A Man of Integrity

PETER G. KOLTNOW

In my volunteer work at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, I have gathered well over a hundred oral histories that are largely personal reminiscences, and often essential to an historical record. And so I offer a personal recollection about Frank Turner.

During an annual meeting of the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials in New Orleans, Frank and I wandered off to find the best lunchtime beignets and coffee that the French Quarter had to offer. We were prepared to miss both AASHTO's luncheon offering and the first afternoon session—no great sacrifice. With the arrival of food, Frank was in a good mood and showed the humorous side of his nature that was most often evident in the company of old friends from Texas. Many people were unaware of Frank's sense of humor because he had the most economical smile I have ever seen; his teeth rarely showed as an indicator of his state of mind.

Frank had something on his mind besides coffee and beignets. I was there as a representative of the truckers, and he was trying to resolve the never-ending battle between truckers who wanted higher axle loads and highway authorities who were trying to preserve pavements. Frank pulled out a piece of paper showing how one might slip an extra axle under truck trailers, thus reducing axle loads and perhaps even permitting heavier overall weights. Well, nothing is that simple, and we spent a pleasant half hour tossing his idea around. We agreed that the subject needed more research, field testing somewhere in the world, and an analysis of the financial and political impacts.

It occurred to me then that there was nothing very startling about his suggestion except the fact that he had made it. His approach to the problem and its solution was just what one would expect from someone in his role and with his background. Frank was his organization's leader not so much because he excelled, but because he epitomized the dedicated, informed public servant. He was mission-oriented, not process-driven. As such he accepted the validity of someone's problem and his responsibility to his employer—the public—and to his field—civil engineering—to examine fairly the needs and interests of all parties. To satisfy Congress and the Administration, often skeptical about the Interstate program, and to meet his own standards, Frank built an organizational edifice renowned for controlling costs and eliminating corruption. One could argue with his point of view, and many did, but it was impossible to question his integrity.

I miss Frank, even though we often found ourselves on opposite sides of the table. A dozen years ago a group of Washington policy wonks decided to form a breakfast club to discuss current transportation matters privately and with utter frankness. Those approached on the subject uniformly insisted that Frank Turner had to be involved as a guarantor of integrity and constructiveness.

Frank enjoyed those postcareer meetings. He brought ideas. He recounted ancient but still germane history with accuracy. And once in a while, even though you could not see his teeth, he would smile.

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ingness of drivers to bear state and federal gasoline taxes without serious complaint, especially when those taxes were earmarked for road work. This love affair with the automobile blinded road engineers and their supporters to complaints, few at first, from individuals in cities who objected to the loss of their property or to other side effects of new roads. As the 1960s dawned however, such complaints began to increase, especially as thousands of people living in the path of urban Interstates became vocal about the loss of their homes through eminent-domain condemnation and about the low value assigned their property. The lack of relocation programs in the early years added to this chorus of complaints.

Still other objections came from those concerned about aesthetics, about the manner in which these roads divided neighborhoods, and about their impact on parks and open spaces. Complaints were voiced as well by those living outside the cities: by roadside motel owners whose facilities were no longer easily accessible to Interstate traffic and by individuals worried about the impact of the roads

The first Secretary of Transportation, Alan S. Boyd, addresses a meeting on highway beautification, as Frank Turner, Director, Bureau of Public Roads, listens.

on areas of special beauty or historical importance. The "freeway revolt" that grew from these various origins gained force as the 1960s progressed, and took roadbuilders by surprise. Raucous public hearings and bitter legal battles ensued in many places, and eventually caused work to be delayed and in a few instances abandoned. Battles in New Orleans, San Francisco, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Washington (D.C.), and Boston, among other places, attracted national media attention.

Such confrontations were especially difficult for highway builders to accept because the traditional approach to decision making about roads in this country was based on the assumption that it was best to remove politics from the process whenever possible. This view owed much to the turn-of-the-century assumption that experts could remove waste and corruption if they replaced politicians in decision-making roles. The Interstate system, delayed for so long by congressional politicking, engendered a renewed desire in state and federal highway offices for a return to the apparently apolitical approach that had characterized the 1920s and 1930s. An example of the virtues of this decision-making process is the remarkably broad consensus within the technical community about the standards for Interstate construction. Through the cooperative forums afforded by AASHO and HRB, BPR's ideas were kept before the community and basic consensus developed.

The story was different when it came to locating the actual routes and setting construction schedules. In these matters that required public contact, both state and BPR engineers preferred to operate as they always had—by developing and maintaining close ties with small numbers of influential business and civic leaders. This approach kept the process manageable and eliminated delays.

