and games of chance. In the Auto Sweepstakes Plan, Van Meter wished to shift the entire discussion of traffic safety and crashes away from ‘death and destruction’ and to “one of safety and pleasure on the streets and highways of our braod[sic] land.”169 To Van Meter, and others, the idea of using a large-scale sweepstakes or competition would implicitly encourage positive driving behavior and thus, save lives and reduce injuries and property damage.

Van Meter’s “Auto Sweepstakes Plan” invoked a common citizen’s binary definition between “good” and “bad” traffic behavior. First, he mentioned his many years of driving experience, multiple types of cars driven, and the crashes and deaths he has seen over the years on the roads. Though he is not a perfect driver, a fact he states when he mentions having previously had six minor traffic violations,170 there is an implicit differentiation between traffic violations that seriously injure or kill a human versus traffic violations that do not. This differentiation is not only visible in Van Meter’s plans for traffic safety, but in other citizen’s, and in the plans of public officials and safety groups. However, this distinction is not so easy to decide, as minor violations

168 Letter, James A. Van Meter to the President, 7/1/65, Ex SA 2, WHCF, Box 3, LBJ Library.
169 Letter, James A. Van Meter to the President, 7/1/65, Ex SA 2, WHCF, Box 3, LBJ Library.
170 Letter, James A. Van Meter to the President, 7/1/65, Ex SA 2, WHCF, Box 3, LBJ Library.
can easily lead to an incident wherein someone is injured or killed.

In a final example, Carle Spiller, president of Spiller Electric Company in Kennebunk, Maine, wrote to the President with his idea for a nation-wide traffic safety initiative. He shared his plan with the AAA and the NSC, wherein the AAA told him the plan would not work and the NSC told him the plan would work, as well as every state governor. The plan, titled “National Highway Safety Contest to Save Lives on the Highways,” consisted of a yearly national contest to have the best safety record in each state based on registered numbers of vehicles. At the end of the year, the state with the best record would have a #1 sticker displayed on every vehicle. The ranking of states would also display colored stickers, so states one through 20 would have green, 21 through 40 would have yellow, and 41 through 50 would have red. The lesson would be for the residents in those states to feel ashamed to display a yellow or red sticker and strive for a green sticker. Spiller stated, “the plan is designed as a combined effort of all drivers in the state to win the national contest, and the result would be the saving of many lives on our highways.”

Contests like this, and similar ones proposed by others, relied on similar tactics to

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171 Mr. Spiller gave the example of “one death in Maine could equal one hundred or more in New York or California.” Letter, Carle Spiller to Bill Moyers, 6/11/66, “Letters Answered for the White House 1 of 2,” Box 76, Records of the President’s Committee for Traffic Safety, LBJ Library.


173 A. Harrison Kosove wrote to Bill Moyers, Special Assistant to President Johnson, with his safety contest plan, “To pull this off, every citizen would be enrolled in the program – a collective American effort. Information would be disseminated by media, wherein “every newspaper, radio, and TV station becomes a continuous fountain of information, advice and inspiration in a venture in which 100 million Americans are participating, a gigantic, nation-wide contest which must benefit everyone and can cost very, very little.” Letter, A. Harrison Kosove to Bill Moyers, 5/31/66, “Letters Answered for the White House 2 of 2,” Box 76, Records of the President’s Committee for Traffic Safety, LBJ Library.

174 Another wrote his proposal, titled, “The Safety Plan that Will Appeal to the Patriotism and the Pride of Americans,” providing nine points for traffic safety, including a windshield emblem for drivers to display in their car if they have been without a crash or traffic violation for one year.
safety efforts proposed by the public in the 1950s. Instead of a reliance on punishment for negative behavior or law-breaking, safety contests rewarded drivers who followed driving laws. Additionally, they exposed drivers who did not follow the laws by requiring a visible marker – whether it be a sticker on their car or some other form of identifier – that stated to others “I am not a safe driver” but also “I am part of the reason our state is not top ranked for safety in the contest.” Both are important factors as they rely on monitoring road users, not only by police officers but generally by fellow members of the driving public.

In response to many of the suggestions, traffic safety officials reiterated that fatality rates would not decrease and safety on the roads would not increase without cooperation and support of “citizen leaders and organizations”\textsuperscript{175} and comprehensive state, local, and national programs that worked together to address safety issues. One letter that provoked the previous response, from Adolph Fram, President of the People’s Cab Co., stated “Does not the ‘Safety Act of 1966’ cover the auto, the road, the driver?… Movement and transportation are vital to the health and welfare of the community.” Fram continued to note that the focus of the new Act was misplaced, and that many of the safety problems of the road were the fault of drivers and in particular their “ignorance and lack of knowledge.”\textsuperscript{176}

But even as they were beginning to be phased out, the PCTS recognized the efforts of

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Regarding this emblem, he stated, “The appeal to our latent spirit of patriotism but one that burns as fiercely[sic] as ever would be aroused, and I am certain that all right thinking Americans would feel a feeling of great pride to be able to have earned the right to display this proud emblem of this the greatest country the world has ever known.” Letter, Benjamin Shepard to Bill Moyers, 7/23/66, “Letters Answered for the White House 1 of 2,” Box 76, Records of the President’s Committee for Traffic Safety, LBJ Library.
\textsuperscript{175} One example is a response letter to Adolph Fram from Richard Tossell, 9/16/66, “Letters Answered for the White House 1 of 2,” Box 76, Records of the President’s Committee for Traffic Safety, LBJ Library.
\textsuperscript{176} Letter, Adolph Fram to the President, 9/12/66, “Letters Answered for the White House 1 of 2,” Box 76, Records of the President’s Committee for Traffic Safety, LBJ Library.
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organizations that addressed the interconnectedness and relationship between car, driver, and road. Richard Tossell, Assistant Director of the PCTS, responded to Jack Goldman of the San Francisco chapter of the National Safety Council regarding their work in traffic safety. Though the NSC chapter believed drivers were the root cause of crashes, their approach to traffic safety involved addressing the potential for car and road defects. Tossell wrote to Goldman, regarding the Action Program in relation to the NSC plans, that “the Action Program for Highway Safety of the President’s Committee for Traffic Safety is predicated on the inter-relationship of the vehicle-car environment (includes road) and their inseparability – particularly in dealing with the problem of accidents.”

The San Francisco NSC chapter remained hesitant to embrace the changing structure of traffic safety that focused more heavily on motor vehicle failure and less on driver behavior. They sent to the President twelve traffic safety questions they are often asked by members. To the NSC, programs that focused on safe driving behavior would ultimately be more effective in reducing fatality rates because of time delays that inherently exist in engineering new cars to meet safety standards. At the same time, the NSC deflected issues pertaining to interior car safety by noting that not all fatalities occurred inside vehicles. This point of view, held by other prominent

178 This was a common criticism of the regulatory framework that focused on the car. The auto industry believed that heavy focus on engineering could create a time delay in getting new safety features to the general public, thus creating potential for more fatalities. This message persisted into the 1970s.
179 The San Francisco chapter of the NCS’s official response to the question “how many people die in traffic accidents” included fatality numbers and also further evidence of their institutional belief in a behavior-focused traffic safety approach. They stated “Last year [1965] 49,000 men, women and children were killed in motor-vehicle accidents. But for the purposes of discussion of the vehicle, we must remember that they did not all die in cars. In fact, about 32,700 – or two-thirds – of them did. The others were pedestrians, bicycle or motorcycle riders, truck occupants, and such.” The official answer noted that any answer dealing with interior occupant safety issues
organizations as well, allowed the new regulatory infrastructure to be undermined from inception, as national organizations continued to advocate for a behavior-focused traffic safety program, and not one that predominately focused on engineering and designing safety into the car.

**Teenagers and Young Drivers**

New teenage drivers were often the focus of traffic safety efforts by both government officials and organizations. Driver’s training programs, implemented to help train teen drivers and cope with the high fatality and injury numbers attributed to them, were not often seen as enough to help them integrate into the existing driving public. In the 1960s, both before and after auto safety regulation, highway safety experts and some communities considered this a problem of “attitude,” which to many safety experts encompassed “everything from emotional maturity and judgement to respect for man and machine.”

Approaching traffic safety through teenagers helped ease the transition from a fully behaviorally focused traffic safety program to one that emphasized the relationship between car, driver, and road, though these programs still heavily focused on driver behavior.

Dealing with the “attitude” problem encompassed more than teaching teenage drivers how to be safe and responsible road users. Some programs that targeted teen drivers instead attempted to appeal to what they considered a basic teenage fear – embarrassment in front of peers and lack of dates. In Fairfax County, Virginia, J.E.B. Stuart High School developed a program for teenage boys based on the idea that “reckless drivers are dateless drivers.”

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Chapter 2

the Cavalettes, thought of the idea and encouraged other teen girls to stand up to their dates who are unsafe drivers. For teen boys who were safe drivers, a girl could submit his name to the school to receive a bumper sticker stating that he was a “Date Approved J.E.B. Stuart High Safe Driver” which he could place on his car. If he were in a crash or received a ticket, the sticker would be revoked.

The description of this program implies that these teen boys would, if they did not have the sticker on their car, be considered unfit for dating because of their dangerous behavior behind the wheel. Efforts like this were a shift from popular culture references of “bad boys” on the highways, driving unsafely, and drag racing. However, drag racing and hot rodding continued into the 1960s and became more mainstream as automakers built cars based on performance standards. As Americans concerned with the safety of streets and communities began a public outcry against cars built for speed and performance – small, compact cars with high horsepower engines and muscle cars – the auto industry embraced this market in the mid- and late-1960s.

While local governments were targeting teen drivers through programs of their own, teens themselves were concerned with the problem of road safety and high rates of teens fatalities. Ethelene Robertson of North Mommoth, Maine wrote to President Johnson in June 1966 about traffic safety concerns for teenagers and for the future of safety in the United States. She wrote, concerned about safety and progress, “…if the United States wanted to help America it would spend more money on the safety of today than on bigger buildings and shopping centers. I’m not denying the progress of the world but couldn’t it wait? If you deny me the right to speak you are

183 Lucsko, The Business of Speed.
denying the public to speak. Remember the world of tomorrow is at stake.”\textsuperscript{184} Continuing, Robertson criticized teenage driving habits and offered solutions for irrational behavior on behalf of young drivers.

Federal government traffic safety experts embraced the work and positive messages of teenagers who wished to contribute positive efforts to traffic safety. In an official response to Ethelene Robertson, Richard Tossell wrote on behalf of the President and the PCTS, “We hope you will study the Action Program and perhaps discuss it with your friends and teachers. The more you understand of what it takes to prevent traffic accidents, the better driver and citizen you will be. This country needs both – good drivers and good traffic citizens. Keep thinking and working in this direction.”\textsuperscript{185} At the same time, William Randolph Hearst, Jr. wrote to the student council at Parkway Senior High School in Missouri regarding their traffic safety initiatives after six of their fellow classmates had died in crashes, that “President Johnson has challenged every American of sense and consciousness to “replace suicide with sanity and anarchy with safety.”\textsuperscript{186} Teenagers were seen as the next leaders and traffic safety experts encouraged them to lead the nation by being responsible users of the traffic safety infrastructure.

**Conclusion**

The transition period in the 1960s from a non-regulatory traffic safety infrastructure to the creation of a federal Department of Transportation with a dedicated traffic safety agency created a tumultuous time for traffic safety politics in the mid-1960s in particular. The phasing out of the

\textsuperscript{184} Letter, Ethelene Robertson to the President, 6/10/66, “Letters Answered for the White House 1 of 2,” Box 76, Records of the President’s Committee for Traffic Safety, LBJ Library.

\textsuperscript{185} Letter, Richard Tossell to Ethelene Robertson, 6/16/66, “Letters Answered for the White House 1 of 2,” Box 76, Records of the President’s Committee for Traffic Safety, LBJ Library.

\textsuperscript{186} Letter, William Randolph Hearst, Jr. to Student Council, Parkway Senior High School, 11/16/66, “Letters Answered for the White House 1 of 2,” Box 76, Records of the President’s Committee for Traffic Safety, LBJ Library.
President's Committee for Traffic Safety spelled the end of the heavy focus on behavior-based traffic safety programs, ushering in a new era of traffic safety that relied on the relationship between car and driver. This, however, would not last as the new focus on the automobile came with criticism from multiple sources. As the new NHTSA began to find its footing within the federal government and enforce the new safety regulations, more criticism built, creating a further divide over safety, personal freedom, and government power that grew in the 1970s.
Technological Freedom and Automotive Restraint

On May 16, 1973, Mary Lou St. Aubin was driving in Schererville, Indiana with her seven-month-old son, Samuel. The car, a Chevrolet Impala, was part of General Motors (GM) 1,000 car fleet with driver and passenger air bags installed, testing the new system. In the opposite lane, a delivery van, waiting to turn left, was struck from the rear by a truck, forcing it into her lane. She slammed on the brakes, causing them to lock, and skidded before hitting the van and spinning around.\footnote{George Smith, Automotive Safety Engineering, 6/5/73, “GM Spokesman Statement,” General Motors Heritage Center.}

In this real-world test of the air bag,\footnote{General Motors referred to this early system as the Air Cushion Restraint System (ACRS), though other companies, the government, and newspapers often call it the air bag or, sometimes, air cushion. Ford and Chrysler also experimented with different names for the air bag as well, though the term I will use throughout for clarity is air bag.} the system performed precisely as General Motors’ engineers expected. At impact, both air bags deployed properly. Mary Lou St. Aubin’s injuries were severe but still lessened by the air bag’s deployment. According to a GM statement, she “suffered a broken left leg just below the kneecap, a broken bone in the right foot, and some lesser impact injuries as her left elbow apparently struck the left front pillar and her left wrist contacted the windshield.”\footnote{George Smith, Automotive Safety Engineering, 6/5/73, “GM Spokesman Statement,” General Motors Heritage Center.} However, her son, who had been lying on the front passenger seat next to her, died later from a subdural hematoma.

