*A Delicate Balance*

# Politics and the Building of Roads

DAMIAN J. KULASH

The United States has been historically on-again–off-again about roads. Highway policy was a major national issue when the National Road was proposed and debated in the first half of the 19th century. But with the rise of railroads starting in 1850, highways moved off center stage and became the stepchildren of counties, townships, and even smaller units of local government. By the time the auto age dawned, these local road organizations were notorious for their ineptitude. Their staff were surrounded by political uncertainty, and many were unable to attract people with the vision, technical skill, and leadership needed to do the job.

The pendulum swung back with the Good Roads movement, begun by bicyclists and then taken over by motorists. As responsibility for roads returned from the local to the state and national levels, a new breed of professionals emerged, and they sought to insulate themselves from politics. Professionalism came to mean continuity and resistance to changes instigated by political leaders.

The nation regained its interest in roads as Frank Turner was growing up. He was 7 years old when the first federal-aid highway act was passed in 1916, and he was 9 when Thomas H. MacDonald took over as head of the Office of Public Roads, which later became the Bureau of Public Roads.

Turner was 20 years old when he joined BPR as a junior highway engineer in 1929. He rose rapidly and served in a series of posts, ultimately becoming Administrator of the Federal Highway Administration. As his career evolved, his distinctive professional style emerged—a style that appeared technocratic and data-driven on the one hand and quite astute at cooperating with political forces on the other (*1*). In *Divided Highways*, Tom Lewis describes Turner as "a quiet man with an encyclopedic knowledge of engineering and the history of the federal government's involvement in highway building—and able to get jobs done in a businesslike and efficient manner. . . . In the highly charged political atmosphere of Washington, Turner stood apart (*2*). This careful balance of technocratic and political agendas is at the heart of the Frank Turner story. Each of us in the transportation community must strike some such balance as we attempt to bring our professional insights into the arena of public decision making.

## References

1. Seely, B. E., *Building the American Highway System: Engineers as Policy Makers*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987.
2. Lewis, T., *Divided Highways: Building the Interstate Highways, Transforming American Life*, Viking, 1997.

*The author, 1998 recipient of TRB's Roy W. Crum Distinguished Service Award, is President and Chief Executive Officer, Eno Transportation Foundation, Inc., Washington, D.C.*

Turner (*second from left*) is present as President Dwight D. Eisenhower receives report from the Advisory Committee on the National Highway Program in January 1955.

the committee's departures from the Bureau's traditional stances were a suggestion to finance the Interstate program with bonds and a proposal to establish an independent federal road-building authority. Both ideas met with strong congressional resistance. In the end, the Clay plan was rejected by Congress in 1955, and the deadlock over road funding remained.

Turner's role did not end, however. He became BPR's behind-the-scenes point man on matters related to federal highway legislation. In 1955 and 1956, during the final political struggles involved in developing the Interstate system, Turner assisted various House and Senate committee chairs as they refined their ideas. MacDonald had played a similar role in steering the federal-aid program through Congress in the early 1920s. Turner proved equally successful in a quiet but effective effort to shape American highway policy, and in 1956 Congress

created the National System of Interstate and Defense Highways with a projected price tag of $25 billion. As the Federal Highway Administration's history notes of Turner, "More than any other single individual, he may be said to be the 'Father' of the Interstate Highway System" (*1*, p. 180).

Turner earned this moniker because his diplomatic skills and reputation for technical expertise proved essential in congressional acceptance of the Interstate initiative. But we should also remember that Turner relied on positions advocated by BPR since the late 1930s. For example, the Bureau had always opposed toll financing, and both the Clay committee and Congress affirmed this position. Moreover, BPR's reliance on highway planning survey data and technical information produced a vision of highways as transport paths and arteries of commerce, not tools for planning or land-use determination. This priority also was reflected in the Interstate legislation. Finally, the Bureau's most basic argument—that engineers and experts should guide highway construction efforts—was incorporated in the 1956 legislation through the creation of an autonomous trust fund, a predetermined map based on traffic patterns, and BPR oversight of standards and construction.

## A Difficult Birth

In 1957 Turner began a new phase in his career, this time as formal leader of BPR. For the next 10 years he served as Deputy Commissioner and Chief Engineer for Public Roads—a post that made him the Bureau's operating officer. His challenge now was to implement the program he had worked so hard to move through Congress. The task was huge. Although a few state highway departments had been developing detailed plans for multilane express roads since the early 1940s, the task of building a national system of such roads across the country and through cities was unlike anything in the experience of highway engineers. Even highway departments in California, Michigan, and Illinois—states with experience in the design and construction of high-speed, limited-access highways—found it difficult to move projects quickly from the drawing board to reality. In every state, the urban sections of the system in particular posed enormous difficulties in such areas as property acquisition, design requirements, and access roads.

Like the states, Turner's BPR moved quickly to cope with the demands of the largest public works project in history. Unfortunately, neither BPR nor the states were altogether prepared to launch the program, despite the years of congressional delay in providing funds; both had to scramble to hire and train additional engineers. The Bureau needed engineers to inspect and approve state plans, specifications, and estimates—the day-to-day routine that had always been at the core of its work. The agency also worked to ensure the suitability of design standards for the new roads by funding research projects and cooperating with the American Association of State Highway Officials (predecessor to the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials) in the development of urban and rural Interstate design handbooks that became bibles for state highway department engineers. The result was a slow start to construction and substantial frustration all around. BPR and the states devised the means for moving projects forward, while the public clamored for more roads—especially Interstate routes—and congressmen pressed for ribbon-cutting ceremonies.

Pressure for instant results was only one dimension of the challenges facing Turner and the Bureau, for the financial rules of the game had also changed. In the past, the federal-aid road program had been based on a 50/50 state–federal funding match and an equal distribution of authority. But the cost and scope of the Interstate program forced Congress to accept a different formula, in which the federal government paid 90 percent of the cost. When Interstate work started slowly, senators and representatives questioned BPR's management of the program, focusing on a few highly publicized cases of corruption, fraud, and waste in the states. Turner presided over the resolution of these and other difficulties during the tumultuous early years of Interstate work in the late 1950s. In the end, congressional hearings revealed only that the Bureau was, as always, cautious with taxpayer money.

By the end of the decade, federal engineers had developed ways of expediting projects in states with sound engineering staffs and watching more paternally those feeling their way. Ohio, for example, developed an assembly-line approach that led to the Bureau's rapid approval by using standard designs and maintaining good relations with BPR engineers during the design process. And by 1960, the mileage of highway opened had increased, ending the period of special congressional scrutiny.

## New Challenges

Just as the initial growing pains were diminishing, however, a new kind of challenge emerged to confront the highway-building community. Through all of the debates about increased funding for roads and the Interstate program, road builders had assumed that Americans remained, as they had been since the start of the century, eager supporters of highway construction. The most obvious measure of the popularity of the automobile may have been the will-