



# VISION, INSPIRATION, AND PERSEVERANCE

## Concluding Thoughts

ALAN E. PISARSKI

The author, a transportation consultant in Falls Church, Virginia, is Chair of the TRB History Committee and of the Data and Information Systems Section. He also chairs the National Cooperative Highway Research Program Project Panel on Using American Community Survey Data for Transportation Planning.

Among my earliest recollections of the Interstate was when I was working part-time for a construction firm while still in college. The firm was part of the consortium building the Long Island Expressway (LIE), and I got to drive on it each morning on the way to work, months before it opened to the public—probably the last time anyone drove the LIE at the speed limit in the peak hour.

The 50 years we are celebrating mark the anniversary of the funding plan for the Interstate, passed in the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956. That funding plan put the Interstate program on the map. The concept and the plan had been around for at least 20 years, and something like an official map dated back to 1944.

This celebration gave me the opportunity to read



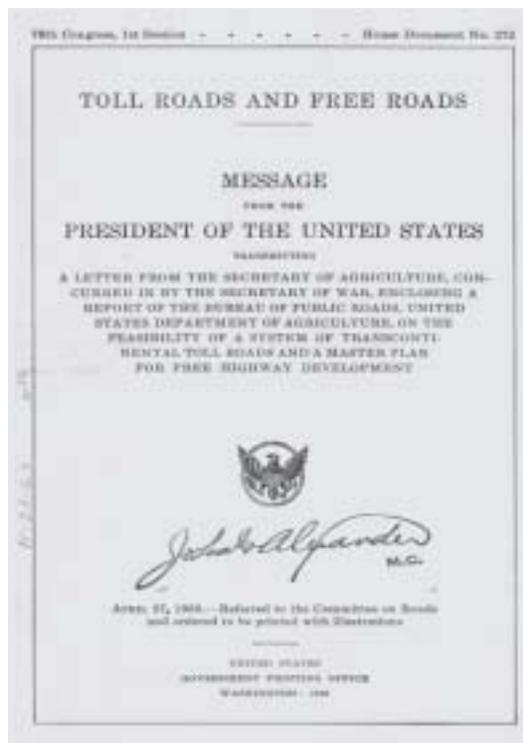
President Dwight D. Eisenhower in the Oval Office.

in full two of the great works of our profession: *Toll Roads and Free Roads* from 1939 and *Interregional Highways* from 1944. These documents are a revelation. Both reports should be made more available, and both should be read by people in our profession. Republishing these documents would expand the understanding of all members of our profession.

The books are largely the product of the genius of one man, Herbert S. Fairbank, for whom the Turner-Fairbank Highway Research Center is partly named. For many decades Fairbank was the right hand of the Chief of the Bureau of Public Roads Thomas H. MacDonald. Some still around today participated with Fairbank in that work and deserve our recognition and our thanks.

### Genius and Persistence

But the Interstate required another kind of genius—a genius for inspiring people to do great things, a genius for organizing and setting challenges and then achieving them. That was the genius of Dwight David Eisenhower. The word genius and Eisenhower do not usually appear in the same sentence. Like many others, I saw two Eisenhowers—the hero of the “Crusade in Europe” and the avuncular character who became President 10 years later. Yet his genius for



## What They Were Expecting, What They Got—and What We Got—from the Interstate Highway System

	1956 Actual	1965 Forecast	1965 Actual	2006 Actual
Population	169 million	180 million+	194.3 million	300 million
Vehicles	54 million	81 million	90.3 million	237 million
VMT	628 billion	814 billion	888 billion	3 trillion
GNP	\$357 billion+	\$500 billion+	\$720 billion+	\$13 trillion+

VMT = vehicle miles traveled; GNP = gross national product

organizing an effort, inspiring people to action, and putting in place the tools that would permit them to succeed made the Interstate possible.

Many of us with the myopia of the present may have a vision of the past in which the Interstate was inexorable—it was guaranteed, it had to be, or maybe it always was—because it is such a mainstay of our world today. But the Interstate did not have to be. Frank Turner told me about the crushing defeat of the plan for the Interstate in 1955 (*TR News* 213, March–April, 2001)—the plan had to be sold and sold again. People like Turner and President Eisenhower had to work continuously to make their vision part of the national vision. They were men who would come back from setbacks and defeats and try again and succeed.

Eisenhower’s State of the Union addresses in 1954, 1955, and again in 1956 show that it took inspiration and perseverance on the part of many to create the Interstate system and to make it a success. Eisenhower’s message to Congress in 1955 reveals the scale of his vision:

*Together the uniting forces of our communication and transportation systems are dynamic elements in the very name we bear—United States. Without them, we would be a mere alliance of many separate parts.*

Today the United States is not “a mere alliance

of separate parts” in large degree because of the great vision of our predecessors whom we celebrate in this 50th anniversary year.

### Safety and Saved Lives

Since its inception, the Interstate has had an exemplary safety record. The system demonstrated that high-speed movement can be accommodated safely. In its early years the fatality rate was less than 3 per 100 million vehicle miles of travel (VMT)—almost half the rate on non-Interstate facilities.

The Interstate demonstrated the value of good safety-conscious design for all facilities, and as a result, Interstate and non-Interstate facilities have improved dramatically. Today the fatality rate on non-Interstate facilities is lower than that of the Interstate in its early days and in 2004 reached the lowest level recorded in the United States—1.46 per 100 million. The fatality rate on the Interstate system also has improved markedly, with levels now well below 1 per 100 million VMT.

These low rates, however, still are unacceptable, representing more than 42,600 fatalities per year. Fifty years ago, President Eisenhower cited 36,000 roadway deaths as one reason to build the Interstate system; in contrast, considering the nearly fivefold increases in the numbers of vehicles and VMT, we can see tremendous progress. The lives saved during those 50 years are perhaps the most important tribute to the systems we have created.

Interstate interchanges near Kansas City, circa 1963.