GM announced the implementation of the air bag system almost exactly one year before the Schererville crash. In a May 17, 1972 press release, GM described how the new air bag systems would work, especially in light of an upcoming proposed federal standard requiring their installation in all new vehicles. In the 1,000 test Chevrolet Impalas, two air bags would be installed
one smaller one in the steering wheel to protect the driver and one larger one in the passenger side dashboard to protect the two front seat passengers.

One major benefit that General Motors pushed was that the air bag system did not require occupants to use seat belts. In the upcoming proposed federal standards, only a passive restraint system, one like the air bag, which required no outside interaction with vehicle occupants, seat belts were not mandatory – a move that both auto makers and federal regulators assumed consumers liked. When a head-on collision occurred, air bags deployed in 60-thousandths of a second, shielding the front seat occupants from impact with the windshield and dashboard or from ejection through the windshield, both common causes of severe injury and death previously. 190

In the case of the Schererville, Indiana crash in May 1973, the air bag was credited with saving Mary Lou St. Aubin’s life, but ironically, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) determined that the air bags did nothing to prevent the infant’s death. As she braked hard and skidded to avoid the delivery van, her son was thrown from the seat – before the impact occurred and before the air bags could deploy. Though NHTSA officials and engineers, and GM engineers, determined that seat belts could aid in reducing injuries and fatalities, they chose not to retroactively install seat belts as they were testing the effectiveness of the air bag as a passive restraint system on its own. 191

On November 29, 1973, General Motors held a press conference for the first production “air cushion” car in Lansing, Michigan. In his remarks, Ed Cole, President of General Motors at the time, mentioned that the new system would be fully invisible to the occupants – there would be nothing there to obstruct them or inconvenience them while entering or exiting the vehicle. His

191 Charles Ewing, “Accident Revives Controversy,” San Antonio Light June 8, 1973, 7-C.
statement was a thinly veiled reference to the view largely held by the auto industry that consumers highly disliked seat belts because they were intrusive and uncomfortable. However, in the next paragraph of Cole’s statement, he continues by stating that, “for an extra measure of safety, we are packaging the ACRS with front lap belts.” GM’s new stance on passive devices brought to the forefront the debate between public and private in the automobile interior and whether the interior of an automobile was a public space. Consumers’ freedom of choice within their automobile was now wove into debates around keeping all occupants safe – not just new vehicle purchasers who had control over the safety equipment installed.

At the center of this example is not technological change in active or passive safety systems, rather, at the heart of the debates on safety systems were perceptions of technological change and how they were altered by personal experiences with automobile crashes. These experiences came in the form of personal tragedy, by being injured in a crash or knowing a person injured or killed in a crash, or more indirectly, by witnessing through media exposure a perception of increasing ‘carnage’ on the roads and a need to participate in the traffic safety movement. Additionally, automakers assumed consumers only cared about safety when it affected them

193 Generally, the automobile as a technological artifact has changed little over its lifetime. As Brian Ladd notes in his book, Autophobia, “a wide variety of motorized and wheeled vehicles have clattered and dashed across the surface of the earth, but a great majority of them are recognizably of a single type: a metal (or at any rate a rigid) box, mounted on four wheels, powered by a petroleum-burning engine, capable of carrying a few people rapidly through a town or country, constrained mainly by the limits imposed by external obstructions in the vehicle’s path” (9). Adding to this, technologies that comprise motor vehicles have changed little over this time as well. And many automobiles, though celebrated for their uniqueness, are remarkably homogenous. Brian Ladd, Autophobia: Love and Hate in the Automotive Age (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008)
personally, increasing consumer distrust against the industry and portraying a culture of complacency regarding safety matters.

Consumers’ assumptions about how passive and active restraints worked to save lives and personally affected the individuals who interacted with them changed drastically over the roughly 20-year period from 1970 to 1989. Though the technology of the airbag and the seat belt changed little over this time, consumer perception of the airbag and seat belt, functioning within larger passive and active safety systems, changed dramatically, along with perceptions of responsibility for safety. These perceptions were mostly guided by changes in federal and state regulations dictating how to keep occupants safe inside automobiles. These included behavioral changes, like requiring seat belts in automobiles and their usage by occupants, and installing passive restraints, mostly in the form of air bags.

In national arguments over consumer freedom of choice in the 1970s, the air bag, as an invisible technology, represented restrictions to personal liberty more generally. At the same time, unsatisfied with the changing state of safety, consumer interest groups aimed their frustration at the federal regulatory level as opposed to working for changes at the state or local level. Instead of advocating for increased consumer product information, these groups pushed for regulatory changes to help stimulate technological change in the auto industry. This push for a

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194 In his article, “Four Paradigms: Traffic Safety in the Twentieth-Century United States,” Peter Norton describes four shifts in traffic safety thought. The fourth occurs around 1980, when consumers once again begin to shift to notions of responsibility as the overarching theme in traffic safety. According to Norton, the responsibility paradigm combined with and transformed the crashworthiness paradigm, and its founders, both traffic safety experts and lay persons, claimed that safety systems “although necessary, were no substitute for driver responsibility.” Norton, “Four Paradigms,” 329.

technological and regulatory resolution to the rising number of fatalities and injuries on the roads created a space for automakers, regulators, and consumers to politicize safety. Letting the air bag, a new, contentious and ambiguous technology, stand as a representative for auto safety as a whole allowed larger issues of regulation, the place of government in business, and personal liberty to be discussed through the lens of this object.

**The Politics of Restraints: Seat Belts and Air Bags in the 1970s**

Traffic safety previously emphasized a combination of both driver education and road engineering over the design of the automobile. However, as the federal government began to regulate the auto industry for safety and considered mandating passive restraints, particularly the use of the air bag, the view shifted to a more design-based emphasis on safety. This new approach stressed manufacturers' responsibility to create a safe vehicle that reduced the probability for a crash and, if one occurred, the severity of injury. At the same time, opponents of air bags and other passive restraint systems criticized federal and state mandates that limited behaviors inside automobiles.

The debate over mandating a passive restraint system raged throughout the 1970s, beginning shortly after the establishment of the Department of Transportation (DOT) and the passage of the National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act of 1966 (MVSA), which created the National Highway Safety Bureau (NHSB).\(^\text{196}\) In the early 1970s, auto fatalities were very high, compared to where they were in the 1960s. Yearly fatalities in 1960 were 36,399 but by the late

1960s and into the 1970s, the fatality rate had reached 50,000.\textsuperscript{197} The major causes of injury and fatality to front seat occupants were ejection, which greatly increased probability of fatality, or impact with the interior of the automobile, most likely the steering wheel or part of the dashboard.\textsuperscript{198}

By the 1970s, seat belts were becoming more commonplace in automobiles, often offered as standard equipment. Though surveys conducted by the auto industry, insurance companies, and other safety experts showed that consumers were not using them. Groups like the National Safety Belt Council wrote press releases pushing for more seat belt use compliance to lower the fatality and extremely high injury rates that occurred each year, making the seat belt the object that could save many young lives if used correctly.\textsuperscript{199}

Though seat belts were increasingly installed in cars as standard equipment in the early 1970s, many consumers balked at the idea of using them. As part of Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standard (FMVSS) 208, Congress passed an amendment not creating a mandatory seat belt law but instead requiring that all new automobiles after 1974 be equipped with seat belt interlock devices. The seat belt interlock connected seat belt and in-seat sensors to the ignition, keeping an automobile from starting if enough weight was placed on either the driver seat or front passenger seat and the occupant did not buckle their seat belt. If an occupant unbuckled their seat belt after

the automobile was started, then a buzzer and flashing alarm would sound until it was buckled again.\footnote{“Seat belts will drive you crazy, but save your life,” Chicago Tribune, July 22, 1973, M80.}

Figure 6. A 1974 Oldsmobile Delta 88 brochure featuring a standard shoulder-lap belt combination with an interlock system for both front seat driver and passenger. While the seat belt interlock was installed as standard in order to increase passenger safety, one of General Motors’ recommendations for child passenger safety involved standing on the floorboard behind the driver. 1974 Oldsmobile Full Line, The Old Car Manual Project, accessed August 16, 2017, http://www.oldcarbrochures.com/; 1974 Supplement to the Owner’s Manual, Oldsmobile ACRS Air Cushion Restraint System, General Motors Heritage Center.

However, traffic safety experts in the federal government, concerned with automobile users’ unwillingness to comply with seat belt use began to push for mandatory air bags in cars as early as 1967. Air bags, protecting the driver and front seat passengers, would inflate automatically upon front-end collision. They argued that air bags would protect drivers and passengers regardless of seat belt use. To them, the air bag was a major breakthrough for reducing and
eliminating traffic fatalities and injuries and getting a high level of consumer compliance. It was a passive safety device that could be installed in vehicles and, unlike seat belts or other active safety systems, consumers did not need to interact with it or feel constrained by it to know it’s there.

Air bags were initially introduced as an occupant protection safety system not in direct opposition to seat belts, though it quickly became seen as an alternative. As a passive restraint system, they were touted simultaneously as both simple and complicated. The system comprised four main components. First was an electric sensor in the front bumper that, when it sensed a crash at certain speeds, would set the system in motion. Then there is the two-part cap and gas cylinder. The cap is punctured allowing the gas cylinder to quickly fill the fourth component, the nylon bag itself, which is stored in the steering wheel or the passenger dashboard. If passengers are not restrained, the air bag will hopefully keep them from being thrown through the windshield in a head-on crash.²⁰¹

The auto industry pushed back against federal mandates in the 1970s, starting with the initial 1973 passive restraint mandate, due to lack of air bag tests conducted by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA).²⁰² In a June 1970 Public Meeting on Occupant Crash Protection, General Motors executives outlined the multiple reasons against a federal mandate, which many automakers agreed with, including technical feasibility; further research on noise tolerance, as noise was a critique of early air bag prototypes; and clarification of the standard before it went into operation.²⁰³ Automakers were already working on restraint systems and other

safety technologies, like the seat belt and the air bag, but balked at a passive restraint mandate that would need to be researched, developed, tested, and installed in all automobiles within a period of three years.

Figure 7. Allstate also placed advertisements informing consumers about the upcoming changes to automobile regulation. However, they were critical of the time lag and low seat belt use rate, urging people to wear their seat belts to reduce injury or fatality in case of a crash. New York Times, June 22, 1971.
General Motors offered air bags in a limited number of 1974 automobiles. In the mid-1970s, when air bags were hesitantly tested out with the public, they were often pitted against seat belts and especially against the interlock system. A news article quoting Buick General Manager George Elges stated that “people would probably want you to pay them $20 to accept an air bag. But they might change their minds when they see the 1974 seat belt interlock system which will be required on all other cars.” Both the interlock and the air bag were seen as infringements on personal freedom at the individual level and different opposition groups placed blame for this on both automakers and the federal government.

General Motors was the most outspoken about the passive restraint requirement and subsequently, their system was also the most well-known by consumers. The Air Cushion Restraint System, ACRS, was juxtaposed against seat belts as more convenient and less intrusive. In a brochure for the system, GM wrote “you’ll never know it’s there... unless you need it!” noting both the obvious about the air bag system and touching on larger issues surrounding federal government interference in business and personal life that were at the forefront of consumers’ minds.

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THE GM AIR CUSHION RESTRAINT SYSTEM...

You'll never know it's there... unless you need it!

The instrument panel above here looks the same as any other General Motors car, but the difference is that this car's airbags are contained in pockets blended into the instrument panel. The door on a car contains is completely hidden, as is the entire ACRS system. At the very instant of a collision, the airbag inflates out of the door and out of the seat to cushion the impact of the internal, for the front and seat backs move both the door and seat back to the rear of the seat and column.

ACR.S... a convenient restraint system for you and your front seat passengers

NO BUZZERS, FLASHING LIGHTS OR SPECIAL STARTING SEQUENCE

The ACRS... a convenient restraint system for you and your front seat passengers

Figure 8. “More Freedom and Comfort,” the description of GM’s ACRS little described the actual workings of the air bag while going more into detail on the ways in which the air bag allowed for personal freedom unlike the current lap and shoulder belts. However, GM still suggested wearing a lap belt along with the ACRS. “GM Air Cushion Restraint System Manual,” The Old Car Manual Project, accessed June 28/ 2017, http://www.oldcarbrochures.com/

A.C.R.S. ...effective in helping provide driving restraint

Here’s what people who have used THE GM AIR CUSHION RESTRAINT SYSTEM have to say about it...

Figure 9. The diagram of a front-end collision and deployment of the ACRS helped consumers understand when the air bag would protect them. Additionally, consumer testimony stating the freedom and simplicity the system affords them, as well as the aesthetic benefits, praise the air bag while criticizing other safety systems. “GM Air Cushion Restraint System Manual,” The Old Car Manual Project, accessed June 28/ 2017, http://www.oldcarbrochures.com/
Newspaper articles and images discussing the ongoing air bag debates in the early 1970s often described the injuries that occurred when an air bag-equipped car crashed. In one account, a 1974 Buick Electra equipped with air bags was in a head-on collision with a 1969 Chevy el Camino. In this case, the Buick driver “had a sore wrist and scratches from glass” and their passenger “had a broken pelvis.” On the other hand, the “driver and passenger in the [el] Camino had skull and brain injuries and the driver’s leg was broken.” This description accompanied an image of the interior of the Elektra with the deflated airbag, and mentioned two important items—that none of the occupants were wearing seat belts and that the restraint systems proposed by federal regulators for 1977 including air bags and lap seat belts.

This brief article and others like it underscored the tensions at the heart of the restraint debates and the confusion and frustration felt by automakers, traffic safety experts, and consumers. Though seat belts were considered highly effective at reducing fatalities and injuries, they were considered intrusive and uncomfortable. In order to bypass this, automakers and traffic safety experts turned to the air bag as an invisible solution that they marketed as not invading the occupants’ space and causing no discomfort.

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205 Air Bags, 9/13/74, “Air Bags,” National Automotive History Collection, Detroit Public Library.
206 Air Bags, 9/13/74, “Air Bags,” National Automotive History Collection, Detroit Public Library.
Announcing GM’s new Air Cushion Restraint System.

