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The Interstate Highway System as an Agent for Cultural Expression and Transformation

The Federal-Aid Highway Act, officially signed into law on June 29, 1956, set in motion the largest public works program in United States history. Its goal was to construct the longest and most modern system of highways that the world had ever seen. The National System of Interstate and Defense Highways did just that and much more. The Interstates brought the nation closer than ever before, and yet, at the same time, divided it in many ways. Its story is one of modern engineering marvels but also of deep changes in American culture. Americans today would find their lifestyle impossible, and their culture entirely misplaced, without it. First, the federal government became increasingly concerned with national defense and stimulating economic growth in the early to mid-twentieth century. The federal government attempted to satisfy both defense and economic needs by funding national road and highway construction. The Interstate system embodies the permanent entanglement of these interests that invariably lead into the next three elements. Second, car culture influenced the creation of the Interstate system immensely, and the Interstates then effectively transformed it into a keystone of modern American culture. Third, although suburbia was born before the Interstate system, it was always dependent on highways or urban expressways, car culture, and the economic interests of the federal government. The Interstates then provided a conduit for suburbia to expand as never before. The fourth, and final element of modern American culture discussed in this project, is civil activism, specifically during the 1960s and 1970s. Urban pollution, the destruction of urban neighborhoods and historic landmarks, the demise of the center city, and urban sprawl were all blamed on the Interstate system. Not

only were the Interstates the subject of much protest and debate, but they provided citizens the ability to assemble en masse in virtually any city of their choosing to protest things such as the Vietnam War and civil rights. Without understanding the Interstate system as the underlying common denominator, these core elements of modern American culture appear disconnected and ambiguous. This project explains why the Interstate system was created and how it transformed American culture.

Federal Involvement in Defense and Economic Interests

Since the 1890s, organized citizen groups involved in the Good Roads movement, like the League of American Wheelmen, had urged the federal government to get involved in improving roads.¹ The movement began with bicycle enthusiasts who wanted good roads, especially in more rural areas, for a more enjoyable cycling experience. Colonel Albert Augustus Pope, who was a member of the League of American Wheelmen and personally funded their *Good Roads* magazine, was the original advocate for the Good Roads movement.² Congress responded to his demands by creating the Office of Road Inquiry in 1893. The movement soon became especially popular with farmers and small communities, but also with automobile owners and anyone who saw the economic benefits of better roads. In 1916, President Wilson signed the first Federal-Aid Road Act which helped bring the movement to the forefront of national politics. It was the first federal law that funded highway construction and it replaced the Office of Road Inquiry with the Bureau of Public Roads. At this point, both citizens and government started to understand

¹ Richard F. Weingroff, "The Man Who Loved Roads," *Public Roads* 65, No. 6, (May/June 2002). Last modified April 7, 2011. <http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/publications/publicroads/02may/08.cfm>.

² Richard DeLuca, *The League of American Wheelmen and Hartford's Albert Pope Champion the Good Roads Movement*. <http://connecticuthistory.org/the-league-of-american-wheelmen-and-the-good-roads-movement-how-popes-bicycles-led-to-good-roads/>.

the beneficial effects of good roads on the economy almost immediately, but the connection between good roads and defense wasn't officially illustrated until 1922 with the "Pershing Map." Thomas MacDonald, along with General Pershing and the U.S. Army, produced this map to chart the routes that would be most crucial to national defense in a time of war.³ Thomas Harris MacDonald was appointed Chief of the new bureau in 1919, upon recommendation from the American Association of State Highway Officials.⁴ MacDonald was one of the first major political supporters of the Good Roads movement, and remained the most influential person in the nation, in terms of highway building, for over thirty years until the Eisenhower Administration. The Good Roads movement helped bridge the gap between government involvement in road building, car culture, and civil activism.

When the United States entered World War I in 1917, Major Dwight D. Eisenhower wanted nothing more than to fight for his country. He specially applied for overseas deployment numerous times, and every time top ranking officers turned down his requests to join battalions serving in Europe on the basis that they felt he possessed "special qualities as an instructor."⁵ Consequently, Eisenhower spent the duration of the war on the home front training recruits in the newly formed Tank Corps out of Camp Colt, Pennsylvania.⁶ He both rued and lamented the fact that "the war to end all wars" had come and gone and he was denied his dream of participating in active combat. At one

³ Richard Weingroff, "Milestones For U.S. Highway Transportation and the Federal Highway Administration," *Public Roads* 59, no. 4 (Spring 1996), last modified April 8, 2011, <https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/publications/publicroads/96spring/p96sp44.cfm>.

⁴ Richard Weingroff, "Firing Thomas H. MacDonald - Twice," *History of FHWA*, last modified October 16, 2013, <https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/infrastructure/firing.cfm>.

⁵ Dwight D. Eisenhower, *At Ease: Stories I Tell to Friends* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1967), 133.

