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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Frank Turner is sworn in as Federal Highway Administrator. *From left:* George H. Fallon, Chairman, and John C. Kluczynski, member, House Committee on Public Works; Mrs. Turner; Administrator Turner; Secretary of Transportation John A. Volpe; and Senator Jennings Randolph, Senate Committee on Public Works.

hold together the coalition that had existed since the 1910s was a continued sense of shared responsibility for meeting the technical challenges of building the Interstate system. This was a big, exciting job, and the new political climate simply added another dimension to the design problem.

In this context, open communication became critical, particularly in getting the technical data into the hands of state designers. Playing a pivotal role were AASHO's long-standing technical committees, where federal and state engineers worked side by side, and the HRB technical committees, where the equally cooperative structure brought universities and the producers of materials into the discussions. In the end, however, the key to successfully managing the Interstate program while holding the federal–state partnership together involved three elements.

First was Turner's insistence on adhering to the shared-responsibility approach in day-to-day operations. In Ohio, for example, state engineers later recalled that two BPR engineers would come out to the field once a month to observe progress on Interstate efforts. These trips reinforced the sense that everyone was working toward a common objective, although BPR retained the upper hand through its dominant financial contribution.

A second element in maintaining the federal–state partnership was BPR's focus on the bigger picture of producing the best possible road network. The new road system was a massive effort full of challenges, the cost was immense, and BPR emphasized the importance of doing it right.

Finally, Turner recognized how to broaden the relatively narrow perspective of highway engineers—including BPR's own long-term vision of building roads to move as many vehicles as feasible at the highest possible speed. In his 1967 address to the AASHO annual meeting, he analyzed what he perceived to be happening in the country (3, p. 208):

> There is a feeling that highways are too complex and far-reaching in their implications to be left exclusively to state highway departments and the BPR. Powerful interests are proposing to give control of the decision making parts of the program to local government representatives and citizens groups. Along with this, there is a growing feeling that highway programs must be subordinated to serve a wider variety of non-highway purposes.

Turner's assessment was quite correct, as was his understanding that continuing to operate in the old way would have serious negative consequences. All of the newer concerns—environmental considerations, unemployment issues, community and lifestyle perspectives, the preservation of historic sites, beautification and land-use matters, and mixed urban transportation programs—would have a place in the federal policy arena.

Indeed, Turner was actually drawing on an element of continuity within BPR in holding this view, for engineers such as H. S. Fairbank and Joe Barnett had long argued that the American highway program needed to embrace a broader vision that included attention to aesthetic, landscape, land-use, and other social considerations. They had pressed for such elements as early as the 1930s. And the generation of highway engineers who came to the field after 1970 were talking about highway design in a new way. They not only accepted the new design factors, but believed those changes were resulting in the production of better highways.

Roads and Modes

However much Frank Turner accepted the need to make adjustments in the perspective of the road-building community, he always remained a highway man. Indeed, it was precisely for this reason that his