You’re looking at it.

Federal law requires that automobiles sold in this country be equipped with systems capable of providing restraint to the occupants in accident situations. One such system, of course, is the combination lap and shoulder belt system found on most 1974 cars. You’re probably familiar with it.

Now there’s an alternate to this system. It’s General Motors’ new Air Cushion Restraint System (ACRS), which is available on a limited number of Oldsmobiles, Buicks and Cadillacs. And while it is an added-cost feature, there are certain advantages: the car will start as soon as you turn the ignition key; and although lap belts are provided, there are no buzzers, no flashing lights, no starter interlock and no special sequence to follow.

Where is the ACRS located? If you look at the instrument panel shown here, it looks like practically any other instrument panel. That’s because the driver’s air cushion is completely contained in the steering wheel hub, and the passenger’s air cushion is concealed behind a special panel that matches the rest of the dash.

Where can you find out more about GM’s new Air Cushion Restraint System? Just visit any Oldsmobile, Buick or Cadillac dealership and ask to see the Mini-Theatre film demonstrating it. We think you’ll like the convenience our new ACRS offers.

We want you to drive what you like and like what you drive.

Figure 10. GM advertisement for the new “Air Cushion Restraint System,” or ACRS, making special note that it is invisible to the driver and other vehicle occupants, unlike seat belt systems. It also, without explicit mention, notes that there is no intrusion or harassment from the seat belt ignition interlock system, which this automobile does not have because it has the ACRS. Chicago Tribune, March 5, 1974.
One news article noted the fine line between acceptable government involvement in traffic safety and the infringement upon personal liberty that opponents of a passive restraint mandate saw. The author stated, “Government has both the power and the duty to protect the travelling public at large from highway risks. But it is doubtful that government should involve itself in mandatory safety requirements aimed at individual protection in this costly and untried degree. There is a limit on what government ought to do, and another limit on what government can do well. The air bag requirement... transgresses both lines.”

In 1976, Secretary of Transportation William Coleman\(^{207}\) sided with American automakers and declined to create a passive restraint standard, stating that individuals’ freedom of choice was at stake and that a mandate would violate their choice in how they decided to keep themselves safe in their personal passenger vehicles. After the initial 1973 passive restraint mandate was delayed, and then changed to include the seat belt interlock, Coleman’s decision played to the consumers who believed the government should not interfere with the auto industry and definitely should not interfere with what happens within their automobiles.

In 1977, when Secretary of Transportation Brock Adams\(^{209}\) replaced William Coleman, he modified Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standard (FMVSS) 208\(^{210}\) to include a three-year timeline for rolling out a new passive restraint system mandate in the 1982 through 1984 model year passenger vehicles, bringing back the passive restraint mandate and the air bag debate. Automakers

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\(^{208}\) Coleman, a Republican, was appointed by President Gerald Ford in 1975.

\(^{209}\) Adams, a Democrat, was appointed by President Jimmy Carter in 1977 and left the office in 1979.

\(^{210}\) FMVSS 208, first established in 1967, has two main purposes. First is to reduce fatalities and injuries to vehicle occupants through specific crashworthiness requirements measured on anthropomorphic dummies in forces and accelerations in test crashes. Second, FMVSS 208 sets equipment requirements for active and passive safety systems.
were given time to decide and develop the passive restraint system of their choice. The two feasible options were the air bag or the automatic seatbelt.

Figure 11. Seat belt ad from the American Safety Belt Council encouraging people to use seat belts and attempting to dispel myths about discomfort and inconvenience. The Washington Post, July 14, 1974.
Testing for Safety: Dummies, Baboons, and Cadavers

To auto engineers, the air bag was a major breakthrough for reducing and eliminating traffic fatalities and injuries and getting a high level of consumer compliance. It was a passive safety device that could be installed in vehicles and, unlike seat belts or other active safety systems, consumers did not need to interact with it or feel constrained by it to know it’s there. These two systems, air bags and seat belts, were largely tested using various types of devices – anthropomorphic test dummies, cadavers, and baboons – to create the safest space for as many occupants as possible.

Crash test dummies emerged prior to the 1970s in various forms to test for injuries. The main dummies used in testing conformed to standards set for adult male bodies. The National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act of 1966 required specific testing, particularly for the newly-required interior safety features. Anthropomorphic test dummies were more human-like than their predecessors, but they still did not meet all requirements for all body types and lacked skeletal joint locations and the kinematic response from the dummy’s body parts was not defined. In other words, they did not fully move like a human.

The Hybrid II dummy, developed by General Motors, was the testing standard for much of the 1970s. Engineers took what they said was the “typical American driver” – the 50th percentile male, a non-existent composite of averages – average weight, average height, average dimensions, average center of gravity, and average range of limb motion, amongst others and combined that with already existing test dummy specifications. Many safety devices developed, tested, and integrated into 1970s cars used anthropomorphic test dummies to create an idealized space within automobiles to create the safest space for as many people as possible – men, women, and children
– as anthropomorphic test dummies in the 1970s became more nuanced in their body type variety.\textsuperscript{211}

Prior to the use of specialized anthropomorphic test dummies, auto companies and safety researchers used human cadavers to test crash survivability. Using cadavers as crash test subjects revealed another layer of data that anthropomorphic test dummy testing could not. Anthropomorphic test dummies were standardized to an average body type, while cadavers each resembled different bodily characteristics that extended beyond the standard male dummy. Cadavers also helped tell a broader story of what happened to internal organs during crashes, something that anthropomorphic test dummies in the 1970s could not do. Cadaver testing used in conjunction with anthropomorphic test dummies broadened the scope of results, aiding in the creation of more strict regulatory policy toward auto safety design. At the same time, the lack of standardization and durability in cadaver types created challenges in reproduction of results, providing critics of auto safety regulation an impetus to dispute findings.

Animals, particularly baboons in the case of automobiles, were also used by scientists and engineers to create safer interior automobile spaces for children and the “non-standard” male that was already tested for with the anthropomorphic test dummy. In particular, tests with baboons helped prove the effectiveness of airbags in the 1970s and, along with that, their ineffectiveness and hazard for children.

Baboon tests were also used to help bolster the arguments for airbag installation and use in the 1970s. As consumers actively pushed back against the use of airbags by the mid-1970s, news reports discussing the results of air bag tests conducted on baboons detailed the obvious benefit to

using a restraint system. The articles also made clear that the baboons were often stand-in “dummies” for children, whose body types they resembled according to researchers. These tests created awareness of the interior dangers for children in vehicles and the importance of appropriate safety restraints for them – helping researchers develop new size and age appropriate restraints and families learn methods for appropriate restraint for children, teenagers, and also adults.

**Consumer Choice and (Mis)Information**

Consumer safety was central to the passive safety system mandate debate but consumers had little say in the regulatory process. Automakers claimed throughout the 1970s and 1980s that consumers were overly concerned with the costs of added safety devices and would not purchase them or use them without a mandate. However, when they were installed without consent, consumers would dismantle the systems after purchasing the vehicles. Some auto repair shops specialized in removing safety devices from cars, regardless of the legal implications. In Detroit, one journalist wrote, “a car can be completely ‘debugged’ for ten dollars,” which indicated to him, in an age of inflation, both a good deal and a high demand for the service.²¹²

Consumers were also sent conflicting information about the air bag. Early reports of faulty air bag tests led consumers to believe that air bags could and would go off at any time while driving, not just when they were in a crash, or that they would not go off at all. However, by the mid-1970s, many of the technical issues that caused concern were modified and much of the controversy then centered on cost and consumer demand – issues that were central more to the auto industry than to consumers. Reports of the air bag still focused on the faulty tests and the “shot gun” sound that occurred when the air bag went off in a crash. Responding to these critics in

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²¹² Robert M. Bleiberg, Stop the Juggernaut, Barron’s, June 5, 1974, “Air Bags,” National Automotive History Collection, Detroit Public Library.
January 1971, Louis Lundstrom, Head of Automotive Safety at General Motors stated many consumers are under the impression that “we should know all there is to know about the automobile, and need only apply this knowledge to make cars safer, stronger, and better than before.” He added, “we are still learning how to make them safer, stronger, and better.”

213 GM Press Release, 1/26/71, General Motors Heritage Center.
An up-to-date report on Air Bags.
The good news. The bad news.

We listen. In recent months, one aspect of the auto safety issue has created a great deal of confusion. Namely, air bags.

Air bags are large, balloon-like devices that inflate on impact, between the passenger and the instrument panel. When they work correctly, they are beautifully effective. When they don't work correctly, they can be dangerous.

By August 1973, an air bag system, or, in effect, will be required by Federal law in the front compartment of every new car in this country.

There is no problem.

Ford Motor Company is concerned that air bags will not have been sufficiently tested or proven for all cars lined in them.

We believe more time is necessary to ensure reliability and reduce costs. And right now, the cost is high; reliability low.

What the situation will be two years or two weeks from now, we can't predict. And frankly, the picture changes by the minute.

This report hopes to do is bring you up to date. It concerns important facts and costs, and estimated prices at this moment. At the end, it asks you to make several choices. Send them to us.

READ ON

Ford and the Air Bag.

Ford Motor Company is our agent for safety. Fifty years ago, the first automobile safety package was sold—incorporating seat belts, padded dash and reconstructed steering wheel—came from Ford. And right now, we're working to meet the Federal deadline.

Now does it make Ford Motor Company one against air bags? We're not. We're for every possible restraint system that will save lives.

For the very reason, Ford engineers are working on a number of restraint systems that may prove to be a better value than air bags. But honestly, at this point, we don't know.

A FEW BASICS

There are essentially two restraint systems to choose from:

1. The Active System. This is a fully automatic deployment system. A small amount of the air bag's air is released by a very sensitive sensor. By using a colorized balloon-shaped device, the air bag is inflated. The inflation is controlled by the Ford Motor Company's encoder system. The inflation is controlled by the Ford Motor Company's encoder system. The inflation is controlled by the Ford Motor Company's encoder system.

2. The Passive System. This is a manually operated deployment system. A small amount of the air bag's air is released by a very sensitive sensor. The inflation is controlled by the Ford Motor Company's encoder system. The inflation is controlled by the Ford Motor Company's encoder system. The inflation is controlled by the Ford Motor Company's encoder system.

THE GOOD NEWS

The Actives System: It is better than a passive system in every way. An array of the air bag's air is released by a very sensitive sensor. The inflation is controlled by the Ford Motor Company's encoder system. The inflation is controlled by the Ford Motor Company's encoder system. The inflation is controlled by the Ford Motor Company's encoder system.

The Passive System: It is better than an active system in every way. A small amount of the air bag's air is released by a very sensitive sensor. The inflation is controlled by the Ford Motor Company's encoder system. The inflation is controlled by the Ford Motor Company's encoder system. The inflation is controlled by the Ford Motor Company's encoder system.

THE BAD NEWS

What about reliability? There are two major concerns in this area.

1. The reliability of the system itself. The reliability of the system itself. The reliability of the system itself. The reliability of the system itself.

2. The reliability of the components. The reliability of the components. The reliability of the components. The reliability of the components.

Ford Motor Company feels that the reliability of the system itself is greater than the reliability of the components. The reliability of the system itself is greater than the reliability of the components. The reliability of the system itself is greater than the reliability of the components.

Ford Motor Company feels that the reliability of the components is greater than the reliability of the system itself. The reliability of the components is greater than the reliability of the system itself. The reliability of the components is greater than the reliability of the system itself.

There are essentially two restraint systems to choose from:

1. The Active System. This is a fully automatic deployment system. A small amount of the air bag's air is released by a very sensitive sensor. By using a colorized balloon-shaped device, the air bag is inflated. The inflation is controlled by the Ford Motor Company's encoder system. The inflation is controlled by the Ford Motor Company's encoder system. The inflation is controlled by the Ford Motor Company's encoder system.

2. The Passive System. This is a manually operated deployment system. A small amount of the air bag's air is released by a very sensitive sensor. The inflation is controlled by the Ford Motor Company's encoder system. The inflation is controlled by the Ford Motor Company's encoder system. The inflation is controlled by the Ford Motor Company's encoder system.

WHERE WE COME OUT

At the outset certain conclusions are inevitable:

Indeed, air bag manufacture potentially beneficial, but more development time is needed. To ensure reliability throughout usage and to ensure maximum from the air bag system, we must be vigilant.

We believe in cars that are engineered, not legalized. And as such, we offer you a choice of options. Select and order in the car you buy. We tend to think that you should be able to choose the kind of safety equipment you want.

Send on your thoughts. We listen. And we listen better.

Figure 12. In an attempt to provide information on the air bag mandate and air bag technology, Ford posted advertisements like this listing basic information and common misconceptions, asking for readers to respond via the short questionnaire at the bottom of the advertisement. The Washington Post, June 21, 1971.
The debates over the air bag fit into larger arguments over freedom of choice in the 1970s. On one side of the debate, the air bag represented both automakers and consumers' nostalgia for vehicles past, with emphasis on the performance and styling of cars over the highly politicized, overly regulated designs that focused on environmental and safety issues without sacrificing the convenience and sense of freedom that the automobile represented. However, since the 1950s, automakers knew they needed to sell their product on more than performance and styling, and both developed and marketed areas like safety. Opposition to the passive restraint mandate also takes form in arguments about the place of government in business.

On the other side, the “pro-air bag” supporters were not arguing freedom of choice, but rather that the air bag would reduce fatalities and injuries greatly, and in addition to that, save money, mostly in the realm of insurance. Tests, they claimed, showed that the air bag was reliable.

