Shall It Be Highways or Byways

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Our nation is progressing by leaps and bounds, in population, industry wealth and position as a world leader. As engineers and road builders we recognize that motor vehicle manufacture and highway usage have played a leading part in our national progress. The motor industry is a vital element in our national economy. Our highways are not keeping pace. We are not even holding our own. We are slipping backward. Our highways are largely of the Model T vintage. By concerted action, the public must be made to recognize the facts and the crisis which exists. A major operation is imperative to correct the ills of our highway system. We must build adequate highways or soon face real economic and political trouble. The time is "later than you thing". We must be a nation of HIGHWAYS—not byways.

Half-way measures and idolatry of restricted investments are producing a crisis on America's highways. While good roads are costly, bad roads are even costlier.

Latest documented estimates on a state-by-state basis place the cost of correcting existing highway deficiencies at $41 billion. Last year, a record 12-month period, we spent a billion and three quarters dollars on highway construction. At this rate of progress it will take 30 years to bring our roads and streets up to today's requirements. Meanwhile, near-futile maintenance work is costing more every day and countless millions of dollars are wasted each year in lost time. A 10-year construction period, in the face of the cold war and world conditions in general, is the longest practicable stretch over which we ought to extend the highway construction and reconstruction necessitated by the war deterioration of our traffic network.

Our traffic jams will continue and grow much worse unless we step up the tempo of providing highways commensurate with today's automotive needs as to speed, weight, and densities.

It costs more to drive on bad highways than on good ones. Today the average motorist spends about six cents a mile to own and operate his car. Only about one-half cent of that amount goes for the roads
he uses. What is worse, many of his operating costs are high because of the very fact that the roads are inadequate to permit economical operation. A more equitable balanced distribution of our highway transportation expenditures—with a trifle more invested in roads—would net us manifold savings in gasoline consumption, insurance premium reductions because of safer travel, and tire and brake wear.

We must abandon the worship of restricted investments in highways which has produced our current traffic-clogged plight. Spending more for highways not only means spending substantially less for vehicle operation but it also means getting places faster and safer. In case of war, these factors would be of the utmost importance.

Built in and for the T-model era, our hodge-podge of roads and streets, many of which follow original horse and buggy trails, just won't do the job. A major operation is imperative to correct the ills of our highway system. We must acquire an entirely new concept of highways. Our thinking must become positive instead of negative. We must reject once and for all the depression-born concept that highways are something that we build only in times of national depression in order to make work. We won't begin to accommodate the more than 43 million motor vehicles traveling our thoroughfares today, not to mention the millions that are still to come, until we take the position that highways are essential to our economy, safety, security, well-being, and way of life, and therefore should be provided as necessities.

May I say to you engineering students in this audience that one of your greatest potentialities upon entering the highway field will be to help alert the public to the dangers that lurk in our inadequate highway system.