Turner was perfectly comfortable with this view of policy making. Yet one might argue that this small-group approach excluded other stakeholders from the process and thereby caused controversy (2). By the end of the 1960s, everyone wanted a say in the decision-making process, and procedures slowly shifted to accommodate those desires. After 1962, local officials had to be more involved in planning, while much more attention was given to the relocation of property owners in the paths of Interstate roads. Additional public hearings were required at earlier stages of the planning process, and the National Environmental Policy Act introduced the requirement for mandatory environmental impact statements. The making of decisions by small groups was a thing of the past.

A Broader Vision

Turner presided over this sea change in public expectations about highway planning and development. In 1967 he became Director for Public Roads, a post he held until 1969 when he achieved the pinnacle of the U.S. road-building community, becoming Federal Highway Administrator. In this position, which he held until his retirement in 1972, he had primary responsibility for connecting road builders to both the executive branch and Congress.

These were tumultuous years, and the changes that took place did not come easily for Turner, for other federal road engineers, or for their state counterparts. State officials often resisted, as did some FHWA engineers, the changes imposed on them by new congressional mandates. Many later expressed frustration at the additional complexity created by greater attention to environmental concerns; others considered the highway beautification efforts launched by Lady Bird Johnson to be trivial. Turner himself made it clear that he believed highways to be the most important element of the nation's transportation system. Yet he also recognized that the environment within which highways were built was being fundamentally altered during the 1960s, and he accepted the need to adapt to the new conditions.

Not all state officials approved of the shift in direction at FHWA; however, the 90/10 matching structure of the Interstate program gave the federal engineers the upper hand. Yet Turner managed to make changes while preserving the federal-aid partnership with the states. One element that helped

Facing the Issues

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I probably worked most closely with Frank Turner in connection with a retrospective study of the Interstate system in the late 1980s, sponsored by the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials. Frank served on the steering committee for the study, and I was part of the research team. I clearly remember his admonition to the study team at a retreat held in Washington that the study be a "management audit" of the Interstate program to help shed light on both its successes and those areas where things could have been done better. The study was not to be a whitewash of the program.

I was a fairly serious critic of the Interstate program at the time. While in graduate school, I was a car-hating city dweller who rode the cable cars and BART from San Francisco to Berkeley every day and got my news from *Mother Jones* magazine. I chose to write about the Interstate highway program because I could not understand how such a well-intentioned program could have been implemented in a way that was so devastating to American cities. So I had a lot of fairly radical ideas about this management audit of the Interstate program.

I should say that a friend subsequently gave me a gift subscription to the *Wall Street Journal*, and before finishing my dissertation I had come around to agreeing with much of what I read on its editorial page. My parents sealed my fate by giving me one of their castoff cars, a 1977 Olds diesel Delta 88, which weighed about 4000 pounds. So much for the car-hating radical!

Frank and I never discussed what happened to the Interstate program beginning in the 1970s, when the backlash began to develop against some highways in urban and environmentally sensitive rural areas. This was a tremendously wrenching time for those who had dedicated their careers to building America's superhighway system. Suddenly they found themselves condemned as public enemies; ravagers of the environment; and stooges of a corrupt conspiracy of big oil, auto manufacturers, and construction interests.

This antihighway backlash had very little to do with the progressive scientific road building of the Bureau of Public Roads that Frank joined in 1929. Rather, it represented a conflict over values, something for which most engineering programs have historically done little to prepare their graduates. As a society, we are still in the middle of a debate about the proper balance among highways, communities, and the environment. The broad consensus that emerged in the 1950s with the birth of the Interstate program broke down in the 1970s and 1980s, and a new consensus has yet to emerge.

Frank and the progressive era of which he was a product offer us a lesson as we seek to resolve these difficult conflicts today. The bottom line is that we need to be willing to face a management audit of our activities—not just highways, but transit, HOV lanes, new urbanist principles of development, and other popular ideas. Just as Frank was not afraid to uncover the warts and errors of the Interstate program, just as the BPR of the 1930s was willing to take a cold hard look at the successes and failures of the primary highway program of the previous 20 years, we need to stand back and examine where we have been spending our funds in the 20 years since the Interstate system was completed.

The pressures are great. Urban road traffic is growing quickly, many communities have reserved little room for new or expanded roads, HOV lanes and transit serve an important but small part of the commuting market, and the commuting market is a shrinking part of the overall urban transportation sector. People want to travel more, but communities are reluctant to provide the road space for them to travel on. The lesson of Frank's career is the importance of facing the issues squarely and then working determinedly to resolve them. We can only hope to succeed a fraction as well as he did.

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