Allstate Insurance Company approached this debate on the pro-air bag side. They created advertisements for the air bag, participated in automotive meetings and conferences, and interacted with communities in order to educate them on the air bag, what it did, and how it saved lives and prevented injuries. They were the most vocal insurer to push for mandatory air bags in automobiles and purchased 200 air bag-equipped 1972 Mercury Marquis from Ford in order to test the air bag in “real life.” Assigning them to various employees starting with the Chairman of the Board,

\[\text{\textsuperscript{214}}\text{ Cost is an issue on both sides, but for different reasons. For the pro-passive restraint side, saving money through lower insurance premiums and the long-term benefits of lower injury and fatality rates meant also lower costs for consumers. For the anti-passive restraint side, the cost per vehicle of installing an air bag system was consistently an issue, even if that cost was transferred to the vehicle owner. They argued that consumers would balk at high prices and would not purchase the optional safety equipment, or if it was mandated, the automakers would lose profit because of the high manufacturing costs.}\]

Allstate committed to air bags as the best safety device for vehicle occupants in conjunction with seat belts.\textsuperscript{216} An Allstate Vice President stated at an auto industry conference that the company wanted air bags “in the front seat of all cars… We at Allstate are not opposed to mandatory seat belt usage laws, but regard them only as interim measures.”\textsuperscript{217} Allstate’s advertisements and public meetings to discuss safety, and particularly the air bag, provided consumers with more information on the air bag and added to the expanding debate on responsibility in traffic safety.\textsuperscript{218}


\textsuperscript{218} In one news article, by an outspoken opponent of air bags, the author wrote, “for my own part, I still resent the aspect of compulsion – that the government will compel manufacturers to install these devices. But I am persuaded, after listening to the Allstate people for a couple of hours, that I will voluntarily purchase this protection [the air bag] once it becomes available.” James J. Kilpatrick, In Defense of the Auto Safety Air Bag, \textit{The Evening Star and Daily News}, February 15, 1973, “Air Bags,” National Automotive History Collection, Detroit Public Library.
Panic stops, potholes, the roughest driving—even a crash landing off a ramp—didn’t fool the air bag.

The air bag works. But only when it’s needed.

At Allstate, we’ve had a lot of time to get to know about air bags. We’ve seen them in action. We know they work. We believe in them. But you probably haven’t had much chance to get to learn about air bags.

So to help convince you that air bags are reliable, we shipped a few of our 200 airbag-equipped fleet cars out to Arizona for rigorous testing.

The tests were conducted by Dynamic Science, an independent test facility. And the air bags performed just as expected: no surprises, no problems.

Here are the results:

Air bag doesn’t inflate accidentally

Rough roads, pot holes, panic stops—even a ramp jump—didn’t accidentally inflate the air bag.

That’s because air bags employ a special sensing device. It uses technology from the space program. The sensor only activates the air bag in frontal crashes severe enough to cause serious injury.

Air bag does inflate when you need it

Some people worry the air bag won’t go off when it’s supposed to. So we ran one of our cars into a barrier at 17 mph (approximately equivalent to a 34 mph collision with a parked car of equal weight and size).

As you can see, the air bag did its job. Without it, the passenger would have suffered serious injury.

Air bags reliable, road-ready

At Allstate, we think this remarkable thing—the air bag—could become America’s No. 1 life saver. Safety experts at the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration say air bags could save thousands of lives a year. And prevent hundreds of thousands of injuries.

Air bags have been tested and re-tested. They work. They’re reliable.

We’re getting more air bag equipped fleet cars as fast as possible. We say, let’s get air bags into all cars as fast as possible.

Allstate
Let’s make driving a good thing.

Figure 13. An Allstate advertisement advising consumers to purchase airbags, and showing the possible consequences of not doing so. Chicago Tribune, May 24, 1972.
Doctor Arnold Arms didn't intentionally buy his car with air bags. He took them because the car—a 1975 Olds—had all the other features he wanted.

But at 6 p.m. on October 7, 1975, he was glad the car came with air bags. On his way to a house call, after a long day in his office, he lost control of his car and smashed head-on into a bus.

In the doctor's words: "I never saw the air bag inflate or deflate. It was so fast. I had a feeling of numbness. However, I was perfectly conscious and found myself alive after the impact. A policeman was at the scene of the accident within approximately two or three minutes. His comment was that he did not see how I was alive.

"I did have a ligament strain on the knee and I had a hematoma (bruise) on the inner side of my leg below the knee joint. I felt comfortable otherwise... and was able to look at a passenger who was in the bus and make sure that she was safe."

"The next day, I went to the dealers (to buy another car)... They did not have a single car available in Kansas City with air bags... I ordered one with bags, so that I'd have one when they were available. I feel very insecure driving without the bags." "I honestly think that air bags should be... mandatory in all cars...

Allstate is convinced that the air bag has more potential for saving lives than any other system available. The air bag works.

For further information on air bags, just write:

Jack E. Martinez, Automotive Engineering Director,
Allstate Insurance Companies, Allstate Plaza,
Northbrook, Illinois 60062.

Working to hold your insurance costs down.

Figure 14. Allstate used Dr. Arms as the face of the airbag in advertisements promoting air bag installation and legislation in the mid-1970s. New York Times, December 17, 1975.
Returning to the Local: Responsibility at the State and Local Level

In the 1970s, much of the debate around mandatory passive restraints also centered on the federal government’s role in protecting citizens from harm. In a 1977 Editorial in the Des Moines Register focusing on this debate, stating “the issue is whether government has either the right or the duty to protect people from the consequences of their ignorance or folly.”

Into the 1980s, the debates around restraint systems and freedom of choice within automobiles began to shift.

State governments created mandatory active seat belt laws throughout the 1980s, before the passive restraint law finally took effect. By this time, the airbag was touted as a partner to the seatbelt, not as a replacement. However, states began enacting mandatory seat belt laws in 1984, with New York being the first to go into effect in January 1985. By January 1986, eight states had laws requiring seat belt use and, by August 1st of the same year, that number jumped to 26 states. Some state’s legislature’s reasoning for mandatory active seat belt laws were to keep air bags from becoming federal law.

In 1983, the percentage of front-seat vehicle occupants observed wearing seat belts was only 14 percent, a number that stayed steady throughout 1984. By 1986, when 26 of the states enacted seat belt laws, the percentage rose to 37.

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219 “Common Sense on Cars,” The Des Moines Register, July 29, 1977, 20A.
220 State and city governments were previously highly active in promoting traffic safety and educating the public about traffic safety activities especially by working closely with community organizations. Much of the traffic safety work that occurred in the 1930s until the 1960s happened at the state and city level and with heavy input and support from community organizations.
221 The initial eight states in 1985 were New York, New Jersey, Michigan, Illinois, Texas, Nebraska, Missouri, and North Carolina.
The nation-wide nonprofit Traffic Safety Now (TSN), formed in 1984, was a privately funded traffic safety organization whose main goal was to increase seat belt usage throughout the United States. Though they incorporated grassroots organizations, the group was corporately formed and operated. Their founding organizations were a mix of domestic and foreign automakers like Ford Motor Company, Chrysler Corporation, General Motors Corporation, American Honda Motor Co. Inc., Volkswagen of America, Inc., and Volvo North America Corporation. Other partners included the lobby group Automobile Importers of America, Inc., the Motor Vehicle Manufacturers Association (MVMA), the American Seat Belt Council Inc., and the National Automobile Dealers Association. They set up grassroots organizations in every state and the District of Columbia in order to spread their message that seat belt laws saved lives.

However, Traffic Safety Now’s purpose was not only to increase seat belt use, but also to keep the federal mandatory passive restraint law from going into effect in 1989. If strong seat belt laws were enacted in every state by then, the federal passive restraint mandate would no longer be required. Traffic Safety Now justified this by quoting one Chrysler executive, who stated, “even with the government-ordered phase-in of passive restraint systems throughout 1990, it will take until the year 2002 until every car is equipped with air bags or passive restraint belts. Only existing safety-belt systems can save lives and reduce injuries now.” TSN justified their push away from

224 Traffic Safety Now consistently used the term ‘safety belts’ instead of ‘seat belts’ in order to further reinforce the primary purpose of seat belts as lifesaving or injury preventing/reducing devices.
226 Similarly to the Automotive Safety Foundation and the National Highway Users Conference, which were also organized by the auto industry to address traffic safety issues in the period prior to World War II, TSN formed in this period as an industry-exclusive organization focused on industry-benefitting safety initiatives.
passive restraints by stating that too much time would elapse and too many people would be injured or killed before all vehicles had the necessary equipment to save them.

### HOW TO HELP SAVE LIVES AND REDUCE INJURIES AUTOMATICALLY

**THREE-POINT PASSIVE SAFETY BELT SYSTEMS ARE AN EFFECTIVE COMPLEMENT TO BELT-USE LAWS.**

General Motors is equipping 10% of its 1987 model cars with automatic lap/shoulder belt systems for the driver and for the right-hand front seat passenger. It is the first step in meeting a federal requirement to phase in passive restraints.

The automatic systems will be **standard equipment** on most 1987 models of the Pontiac Grand Am and Bonneville, Buick Somerset, Skylark, and LeSabre, and Oldsmobile Calais and Delta 88. By 1990 we plan to equip all GM cars with passive restraint systems.

The belts in the GM system will be connected to the car at three anchor points—one toward the center of the front seat, and two on the front door.

**Three-point automatic lap/shoulder belt systems offer the same advantages as GM's current three-point manual systems.** Lap and shoulder belts allow you to "ride down" the crash as the vehicle absorbs the impact. They also help prevent you from being thrown from the car in an accident, where you are more likely to be killed or seriously injured.

Safety belts have proved effective in reducing injuries and fatalities. That's why GM supports belt-use laws. Automatic lap/shoulder belt systems will make it even easier for people to comply with these laws.

Opening the door pulls the belts forward for entry. Closing it brings the belts into their operating position. A single push button at the center anchor point releases the system in an emergency. Retractors pull the released belts into storage positions on the door.

**Extra attachment points will be built into cars equipped with these systems so you can secure most child restraint systems with an auxiliary lap belt.**

General Motors is pursuing other programs that will help reduce the number and severity of injuries caused by accidents. We are designing energy-absorbing interiors. We are phasing in rear-seat lap/shoulder belts, beginning with some 1987 models—kits will be made available through GM dealers to retrofit most older cars with these systems. And we will be equipping some 1988 model cars with driver-side air bags to supplement safety belts.

General Motors has been a leader in automotive safety because we believe that building safer cars is good for you. And good for us.

*This advertisement is part of our continuing effort to give customers useful information about their cars and trucks and the company that builds them.*

Figure 15. General Motors placed ads like this in newspapers describing how automatic seat belts operated and promoting the Traffic Safety Now agenda—to get consumers to wear their seat belts and support seat belts over air bags. Los Angeles Times, November 30, 1986.

Though the organization was one of many pro-seat belt groups in the 1980s, they recognized that the main issue was still that some consumers saw seat belt laws as an infringement
upon personal freedom of choice. Traffic Safety Now and other seat belt groups began using the common theme that, in a crash, “everyone pays the price.” Pro-seat belt groups recruited insurance representatives, doctors, and others in public health to help inform the public of the increase in insurance rates, medical costs, and other personal expenses that are felt not just by those involved in a crash, but that ripple out and effect the population as a whole.

Though the automakers were embracing the idea of safety, many, like Maine Representative Patrick McGowan, believed that the automakers intent was not to widen the impact of seat belt use. In a June 1988 news article, written at the same time Chrysler was rolling out its air bag initiative, Representative McGowan stated that “they are trying to avoid having to put airbags in their cars... That’s the real motive of why they are putting all that money into campaigns all over the country.” It wasn’t until the late 1980s, when the automakers introduced air bags again and promoted them positively that consumers began to slightly shift positions on the role the auto industry played in traffic safety.

**Conclusion**

By the end of the decade, both automakers and consumers mostly embraced restraint systems in automobiles. In May 1988, Chrysler Motors announced that they had begun installing driver-side airbags as standard equipment in six of their car lines. Launching national advertising campaigns with Chrysler President Lee Iaccoca admitting his previous doubts about safety, and often the air bag in particular, Chrysler tried to lead the auto industry into a new era where safety

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229 “In the debate over the infringements on individual freedom of choice the state’s interests prevail because the costs of medical, rehabilitation, unemployment and welfare services on society supercede the right of an individual to impose those burdens upon society by failing to wear seat belts.” “The Minnesota Mandatory Seat Belt Law: No Right to be Reckless?” Hamline Law Review Rev. 229 vol. 10 (1987): 229
came first. General Motors and Ford also installed air bags in most of their car lines, along with many of the non-U.S. automakers. In 1989, passive restraints in passenger vehicles became mandatory in the United States. By that time, all new vehicles had to come equipped with either airbags or automatic seat belts to meet the new law.

"No one can guarantee safety. But that doesn’t mean the car industry shouldn’t keep trying to do more."

Figure 16. Chrysler ads featuring Lee Iacocca attempted to turn the popular tide regarding personal safety devices like air bags in cars. New York Times, May 24, 1988.
Chapter 3

"I had my doubts about air bags, but today's new technology made me a believer."

Chrysler is the first and only American car company to make air bags standard equipment. When sensors detect a front-end collision of enough force to trigger it, the air bag pops out of the steering wheel trim cover and inflates to help protect the driver's head and chest. It happens in about 50 milliseconds. That's half the time it takes to blink your eye. Then, the bag partially deflates.

"You won't hear any more boasts about air bags from me. The engineers told me that the time is right, and the technology is right. So, on May 15th, we began installing driver-side air bags at no extra cost on Chrysler LeBaron Coupe and Convertible, Chrysler Fifth Avenue, Dodge Daytona, Dodge Diplomat, and Plymouth Gran Fury. By 1990, we'll have air bag safety systems standard on every passenger car. Chrysler Motors Corporation builds in the U.S.

The 50-millisecond miracle.

"I'm amazed at how fast, and how effectively, the air bag works."

"Bags and belts. They go safely together."

"You learn, and you live."

Figure 17. Chrysler ads featuring quotes from President Lee Iacocca stating he was previously wrong about safety devices and that Chrysler would be fully on board with safety moving forward. Wall Street Journal, June 20, 1988.

In the late 1980s, safety systems more often became the way in which consumers made decisions about automobile purchases, and the auto industry began advertising safety features over others. The air bag and seat belt were no longer widely viewed as restrictions on freedom or
questioned as unnecessary options. Their ties to federal regulation also diminished after the mandatory passive restraint law went into effect. Because not all states passed appropriate seat belt laws, by September 1989, all new automobiles were required to have some kind of passive safety system.\textsuperscript{231} Automakers embraced the air bag, and to a lesser extent the automatic seat belt, to help meet this requirement, though they understood that the consumer was incredibly important in the equation, regardless of federal or state mandate.

As the state seat belt use laws and federal passive restraint law went into effect, auto safety devices became objects through which consumers began to understand the ways in which their cars were actively working to protect them. Traffic safety from the consumer standpoint began to shift into a shared relationship between the automobile and the driver, wherein the automobile provided consumers with the tools to be safe and drivers took on more responsibility for their own safety and the safety of their passengers.

The final 1989 passive restraint mandate was for the consumers, but was not a fully consumer-driven movement, and neither was the state-level mandatory seat belt laws. By the end of the 1980s, consumer perceptions of restraints shifted simultaneously with perceptions of safe driving behaviors. By this time, arguments about freedom of choice in automobile safety shifted toward responsibility for driving behaviors, including and mainly focused on impaired driving.

\textsuperscript{231} Passive systems mostly referred to a version of the air bag; however, by the end of the 1980s the mandate could be met by either an air bag or an automatic seat belt. Volkswagen first began developing automatic, or passive, seat belt systems in 1976. Anthony Yanik, A Chronology of Automotive Safety Innovations, “Safety 1974-,” National Automotive History Collection, Detroit Public Library.
Drunk Geniuses and Sober Idiots: Behavioral Solutions to Drunk Driving

On Thursday, September 7, 1967, the Hoffmeister family piled into their 1965 Chevrolet station wagon in Woodbridge, Illinois, headed to a local shopping center. Heading in the opposite direction was Ralph Kusnierz, driving his 1967 Ford convertible intoxicated and at high speeds. Kusnierz swerved through cars and eventually jumped a curb, colliding head-on with the Hoffmeister’s station wagon. The crash killed Kusnierz and the entire Hoffmeister family – Arthur and Paula Hoffmeister, their five children, and Paula’s parents, John and Esther Brubaker. Chemical tests of Kusnierz’s blood found intoxication levels well above the limit considered impaired.232

Newspapers across the United States featured news of the crash, each lamenting the loss of three generations of one family, and noting the part that alcohol played in the crash. More, news articles pointed to Kusnierz’s driving record and multiple previous violations, starting in 1956.233 The Chicago Daily News printed Kusnierz’s driving record on the front page above the fold, along with a story about the crash.234 The Chicago Tribune followed the story closely, one of the worst traffic crashes in Illinois history, noting calls for license revocation for repeat traffic law violators by traffic officials.235

233 The Chicago Tribune printed a list of Kusnierz’s driving record on September 9, 1967. Starting in April 1956 with a ticket for an improper turn, Kusnierz was ticketed again in May 1956, and arrested multiple times over the next decade, in November 1958, July 1962, August 1963, October 1963, and December 1964. One of those arrests, in October 1963, was for driving while intoxicated, resulting in a license revocation. In June 1965 and January 1966, his revocation was extended until it was finally returned in February 1966. In February 1967, his license was suspended for lack of insurance, reinstated in March, and suspended again in June 1967, with a final reinstatement in July 1967.
In the aftermath of the Hoffmeister crash, and many others like it, the typical rhetoric referred to the crash as an “unfortunate accident” and unavoidable. The phrase “There but for the grace of God go I” was often evoked in discussions of crashes involving fatalities, especially where alcohol played a role. During memorial reflections for the Hoffmeister family, Father Kucera, the Hoffmeister’s Reverend, stated that the question “why did this happen” was not “for the human mind to ponder.” He added that the crash “emblazoned across the windshields of our minds the working of God’s will,” further emphasizing the belief that when one is driving, they only have so much control over the situation. Further, in case the Hoffmeister crash, Sheriff Lawrence Springborn stated that the road was dry and the section where the crash occurred had no curves, and that, in reference to Kusnierz’s drinking and driving, “it was just one of those things – he lost control,” again shifting blame away from the drunk driver and into the realm of the unknown or uncontrollable.

Four years later, in 1971, *The Saturday Evening Post* recounted the Hoffmeister crash, using it as an example of the lack of solutions for the drinking and driving problem. By the early 1970s, societal attitudes around drinking and driving began to shift nationally as safety experts revealed that alcohol played a defining role in over half the auto fatalities that occurred each year. Federal government safety experts worked with state and local law enforcement and state traffic safety agencies to create awareness programs on the dangers of drinking and driving, not only to ones’ health and life but also on the penalties associated with getting caught. Automobile companies researched and developed behavioral solutions to monitor driver behavior and stop

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237 “Driver’s Last Offense Fatal to 10: Speed, Drinking Arrests Found on Record,” *Chicago Tribune* Sept 9, 1967: A4
238 Brown, “The Killer Drunk.”
those who were impaired. However, one key part of this awareness involved changing American social views of alcohol use. This battle would be hard fought throughout the 1970s and 1980s, with citizen activists at the forefront of the movement.

In this chapter, I examine the various attempts to construct solutions to the drinking and driving problem in the 1970s and 1980s. With the widespread realization by safety experts and the American public that alcohol played a defining role in over half of the fatal traffic crashes each year since the end of World War II, and that this number continued to grow, many government safety experts, auto engineers, and citizen activists pushed for drunk driving reform. Widespread, victim-focused citizen activism in the 1980s provided a catalyst to turn drunk driving into a nationally recognized problem that required behavioral, institutional, and technological solutions. Weaved throughout all potential solutions to the problem of drunk driving were behavioral changes to Americans' understanding of the relationship between driving and alcohol use.

The ultimate goal of ending drinking and driving fatalities and injuries required input and collaboration from various groups. One of the major tasks for traffic safety experts was to define what a problem versus social drinker was in the context of driving, and what behaviors constituted problem driving. Safety experts wanted to break apart and separate social norms tied to both driving and drinking, so that Americans no longer hesitated to stop a drunk person from driving. Automotive safety engineers approached this problem within a technological framework and attempted to create technological solutions to drunk driving. On the other hand, both government officials and citizen activists worked to create people-oriented solutions through educational programs, victim advocacy, public outreach programs, and changes to the legal, political, and social institutions of alcohol use and drunk driving.
By examining drinking and driving as a “bad behavior” and the institutional solutions to ending it, the multiple-decade effort to define and correct the problem succeeded, but only in specific ways. The dominant understanding of drinking and its effects on the body by the American public largely expands from anti-drinking and driving campaigns that began in the 1970s and dominated the 1980s by community activist groups like Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD). Their knowledge of alcoholism and alcohol, however, is secondary to their own expertise as traffic safety experts and community leaders. The anti-drinking and driving efforts in the 1970s and 1980s led to large-scale institutional and cultural shifts in the understanding of alcohol and its use; however, drinking and driving remained a major traffic safety priority.

Creating the Problem of the “Drinking Driver”

Late twentieth century concepts of alcoholism as a disease began to emerge around 1940, and institutions of alcohol studies at universities across the United States dominated literature with the idea that alcoholism was a treatable medical disease. Traffic safety experts working on the drunk driving problem in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s centered their beliefs on alcoholism around E.M. Jellinek’s *Disease Concept of Alcoholism*, which listed stages of alcoholism. In this model, alcohol dependence was as a medical illness and physical addiction. Progressive stages of alcohol use could not be controlled, and each was distinguished by various symptoms. The alcohol itself was given agency and control over the drinker.\(^{239}\)

As new literature emerged on the nature of alcoholism, the American driving public’s perceptions of drinking and driving crashes shifted, along with their cause. At the end of Prohibition, as drinking became a legal activity again, many Americans did not want the

government infringing upon their drinking again. The development of alcoholism as a medical disease in the mid-twentieth century also shifted Americans' views of how alcoholics and alcoholism should be treated – not by punishment but through medical treatment. The anti-drunk driving movement worked to change perceptions of both the concept of the drunk driving crash and the drunk driver, turning the drunk driver into a self-indulgent, out of control menace. By positioning the drunk driving movement as a public health and safety issue, the movement leaders successfully created the “reemergence of the perception of alcohol problems as those produced by people who made trouble rather than those from troubled people.”

During the traffic safety movement in the 1960s, Doctor William Haddon, the first director of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), acknowledged the problem of both drunk driving and its association with crashes in this context. However, the automotive industry acknowledged at the time that while drinking and driving occurred, the best course of action would be to mitigate injury in case of a crash. In the initial years after the founding of the DOT, the NHTSA focused on making vehicles safer. As the results of early DOT efforts to make vehicles safer marked improvements in injury and fatality rates, the rates at which alcohol played a factor in crashes remained constant.

One of the key requirements of the Highway Safety Act of 1966 was a study of the relationship between alcohol use, highway safety, and motor vehicle operation. The initial report, submitted in 1968, found that alcohol use by drivers and pedestrians lead to at least 25,000 deaths and at least 800,000 crashes per year. Prior to the 1970s, methods for controlling drunk driving focused heavily on law enforcement activities and penalties for those convicted. Problematically,

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as drinking and driving was not viewed as a pervasive, negative issues in American society, law enforcement and courts often did not ticket, arrest, or convict drunk drivers.\textsuperscript{241}

In the late 1960s, official NHTSA data revealed that over 50 percent of traffic fatalities each year were alcohol-related. The insurance industry estimated alcohol use by drivers and pedestrians lead to roughly 30,000 fatalities and 800,000 injuries each year.\textsuperscript{242} Traffic safety experts needed to define who they considered to be the drinking driver. It was important to make the distinction that not all people who drank, were unable to drive. Previous traffic safety campaigns targeting drinking and driving emphasized this all or nothing “if you drink, don’t drive” mentality and failed,\textsuperscript{243} and traffic safety experts in the early 1970s realized that the first step in their approach must be to educate themselves and the public on the various types of drinkers, the ways that alcohol effects driving ability, and, most importantly, how to change the social norms around drinking and driving.

To understand the drinking and driving problem, safety experts first defined drinking behavior. Many post-World War II safety experts relied on medical expertise and, in particular, the prevalent view of alcoholism as a disease, to understand drinking behavior. They used this information to create anti-drinking and driving campaigns and create a new identity based on the risks and damage the drinking driver caused.

A new approach to drinking and driving emerged in the U.S. from the initial results of the British Road Safety Act of 1967, which limited the blood alcohol content (BAC) of drivers and introduced scientific testing through the heavy use of breath testers by police to drunk driving

\textsuperscript{242} U.S. National Highway Safety Bureau, \textit{Alcohol Safety Countermeasures Program}.
Traffic safety experts in the 1960s believed that crashes were caused by a multitude of factors working together. The correlation between drunk driving and crashes, however, was based on scientific evidence of a cause-and-effect relationship between the two. Traffic safety experts and many citizens believed excessive drinking contributed to fatal crashes, what began to emerge in the 1960s and 1970s was the realization that drinking in moderation and driving also lead to increased risk of fatal crashes.

The two main categories of drinkers by traffic safety experts used were “social drinkers” and “problem drinkers” or “alcoholics.” Social drinkers were portrayed as people who drink on occasion, probably on the weekends or at social functions. To experts and the American public, they were normal drinkers. Problem drinkers were habitual drinkers, potentially with previous drunk driving arrests, or other drinking-related arrests, as well as family or career issues. They constituted a small number of drivers comparatively; however, enforcement efforts were mostly focused on this population of drivers. Many police narratives existed in the media about these

244 The British Road Safety Act of 1967 was viewed as almost immediately successful in lowering rates of fatalities and injuries from drinking and driving crashes. Largely contributing to the effect was the general impression that severe penalties would be sanctioned on drivers who drank more than the legal limit. However, the fatality and injury rates began to return to previous levels as drivers realized punishment was not as strict or often as they imagined. H. Laurence Ross wrote of this phenomenon in Law, Science, and Accidents – The British Road Safety Act of 1967, not uncommon to other enforcement-based drinking and driving campaigns, “that public expectations were not met reflects in part the inherent difficulty in identifying the drinking driver while he is at the wheel. The breath test was not intended to solve this problem.” H. Laurence Ross, Law, Science, and Accidents – The British Road Safety Act of 1967 (Chicago: American Bar Association, 1973), 67.
246 Ross, Law, Science, and Accidents.
drivers and their multiple arrests for drunk driving, some with incidents resulting in injuries and fatalities to other drivers. Despite multiple arrests, many still continued to drive drunk, with or without a valid license.\textsuperscript{248}

Problem drinkers were also defined in terms of their relationship to drinking and driving. NHTSA distinguished between problem drinkers and alcoholics in their pamphlets to citizens by using medical definitions - an alcoholic was a problem drinker, often with a diagnosis of alcoholism. NHTSA also considered problem drinkers to be deviant from society. The problem drinker would often drive with a Blood Alcohol Content (BAC) of 0.15% or higher, while social drinkers stayed within lower BAC limits.\textsuperscript{249}

\textsuperscript{248} Like the Hoffmeister crash and Ralph Kusnierz, news often printed the driving history of drunk driving offenders. One example from 1971 stated that one person had six crashes in 10 years, injuring one and killing another. His licensed had been revoked twice, but he continued to drive, and had been arrested for 19 major traffic violations. At the time of writing, that person was still driving. The officer interviewed stated “after a while it’s like banging your head against a wall. What do you do about it? I don’t know.” \textit{New York Times} March 14, 1971: 72.

Figure 18. Alcohol Safety Countermeasures Program chart showing the relationship between blood alcohol level (same as BAC) and risk of crash. The chart also emphasizes responsible drinking and problem drinking, tying them to driving. U.S. National Highway Safety Bureau, Alcohol Safety Countermeasures Program, 6-13.

Government traffic safety and alcohol experts and auto insurers created advertisements in the 1970s targeting this new definition of the “problem drinker” and how to spot one. Often, the ads portrayed middle class families who, from outward appearances, looked as though they were not alcoholics. This attempted to break the notion of the “alcoholic” as homeless or “on skid row.” Many suburban Americans relegated the world of alcoholism and addiction to poor

neighborhoods and cities, thinking that it did not happen to them. These advertisements and the 1970s targeting of new drunk driving education was marketed at the middle-class American who thought, “that could never happen to me.” Instead, the advertisements aimed to change the general understanding of acceptable alcohol use in the home. Having a drink or two with others was acceptable, drinking alone or in excess was deemed unacceptable and irresponsible behavior.

Figure 19. Early 1970s Alcohol Safety Action Project campaigns focused on addressing the stereotype of the problem drinker and breaking the taboos around excessive drinking behavior. James W. Swinehart and Ann C. Grimm, Public Information Programs on Alcohol and Highway Safety: Proceedings of a National Conference of Governmental, Commercial and Voluntary Organizations (Ann Arbor, MI: Highway Safety Research Institute, 1972), 85.
Many campaigns were focused toward men. In a 1972 national conference of traffic safety experts, industry and community organizations, they saw masculinity as one of the main themes to address, stating stereotypes around ‘real men’ and their ability to hold their liquor. Drinking and driving, then, resulted in “a challenge to insecure males to prove to those around them that they can function well even after they have had a lot of alcohol.” Using other major public health campaigns as examples, experts suggested campaigns that recognized the “manliness” in realizing when to stop drinking and saying no.

“My son Robbie couldn’t be a problem drinker. He’s only 17.”

Figure 20. Alcohol Safety Action Project ad targeting parents of teenagers. The advertisements sought to address rising drinking and automobile fatality rates among teenagers in the early 1970s. James W. Swinehart and Ann C. Grimm, Public Information Programs on Alcohol and Highway Safety: Proceedings of a National Conference of Governmental, Commercial and Voluntary Organizations (Ann Arbor, MI: Highway Safety Research Institute, 1972), 89.

Associations creating campaigns to change the understanding of social drinking also shifted the nature of social gatherings. Pamphlets encouraged hosts and hostesses to monitor guests’ behavior and, if someone had too much alcohol, not let them drive their car home. Hosts and hostesses in this sense became an extension of the traffic safety enforcement world, monitoring

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and controlling guest behavior. If the guest drank too much, it was the imperative of the host or hostess to remove the choice from their guest and instead call them a taxi or offer them a space to stay in their house for the night.\textsuperscript{252}

The American drinking public also had to reexamine the way they understood the effects alcohol had on their body and ability to drive. Social drinkers understanding of blood alcohol content (BAC) and the way it was interpreted by police differed. Many social drinkers believed that one or two alcoholic drinks meant that they were at 0.05 or 0.07 percent blood alcohol content and, if pulled over by a police officer, would be arrested for drunk driving. This assumption arose from the misunderstanding of who was drinking and driving, how much they were drinking, and when they were doing it. Social drinkers believed that those who were arrested for drunk driving were social drinkers like them, having one or two drinks at a social event and then unfortunately “unlucky” enough to get caught driving afterward. On the contrary, research studies showed that in the majority of fatal crashes involving alcohol, the drunk driver had a BAC well above 0.05 or 0.07 percent. Safety experts and citizens alike needed to create a correlation between the relationship of BAC to alcoholic drinks consumed.\textsuperscript{253} To safety experts, the drunk driver who was arrested was not typically a social drinker who consumed a drink or two at a social event, instead that person was a problem drinker or alcoholic, who likely had issues with his or her family or job, and who consistently drank large quantities of alcohol on a regular basis.

\textsuperscript{252} A Message to my Patients pamphlet, June 1979, “Driving- Drunk,” National Automotive History Collection, Detroit Public Library.
\textsuperscript{253} U.S. National Highway Safety Bureau, \textit{Alcohol Safety Countermeasures Program}. 
Chapter 4

WHAT KIND OF DRINKER ARE YOU?
TAKE THIS TEST AND FIND OUT FOR YOURSELF.

☐ 1. Do you think and talk about drinking often?
☐ 2. Do you drink more now than you used to?
☐ 3. Do you sometimes gulp drinks?
☐ 4. Do you often take a drink to help you relax?
☐ 5. Do you drink when you are alone?
☐ 6. Do you sometimes forget what happened while you were drinking?
☐ 7. Do you keep a bottle hidden somewhere—at home or at work—for quick pick-me-ups?
☐ 8. Do you need a drink to have fun?
☐ 9. Do you ever just start drinking without really thinking about it?
☐ 10. Do you drink in the morning to relieve a hangover?

If you had four or more 'yes' answers, you may be one of the nine million Americans with a drinking problem.
For a free booklet, write: N.I.A.A.A., Box 2045, Rockville, Md. 20852

Figure 21. Magazine quiz created by the US Department of Health, Education, and Welfare in the early 1970s to self-diagnose alcoholism. The test asks about commonly assumed behaviors of alcoholics, encouraging test takers to contact the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism for more information. It could also be used to understand the symptoms of a family member or friend’s alcoholism. In addition to the magazine ad, they also created a game show style television ad. James W. Swinehart and Ann C. Grimm, Public Information Programs on Alcohol and Highway Safety: Proceedings of a National Conference of Governmental, Commercial and Voluntary Organizations (Ann Arbor, MI: Highway Safety Research Institute, 1972), 105.
By the late 1980s, understanding the variations in driver BAC levels shifted from social drinker and problem drinker, to impaired and intoxicated or drunk drivers. Now, drivers whose BAC was in the 0.01 to 0.09 percent range were impaired. Those with high BACs of over 0.10 percent fell into the intoxicated or drunk driver category. Sober drivers were only those whose BAC could be listed as 0.00 percent.\textsuperscript{254}

**Drunk Driving Deterrence and Controlling the Problematic Driver**

Though Alcohol Safety Action Programs (ASAP) increased apprehension of drunk drivers in the 1970s, they did so at the expense of increased police resources and the use of surveillance to monitor traditional behavioral cues.\textsuperscript{255} State and local safety councils educated drivers on how to determine if another driver was intoxicated, and what to do in that situation. They juxtaposed non-drunk drivers, or ‘defensive’ drivers with drunk drivers, who broke not only safety rules but social driving rules. According to the Greater Los Angeles Chapter of the National Safety Council, the drunk driver may honk excessively, drive with his/her window down despite outside weather conditions, brake erratically and unnecessarily, signal incorrectly, or swerve across lanes.\textsuperscript{256} Drunk driving activists also pushed the auto industry and federal government to find a technological solution to drunk driving.

The interlock device has a history unrelated to the drunk driving movement but tied to the larger traffic safety movement. In the 1970s, as the federal government attempted to mandate seat belt usage for front seat occupants, they also temporarily mandated the use of the ignition interlock


\textsuperscript{255} Ross, *Law, Science, and Accidents*.

which, in this case, would not allow the vehicle to start until the driver’s seat belt was fastened.\footnote{Reppy, “The Automobile Airbag.”}

After public backlash at what was seen as an infringement of individual freedom and personal annoyance, Congress rescinded the interlock mandate and the idea fell out of favor until it was reintroduced as a solution for drunk driving crash reduction in the 1980s. By that time, and for that use, the general public accepted the interlock as an acceptable response to drunk driving.

The ignition interlock, a breathalyzer system installed in the cars of those charged with drunk driving offenses, locks the starter system of the car if the driver has above a certain blood alcohol content, most often zero. The breathalyzer ignition interlock was broadly accepted as an appropriate solution to the drunk driving problem by the American public in the 1980s.

But earlier alcohol ignition systems developed in the 1970s required a different type of interaction from drivers. General Motors developed various types of behavioral and chemical systems to stop drunk drivers. These included a behavioral- or psychomotor-type system a keyboard input type they called the Phystester, and later through a collaboration with NHTSA, a Critical Tracking Task (CTT) system. According to a GM safety engineer, the CTT originated as a NASA pilot test but was then modified by GM into a “behavior test requiring eye-hand coordination and reaction time.” Drivers had to keep an oscillating needle inside a meter for 10 seconds in order to start their car. These tests were not only to keep drunk drivers off the road, but also to deter drugged and drowsy drivers as well.\footnote{These were installed in some offender’s cars, but widespread implementation did not occur.}

Traffic safety experts were concerned with test accuracy. Some tests developed in the 1970s were based on driver behavior, including the Phystester and the Critical Tracking Task.
(CTT), both of which were developed by the automotive industry.259 At the same time, engineers working with the federal government developed breath-based testing devices, like the Alcohol Safety Interlock System (ASIS) which would become the widely-used breathalyzer interlock in the 1980s.260 Critics worried that the devices would stop drivers from operating their vehicles quickly in emergencies. Engineers and designers working on technologies like the CTT and Phystester in the 1970s were also asking similar questions about restrictions on sober drives, how to incorporate tests for drowsy or drugged drivers, and how to market in-car drunk driving solutions to those not convicted of drunk driving offenses. GM engineer Trevor O. Jones stated, “one problem with the device is that sober idiots have been left stranded while some drunken geniuses have beaten it and started their cars.”261

By the 1980s, in-car breathalyzer systems were viewed as ways to both punish drunk drivers and also change their behavior, as fines, jail terms, and license revocation were proving ineffective at deterrence. Drivers that were legally forced to use the in-car breathalyzer, however, found many ways to get around it, including storing air in a balloon for later use or having a sober friend blow into the device for them – issues that the previous alcohol ignition system designers were attempting to avoid in the 1970s.

Citizen Activism and Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) in the 1980s

On August 4, 1983, a member of the Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), Michigan State Coordinating Committee sat in a court room awaiting the trial of a drunk driving suspect.

259 General Motors Critical Tracking Task pamphlet, “Driving-Drunk,” National Automotive History Collection, Detroit Public Library.
260 E. Donald Susman, Philip W. Davis, and Andrew Warner, Automatic Detection of Intoxicated Drivers, SAE, “Driving-Drunk, National Automotive History Collection, Detroit Public Library.
MADD asked members to observe drunk driving cases to monitor which judges and prosecutors were too lenient with sentencing and which properly followed the current drunk driving laws in each state. She wrote in her notebook that the man on trial was already on probation for a previous driving offense from May 1983. This time, he was back in court after police suspected the motorcycle he was riding was stolen, only to find he was instead drinking and driving. Ironically, he told officers he was on the way to an alcohol rehabilitation program when he was pulled over. According to her notes, the judge revoked his probation and committed him to a correctional institution for one to two years, with the possibility for appeal after 60 days.

To MADD, this case was an example of a common phenomenon that played out for decades prior in courtrooms throughout the United States, and one of their main goals was to change the perception of effective and proper punishment for drunk drivers. In 1980, Candy Lightner founded Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) after a repeat-offender drunk driver killed her daughter. MADD consistently used the story of Candy Lightner’s daughter Cari’s death and the injury and subsequent death of Laura Lamb, and the subsequent founding of MADD, as the center of their organization and mission. MADD, and similar community activist groups at the

262 MADD Coordinating Committee Minutes notebook, Box 1, Mothers Against Drunk Driving-Michigan Chapter Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.
263 MADD changed their name to “Mothers Against Drunk Driving” from “Mothers Against Drunk Drivers” in the mid-1980s to place more emphasis on the act of drinking and driving and the victim, instead of on the drinking driver.
264 At five months old, Laura Lamb became the youngest quadriplegic in the United States in 1979. She and her mother were involved in a crash with a drunk driver, who had 37 previous convictions, and slammed into their car head-on. Her mother played an active role in MADD’s early years, along with Candy Lightner. Peggy Mann, “Death on the ‘High’-Way,” The Saturday Evening Post, September 1981.
265 Official MADD documents discuss Cari’s death in a specific way. Cari is portrayed as a bright, happy 13-year-old girl who was out having a fun day with a friend, walking to a carnival. On the other hand, the documents portray the drunk driver as a repeat offender, who was released from jail two days prior, and had previous drunk driving and reckless driving charges against him. Though he is portrayed by his poor driving record, there is also a critique of the judicial
time such as Remove Intoxicated Drivers (RID) and Students Against Drunk Drivers (SADD), organized with a focus to end drunk driving and support victims and their families. The goals of these community activist organizations were straightforward: end drunk driving through community education, more stringent punishment, and new and better laws to deter and punish those who do choose to drink.

Though similar to many of the government efforts of the 1970s, the community activism of the 1980s differed in a crucial way as it also put a heavy emphasis on the victims of drunk driving crashes. Telling the stories of victims through massive media campaigns created a new national moral outrage at the death and injury inflicted upon those they saw as innocent victims, many of whom were children, of drunk drivers. The activist work done by MADD and other similar community activist organizations helped shift drunk driving into the realm of deviant behavior for the majority of Americans.

Both Cari Lightner’s and Laura Lamb’s stories, told numerous times throughout the history of MADD, weave a descriptive narrative about a “normal” day gone terribly wrong – a narrative that is often repeated in MADD’s victim activism work. It is this narrative that allowed MADD to give a human face to drunk driving and create a public space for discourse to occur. Regarding Cari Lightner’s story, Sociologist Frank Weed stated that, “Candace Lightner presented the image system that kept him from serving full sentences or reduced his charges. Within the story of Cari’s death is MADD’s message to fight for victim’s rights and push for stronger penalties for drunk drivers. By portraying the drunk driver and victim this way, MADD also pushes the boundaries of public acceptance for drunk driving and puts more emphasis on victim’s rights. MADD National Headquarters documents, Box 1, Mothers Against Drunk Driving-Michigan Chapter, Box 1, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

Remove Intoxicated Drivers (RID) and Students Against Drunk Drivers (SADD) were the most vocal community activist group, in addition to MADD, in the 1980s. However, no anti-drunk driving group reached the level of notoriety of MADD, thanks in part to its founder, Candy Lightner.
of the angry bereaved parent who regarded herself as a victim. She developed a concept of victim that extends beyond the individual directly harmed, so that family members or friends of the person injured or killed in a drunk-driving crash can all claim that they are the victims of a crime.\footnote{267}

MADD’s focus on the victims of drunk driving coupled with their advocacy for large-scale changes to drunk driving laws at the national and state levels made some advocates for drunk driving law reform call them a so-called “missing link” between government and the public in bringing drinking and driving to the forefront of American public health and safety concerns in the 1980s.\footnote{268}

MADD publicly stated that previous work by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) and other government agencies had little impact on the overall drinking and driving culture in the United States. MADD’s goal was to bring the problem of drinking and driving to the widespread attention of the American public, mainly through victim advocacy. According to them, MADD is effective not only because they are a grassroots organization, but because their members are from “all walks of life.”\footnote{269} What made MADD stand out from previous efforts to target drunk driving was their targeted impact on the public. As Sociologist Joseph Gusfield wrote,

The very name, MADD, presents the symbols that carry an expressive imagery. ‘Mothers puts the issue in a framework of violence against children. ‘Against’ provides an emotional sense of battle and enemies. ‘Drunk drivers’ provides an image of the DUI as socially irresponsible and out of self-control. This is the ‘killer drunk’ who constitutes the villain

\footnote{269} MADD Organizing a Chapter Guidelines, Box 1, Mothers Against Drunk Driving-Michigan Chapter, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.
of the story. MADD has brought into the public arena the emotional and dramatic expression of the public as victim.\textsuperscript{270}

MADD’s mission statement reads, “The mission of Mothers Against Drunk Driving is to stop drunk driving, support the victims of this violent crime and prevent underage drinking.”\textsuperscript{271} Much of the organization’s earliest work centered on changing peoples’ perceptions of car crashes involving alcohol. MADD’s descriptions of drunk driving crashes carefully emphasized who was at fault and the complete innocence of the victim. They actively avoided the word “accident,” instead adopting the word “crash,” like government officials before them, and worked to change who was considered the victim – not the drunk driver but the person injured or killed in the crash. As medical doctor and historian Barron Lerner stated, “an accident connoted an unfortunate act of God, not something that could - or should - be prevented.”\textsuperscript{272} By the 1980s, MADD set out to change the idea that a drunk driving crash was not an accident, but rather the “conscious act of someone who had deliberately disregarded both the law and any semblance of decent behavior.”\textsuperscript{273}

In their early chapter organization guidelines, MADD national provided new state chapters with policies to avoid. MADD further defined their use of crash over accident, describing drunk driving crashes as crimes. MADD stated that chapter members should never use the term “accident” to describe a drunk driving crash. Victim advocacy was growing in the late 1970s, and victims of some crimes already had legal rights and protections; thus, by referring to drunk driving

\textsuperscript{271} MADD Organizing a Chapter Guidelines, Box 1, Mothers Against Drunk Driving-Michigan Chapter, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.
\textsuperscript{273} Lerner, \textit{One for the Road}, 9.
crash victims as crime victims, this would give them more leverage with the police, in court, and in terms of any compensation that may come from an ultimate drunk driving conviction.\footnote{274}

Drunk driving activism in the early 1980s found its place alongside more conservative forms of activism that were emerging – activist concern that focused on drug addition, domestic violence, and rising crime rates. Driving many of these initiatives was the relatively new focus on victim’s rights. Many of these activists believed that the legal system focused too heavily on criminals without providing support to victims. Through consistent telling of victim’s stories – wherein a drunk driver, most likely a recidivist seemingly with no remorse for his or her actions, killed an innocent, young, sober victim – the drunk driving crash turned from being an ‘accident’ to an avoidable tragedy, and the victim was no longer the drunk driver whose rights were in jeopardy from harsh punishment, but the person injured or killed and their family.

To activists and safety experts, car crashes, and more specifically drunk driving crashes, could be prevented. And, those who drove drunk were most likely repeat offenders, even if they had never been caught before. One of MADD’s organizational goals and earliest hurdles was to change this view of the drunk driver – they had to take the individual who chose to drink and drive out of that one instance of drinking and put their crash into a larger context of prior, regular drunk driving, and frame that against the innocent victim.

But simply shifting the focus from the driver to the victim would not end drinking and driving. In their 1982 national policy guidelines for chapters, MADD laid out four major approaches to addressing the drunk driving problem.\footnote{275} These approaches were similar to those

\footnote{274} MADD-Michigan documents, Box 1, Mothers Against Drunk Driving-Michigan Chapter, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

\footnote{275} These four approaches were “Legal,” “Health/Legal,” “Community Education and Public Information,” and “Technological.”
taken by government agencies trying to tackle drinking and driving in the past. MADD recognized the need to approach the drunk driving problem with various methods. Though they initially had limited resources, the national organization outlined four major approaches to solving the problem, and the ways in which each has succeeded and failed. In the early 1980s, MADD focused on two of the four approaches in particular, the legal and community education and public information approaches, while leaving the other approaches, health/legal and technological, to organizations with more experience and resources with which to more readily handle them.276

The legal approach was considered the oldest approach to the drunk driving problem. This approach is based on the idea that the threat of punishment will deter social drinkers from driving. British officials reported minimal success with this approach in the British Road Safety Act of 1967; tougher laws initially deter drinking and driving. However, as people realize that the chance of being caught is small and punishment is minimal, previous levels of drunk driving incidents return after a period of time.277

MADD also chose to focus its early efforts on what it called the “Community Education and Public Information” approach. This approach was also most notably used in anti-drunk driving campaigns by governmental agencies, industry, and citizen activist groups. Post-prohibition alcohol education emphasized abstinence in moralistic tones with messages based around the line “Don’t Drink.” After World War II, as teen drinking and driving came into focus as a widespread problem, many organizations focused their efforts around the messages “Don’t Drink and Drive”

276 MADD Organizing a Chapter Guidelines, Box 1, Mothers Against Drunk Driving-Michigan Chapter, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.
277 MADD Organizing a Chapter Guidelines, Box 1, Mothers Against Drunk Driving-Michigan Chapter, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.
and “If you drink, don’t drive.” Both sought to keep drinking and driving as separate, isolated activities.

The two other approaches recognized that drinking and driving often occurred in the same social situations, and aimed to redefine social behaviors around the acceptance of drinking and driving. “Drink Responsibly” campaigns promoted “responsible” drinking through stopping before one is seriously impaired. In the early 1980s, “Drink Responsibly” was often used in alcohol education; however, little evidence existed that it affected the rates of alcohol-related crashes among young drivers.

The “Intervene to Help Others” approach, relatively new in the early 1980s, involved reaching out and stopping another person from drinking and driving. This often came across in messages like “Friends Don’t Let Friends Drive Drunk.” MADD noted that recent studies showed that messages like this had impacted younger audiences under the age of 25. Much of MADD’s outreach work used this technique, as they looked at teen drivers as a major target audience.  

\[^{278}MADD\text{ Organizing a Chapter Guidelines, Box 1, Mothers Against Drunk Driving-Michigan Chapter, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.}\]
Figure 22. Even the Licensed Beverage Industry adopted the mantra "Friends Don't Let Friends Drive Drunk" in the early 1980s. Advertisement MADD-Michigan documents, Box 1, Mothers Against Drunk Driving-Michigan Chapter, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.
MADD reminded its local and state chapter members that they are always educating their communities, families, and friends when they speak about MADD. They used intervention strategies for drinking and driving when talking to friends and family, telling members to drive an inebriated friend or family member home, call them a taxi, or otherwise keep them from driving. They also provided analogies for drinking and driving to put what they considered the risk to themselves and the community in perspective. The MADD guidelines gave the example: “We do not allow someone to run around our neighborhood with a loaded gun, but we will tolerate our friends drinking and driving. THERE IS REALLY NO DIFFERENCE. THINK ABOUT IT.”

MADD’s focus on community education also created a secondary focus on educating members and non-members on how to speak up about how alcohol abuse and driving is portrayed. MADD leadership encouraged individuals to further make drinking and driving socially unacceptable behaviors. To do this, they encouraged individuals to ask groups they belonged to – churches, professional organizations, clubs – to sponsor drunk driving programs. They hoped individuals would speak out against representations of drinking and driving as fun, acceptable, or amusing behavior. Members often wrote letter campaigns to media outlets in order to change the representation of alcohol use and driving on television shows.

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279 MADD Organizing a Chapter Guidelines, Box 1, Mothers Against Drunk Driving-Michigan Chapter, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

280 MADD Organizing a Chapter Guidelines, Box 1, Mothers Against Drunk Driving-Michigan Chapter, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

281 As one example, the Harvard Alcohol Project emerged from the Harvard School of Public Health as an institutional program that worked with media to engage audiences in anti-drunk driving messages and behavior. The Harvard Alcohol Project successfully introduced the concept of the “designated driver” into American sitcoms in the 1980s and worked with groups to hone in on messages regarding responsible alcohol representations on television. Jay Winsten, *The Designated Driver Campaign: Status Report* (Boston: Center for Health Communication, Harvard School of Public Health, 1990).
Choosing to focus on the legal and community education approaches allowed MADD members to take on multiple roles – as drunk driving victims, as advocates for legal reform, and as safety experts for their communities. MADD believed that a combination of approaches would best reduce, and eventually eliminate, the drinking and driving problem. Interestingly, MADD activists called not for tougher drunk driving laws, but tougher enforcement of existing laws, creating a tighter link between law enforcement and citizens who were slowly coming around to the consensus that law enforcement and judicial system should strictly prosecute drunk drivers.

Victim stories brought to light the legal system that allowed drinking drivers to continue to drive drunk – sparking further outrage not only at the drivers but at the government and industries, like alcohol, hospitality, and media, that citizens saw as instigators of the issue. The countless stories, that were all incredibly similar in media retellings of the events, reached an American public that had previously been complacent about the actual devastation that drinking and driving caused. MADD’s media campaigns created a general sense of moral outrage that not enough was being done to counteract drinking and driving.

In the early 1980s, MADD, along with another national activist organization, Remove Intoxicated Drivers (RID), worked with the traffic safety experts in the federal government on a proposed plan to raise the national drinking age to 21 in an effort to reduce drunk driving related crashes. In July 1984, with drunk driving activists at his side, President Reagan signed the National Minimum Legal Drinking Age Act. States were incentivized to adopt the legal drinking age of 21 by the treat of withholding federal highway construction funds.\textsuperscript{282}

MADD and other activists also worked on programs in support of this legislative activity. Continuing their roles as special experts and in consultation with medical practitioners, drunk

\textsuperscript{282} The last state complied and received its federal highway funds in 1987.
driving activists appealed to the public through discussions of alcohol’s effects on developing brains, performance issues at school, and on moral issues like abstinence. Backlash against the lowering of the legal Blood Alcohol Content (BAC) level from 0.15 percent to 0.08 percent, a struggle that had been ongoing since the 1960s, was met with traffic studies and police reports stating that a lowered BAC did not overwhelm the legal system and that, according to completed studies by NHTSA and other agencies, lowering BAC actually played a role in reducing alcohol-related car crashes.²⁸³

**MADD and the Technological Approach to Drunk Driving**

The heavy focus by the federal government on technological solutions to safety and behavioral issues, mostly in the form of passive restraints, provided MADD with the opportunity to focus on non-technological solutions to drunk driving. Public backlash to new technologies that restricted driver freedom, like seat belts, airbags, and breathalyzers, were highly contested. MADD initially did not push for mandatory technological solutions to drunk driving in order to remain out of the technology spotlight. Early MADD Policies and Guidelines stated, “MADD does not endorse particular products, referring here to devices like the breathalyzer, a favor often asked by manufacturers.” Instead, they stated, their “limited resources are applied to other approaches.”²⁸⁴

Until the mid-1980s, MADD remained quietly in favor of technological advances to curbing drunk driving but did not support any device nor did they conduct their own research on existing or potential technological solutions. However, MADD supported scientific studies related to blood alcohol content and driving ability. The technological approach would become more

²⁸⁴ Policies and Guidelines, Box 1, Mothers Against Drunk Driving-Michigan Chapter, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.
prominent to MADD’s goals, eventually allowing them to create partnerships with the auto
industry and leading MADD to prefer the in-car breathalyzer interlock systems as a solution to
drinking and driving.

MADD openly supported alcohol ignition interlocks for drivers convicted of drunk driving
offenses, but many of their “technological approach” programs focused on outreach to educate and
deter drinking drivers, particularly around national holidays when drinking and driving incidents
tended to be higher. The Drive for Life program, sponsored by Volkswagen, began on Labor Day
weekend at Volkswagen dealerships across the United States and lasted through the month of
September. The program encouraged people to visit their local Volkswagen dealership and pledge
not to drive drunk. The program enlisted celebrities and politicians, including Howie Mandel
whose wife had been injured in a drunk driving crash 285 and First Lady Nancy Reagan, to help
boost their program’s impact 286.

Figure 23. MADD and VW bumper sticker for the "Drive for Life" program emphasizing the
important relationship between the driver and the car. MADD-Michigan documents, Box 1,
Mothers Against Drunk Driving-Michigan Chapter, Bentley Historical Library, University of
Michigan.

285 Drive for Life, Box 1, Mothers Against Drunk Driving-Michigan Chapter, Bentley Historical
Library, University of Michigan.
286 MADD also created programs like Life Ride, a New Year’s Eve program that provided free
taxi rides to drivers who were too impaired to drive.
In the late 1980s, MADD also partnered with Chrysler for their “TH!NK…Don’t Drink and Drive!” campaign. Using a Dodge Daytona equipped with an on-board computer programmed to delay the car’s braking and steering abilities, the driver’s weight and an amount of alcohol was entered into the computer. Then, the car was driven on a controlled course to demonstrate the “reduced driving abilities of an alcohol-impaired person.” In the car, the drivers quickly realized how hard it was to control their actions as they veered toward traffic cones, representing cars and trees, and silhouettes of people. MADD and Chrysler used this campaign to mostly target teenagers. In one test in Maryland, a teenager emerged from the car and stated, “I would never drink and drive. I wouldn’t want to have someone’s death on my hands.”

287 MADD-Michigan, Box 1, Mothers Against Drunk Driving-Michigan Chapter, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.
The Dodge impaired Driving Simulator is a Dodge Daytona Shelby Z equipped with an on-board computer which can be programmed to delay the car's braking and steering abilities. After the driver's weight and a variable amount of alcohol is entered, the car is driven on a controlled slalom course to demonstrate the reduced driving abilities of an alcohol-impaired person. The car is part of the Dodge-underwritten "THINK... Don't Drive and Drink!" public awareness campaign and will tour the United States this summer.

Figure 24. Examples of the Chrysler (Dodge) and MADD program, "Think... Don't Drink and Drive!" MADD-Michigan documents, Box 1 Mothers Against Drunk Driving-Michigan Chapter, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

Eventually MADD began to focus on safety issues peripheral but still linked to drunk driving, like seat belts and child passenger restraints. Although their main goal was to change driving habits, specifically drinking and driving, in 1986, MADD-Michigan joined the Seat Belt
Coalition organized by Michigan Secretary of State Richard Austin.\textsuperscript{288} Seat belt use was the only non-drinking and driving issue adopted by MADD-Michigan and MADD-National in the 1980s. Former MADD Michigan executive director Bethany Goodman stated, “while we can’t totally control the risk of encountering a drunk driver, there is something we can do to reduce the risk should a crash occur - wear a seat belt and make sure your children are secure in the restraint seats appropriate for their ages and weights. We can minimize the odds of death or crippling injury by simply using a seat belt.”\textsuperscript{289} MADD’s initial mission and goals that focused solely on victim’s rights advocacy and harsh punishment for the perpetrators steadily evolved in the mid-1980s to encompass other major highway safety issues that helped minimize the injury and fatality rates of drunk driving crashes, if they did occur.

**Personal Freedom to Drink and Drive: Criticisms of Anti-Drunk Driving Campaigns**

However, MADD’s very aggressive approach to drunk driving, especially in the early 1980s, meant that they and other anti-drunk driving activist groups were not without conflict or critique. Criticism of the organization and the drunk driving movement came in two ways. First, many criticized the movement, and mostly MADD, for infringing on what they saw as their personal liberty to drink and drive. MADD’s efforts to curtail drinking and driving, specifically their focus on the minimum drinking age, BAC, and breathalyzers, were viewed as a “regulation of pleasure” and “constriction of personal liberty” of young people.\textsuperscript{290}

\textsuperscript{288} Susan Watson, “Protest, poetry by candlelight,” (1984), Box 1, Mothers Against Drunk Driving-Michigan Chapter, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

\textsuperscript{289} MADD-Michigan, Box 1, Mothers Against Drunk Driving-Michigan Chapter, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

In June 1984, Philip Linker, an associate professor of English at Suffolk Community College on Long Island, stated that he drove home drunk consistently every Saturday night for the past 25 years without incident – ever since he’d been licensed to drive. He continued by noting that, while the work of MADD and other groups is spreading and working to reduce drunk driving crashes, this work is also heavily infringing upon his rights. Regarding breathalyzers, he stated, I am convinced, based upon my own safe driving record and that of millions of others like me, that there is an equally effective method of reducing alcohol-related car accidents, without resorting to such draconian measures, which severely encroach upon the rights and liberty of the vast majority of New Yorkers of all ages who are responsible drivers and who find their life styles threatened by such laws, regulations, and practices.291

Though MADD and most of anti-drunk driving movement did not officially align itself with any one political ideology, they were criticized for what some citizens saw as overly regulatory and heavily infringing policies. These critics called MADD neo-prohibitionists. Like others, Linker wanted to eliminate the new national minimum drinking age, tying MADD to Prohibition and the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WTCU), and attempted to distinguish responsible, albeit drunk, drivers like himself from the irresponsible drunk drivers - the ones who caused crashes and were a menace on the roads - so that we could “return a lost liberty to responsible users of alcohol and restore safety to our highways.” Linker’s opinion on the drinking driver was exactly the stereotype that anti-drunk driving activists wished to break – that of the driver who thought that it was acceptable to drive drunk because they had never been caught or because they were “good” at driving drunk.

Beyond MADD’s policy-making initiatives and criticisms about ties to prohibition, there were deeper issues related to the gender dynamics of drinking and driving that played out in the critical comments made against MADD and in groups that developed in opposition. Crash data

showed that men were more likely to die in alcohol-related car crashes than women – creating gender disparities that led to further resentment against female activists. Male critics often assigned stereotypical female traits to the activists, regardless of gender, and claimed that they were inappropriately overemotional or that they were too overprotective and overbearing. Or, in other cases, they would make inappropriate remarks about the activists’ bodies.292 At the same time, these counter-activists did not acknowledge the anti-drunk driving activists’ role in the larger system of drunk driving regulation and technological development that occurred in the 1980s.

On the other hand, some criticized the anti-drunk driving movement for creating strict and “unjust” enforcement by police and the judicial system, which in turn took away personal freedom from non-drinkers. After states passed stricter anti-drunk driving laws including license revocation and fines based on BAC and changes to the minimum drinking age, citizens formed groups in the mid-1980s to push back against the new legislation and the messages of MADD.293 In New Jersey, the ‘All Citizens Against Unjust and Severe Enforcement’ (a-Cause) organization actively fought what they saw as an invasion of privacy, often against those they saw as innocent people. A-Cause fought against sobriety checkpoints and fines for hosts who served alcohol to drivers who later caused crashes.294 A-Cause and its founder, Robert T. Baer, fought to “raise the consciousness of our citizens and legislators to the dangers of having blanket civil liberties diluted, and perhaps lost forever, through overzealous legislation and paralleled law enforcement.”295

292 Lerner, One for the Road.
Chapter 4

Conclusion

Government traffic safety experts and community activism directly impacted the ways in which the American public viewed and used alcohol in the 1970s and 1980s; however, while alcoholism became viewed as a medical disease and the drinking driver a criminal, the rate of drunk driving crashes remained consistent throughout this time.296 In February 1989, MADD-Michigan reported that, while non-alcohol-involved traffic crashes were reduced during the 1968-1986 period, those involving alcohol were only slightly affected and still comprised half the fatal crashes each year.297 The influence of policy and community activism changed perceptions of drinking behavior and the morality of drinking and driving, but did little to curb actual problem drinkers or create a deterrence system.

MADD's aggressive approach to drunk driving reform in the 1980s is not focused on ending drinking, but ending drinking and driving. This crucial distinction played an important role in the social and cultural connections between their activist work and the backlash they received. Their activists used their expertise as victims of drunk driving crashes, whether that meant through the loss of a family member, first-hand experience in a crash, or maneuvering through the legal system, in order to seek justice for those they saw as innocent victims of a preventable crime. They also worked to advocate for victims and for their own place within government and industry efforts

296 And, in 1990, the rates of fatal crashes overall continued to decline, while alcohol-related deaths rose. Sarah Kellogg, “Nearly Half of Road Deaths Tied to Alcohol,” Grand Rapids Press, 1990, Box 1, Mothers Against Drunk Driving-Michigan Chapter, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

297 Letter to Michigan State Steering Committee of the Michigan State Safety Commission from The Professional Advisory Board, Box 1, Mothers Against Drunk Driving-Michigan Chapter, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan; Nearly Half of All Road Deaths Tied to Alcohol, Box 1, Mothers Against Drunk Driving-Michigan Chapter, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.
to address drunk driving, diminish its effects, and eventually find technological solutions to eliminate the threat of the drinker who chose to drive.

That MADD could symbolically turn its membership base into a generalized mother figure speaks to the role of the mother within the family unit and the role of mothers and women in social movements more generally throughout the twentieth century. MADD activists, especially those in top leadership positions, were able to take on the role of victim, gaining a certain special expertise through their experiences with drunk driving incidents – whether that meant through the loss of a family member, first-hand experience in a crash, or maneuvering through the legal system in order to seek justice for those they saw as innocent victims of a preventable crime. They used this expertise to both advocate for victims and to advocate for their own place in discussions at the government and industry level regarding efforts to address drunk driving, diminish its effects, and eventually push for technological solutions to eliminate the threat of the “killer drunk.”
Americans Remake Highway Transportation

There are two trends in modern traffic and automobile safety that find their origins in the traffic safety initiatives of the second half of the twentieth century – autonomous vehicles and city-led vision zero programs. Both rely on public perception, support, and acceptance to continue to grow and integrate into the existing transportation infrastructure as viable solutions to highway fatalities and injuries.

In February 2016, I attended a forum presented by the MIT New England University Transportation Center (UTC).298 Speaking was NHTSA administrator Mark Rosekind and, along with Bryan Reimer the Associate Director of the UTC, they discussed the future of automated driving and NHTSA’s role in regulating the automotive industry. However, Rosekind offered some sobering statistics on the current state of traffic safety and the uncertainty of the future. Despite efforts from the auto industry, policymakers, and citizens, fatality numbers are still high – at 32,675 in 2014.299 But is the future of traffic safety found in autonomous vehicle and road technology and smart city design?

Rosekind is reluctant to wholeheartedly agree that autonomous is the way of the future. However, to engineers and designers like Reimer and others, the current traffic safety policies are not effectively working to reduce traffic fatality numbers to zero and create a more economical, efficient, and safe transportation infrastructure. NHTSA regulators are not against the introduction of automated vehicles, they are instead taking into account the reactions, both positive and negative, of the public and the complexity of integration into general use. In the forum, Rosekind

299 Though the number of fatalities is high, fatality rates are reported as down by 20 percent over the previous decade. Peter Dizikes, “Car talk: At MIT, federal safety chief discusses future of automated driving,” MIT News, February 10, 2016.
stated, “if you had perfect, connected autonomous vehicles on the road tomorrow, it would still take 20 to 30 years to turn over the fleet.”

The auto industry and federal government, once contentiously at odds regarding the installation of safety equipment are now working together on timelines for implementation of autonomous vehicle technology. During the forum, Rosekind often mentioned the relationship between the auto industry and the regulators, and the ways in which they work together to create policy outcomes that will create the safest environment on the roads.

The marketing of autonomous cars also harkens to the mid-century discussions of traffic safety as "humanitarian" and "economical." Advertisements and articles boast that fully autonomous cars will allow drivers to get work done on their way to the office, watch a movie, read a book, or even take a nap. At the same time, they are seen as more humanitarian in that they will reduce fatalities and are less fallible than human drivers. Autonomous vehicles are also considered the first major change to vehicle technology since the early twentieth century. The arguments for and against the autonomous vehicle’s applications to safer, more efficient, more

300 Dizikes, “Car talk.”
301 However, the relationship is still contentious and NHTSA regulators will fine the industry for failing to meet requirements or for blatantly flouting rules, like for example in the Takata air bag recalls. “Takata Air Bags,” NHTSA Recall Spotlight, January 19, 2017, https://www.nhtsa.gov/recall-spotlight/takata-air-bags
302 Will Knight, “Your Driverless Ride is Arriving,” MIT Technology Review 119, no. 6 (2016).
303 This is a dominant narrative in automotive history and, more recently, literature on autonomous cars has used this argument to bolster their own arguments for a new revolution in vehicle automation and safety technology. In Driverless: Intelligent Cars and the Road Ahead, the authors claim that the automobile has remained static and “brainless” until now, with little changing over the past century. However, the interior of the automobile has been drastically reworked for increased passenger safety, especially in the second half of the twentieth century. Hod Lipson and Melba Kurman, Driverless: Intelligent Cars and the Road Ahead (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2016).
Conclusion

In October 2016, the Department of Transportation announced a new iteration of the plan to reach zero fatalities titled “Toward Zero Deaths.” After a seven percent increase in fatalities in 2015, and fatality rates up ten percent from previous years in the first half of 2016, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration created this new effort to “get to zero.” Several states and cities in the United States already have existing plans, including Boston’s “Vision Zero” to eliminate fatal and serious crashes by 2030, and so do organizations such as the National Safety Council and their “Road to Zero” campaign, which has similar goals to end traffic fatalities within 30 years, and the Vision Zero Network, a collaborative effort by multiple communities and institutions to create a safe transportation infrastructure. Vision Zero programs are based on a Swedish model, also called Vision Zero, that began in the 1990s.

Vision Zero initiatives are the modern-day Action Plan for Highway Safety. They are community-driven programs that rely on holistic approaches to traffic safety in order to finally reach the goal of zero fatalities. In this modern-day equivalent, traffic safety is not only focused on drivers and walking pedestrians, but bicyclists, transit users, and persons with disabilities. They

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incorporate policy, advocacy, healthcare, engineering, and police enforcement work, among others, to create safe, equitable transportation solutions.

These Vision Zero initiatives, much like the Action Program before them, are plans that are currently implemented in select places by interested parties and mainly in large cities. But, what happens when a small town is struck with a traffic safety issue and initiatives like Vision Zero are nonexistent? Like the parents of children killed by drunk drivers, speeding drivers, or train crossings, individuals have to fight for the traffic safety initiatives they see as important.

In November 2016, a 14-year-old girl was walking to school along a 50 mile-per-hour road in Macomb Township, Michigan at 7am where she was struck and killed by one of her classmates. Five years earlier, another high school student was also struck and killed, prompting township officials to install partial sidewalks, but no streetlights. Her mother, acting immediately, began petitioning the Township Board of Trustees to address the lack of adequate lighting, the speed limit, and the lack of sidewalks. Similar to previous parent-focused initiatives to change policy in the wake of a traffic related death, her mother’s efforts have created change in the local community, creating momentum to get the speed limit evaluated and eventually lowered and for other safety infrastructural issues, like street lighting, to begin. At the same time, the students and parents at the local school are also contributing to an enhanced traffic safety society as they become more aware of issues and repercussions as it happened to one of them. The story of U.S. traffic safety is complex and many of the initiatives of the postwar period are still reiterated in

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present policies in federal, state, and local governments as citizen activists continue to advocate for traffic safety measures in their communities. Over time, the changing nature of traffic safety solutions shaped the way in which citizens, regulators, and automakers reacted to traffic safety needs, and changed the role of safety in American society.
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<td>ASF</td>
<td>Automotive Safety Foundation</td>
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