⁶ Eisenhower, *At Ease*:137-138, 133.

point, he even considered leaving the army but ultimately decided to stay.⁷ Always eager to learn and participate, the adventurous young officer, less than five years graduated from West Point, volunteered as one of two specially requested tank officers to act as observers for the one small tank in a transcontinental convoy.⁸ On July 7, 1919, the “motor truck train” embarked from the Ellipse in Washington, D.C. en route to San Francisco. Just over seven hours later and forty-six miles from their original departure point, the convoy suffered its first breakdowns and made camp in Frederick, Maryland, where Eisenhower joined them.⁹ Their journey concluded after sixty-two days of transcontinental travel at a snail’s pace; the convoy averaged only 58.1 miles per day and just over six miles per hour.¹⁰ By no means did the convoy set any speed records, but it did set a world’s record for “the total continuous distance traveled of 3,251 miles,” and it was also “the first motor convoy to cross the American Continent.”¹¹ The accomplishment is even more astounding given that over seventeen-hundred miles of the journey were “made over dirt roads, wheel paths, mountain trails, desert sands and alkali flats.”¹² If nothing else, the experience convinced Eisenhower that the nation was in dire need of better roads.

Both the military vehicles and the roads on which they traveled hardly stood up to the test. The convoy headed west via the Lincoln Highway, which remained so underdeveloped in some areas that Emily Post once described it as, “an imaginary line like

⁷ Eisenhower, *At Ease*:155-156.

⁸ Eisenhower, *At Ease*:157.

⁹ Richard F. Weingroff, “The Man Who Changed America, Part I,” *Public Roads* (March/April 2003), last modified April 7, 2011, <http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/publications/publicroads/03mar/05.cfm>.

¹⁰ William C. Greany, “Principal Facts Concerning the First Transcontinental Army Motor Transport Expedition, Washington to San Francisco July 7 to September 6, 1919,” *Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library*, 6.

http://www.eisenhower.archives.gov/research/online_documents/1919_convoy/principal_facts.pdf.

¹¹ Greany, “Principal Facts,” 1.

¹² Greany, “Principal Facts,” 8.

the equator! Once you get beyond the Mississippi the roads are trails of mud and sand.”¹³ Eisenhower recounts that the convoy had been on schedule until it reached Nebraska, at which point the roads became so poor that they delayed the convoy by four days.¹⁴ Adding to the difficulty, some drivers feigned experience when, in actuality, they were barely familiar with a Ford Model T.¹⁵ Although some vehicles performed better than others, and mechanical issues were not a major hindrance to their progress, the deplorable condition of the roads meant that the convoy could not have proceeded any faster, even if the equipment were up to the task. The most troublesome delays, reportedly numbering over two-hundred, were caused by “road accidents” or, “mishaps due entirely to the unfavorable and at times appalling travel conditions that were encountered.”¹⁶ Every challenge and problem faced by the convoy provided officers and observers valuable knowledge and insight about the value of good roads and highways.

The transcontinental motor convoy offered the military the chance to test and compare the performance and reliability of their vehicles. Specifically, their ability to transport troops and materiel across vast expanses of land in the event of a national emergency. It also offered the American public a glimpse at the equipment that had helped win them the war, as well as the opportunity “to understand the vast importance and urgent necessity of motor transport and good roads in the cause of national defense.”¹⁷

¹³ Drake Hokanson, *The Lincoln Highway: Main Street Across America* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1999), 4, accessed March 25, 2014, <http://books.google.com/books?id=y0Fz8raz2LsC&lpg=PR2&ots=ZsWvMmWwpw&dq=an%20imaginary%20line%2C%20like%20the%20equator%20lincoln%20highway&pg=PP1#v=onepage&q&f=false>.

¹⁴ Dwight D. Eisenhower, “Report on First Trans-Continental Trip,” *Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library*, November 3, 1919, 3, http://www.eisenhower.archives.gov/research/online_documents/1919_convoy/1919_11_03_DDE_to_Chief.pdf

¹⁵ Eisenhower, *At Ease*:158-159.

¹⁶ Greany, “Principal Facts,” 9.

¹⁷ Greany, “Principal Facts,” 11.

However, according to the convoy's Ordnance Commander, 1st Lt. E. R. Jackson, the most important reason for this trip was to demonstrate: "the War Department's contribution to the Good Roads movement for the purpose of encouraging the construction of through-route and transcontinental highways as a military and economic asset."¹⁸

Following his cross-country adventure, Eisenhower submitted his "Report on Trans-Continental Trip." In it, he elaborated on the necessity to improve the existing highways and roads as well as the success of the convoy in garnering the public support for doing so. First Lieutenant E. R. Jackson offered a similar assessment, in his "Report on First Transcontinental Motor Convoy," in that the convoy positively influenced public interest in the Good Roads movement.

Both men recognized that proper maintenance and funding would make most roads exponentially better. As Jackson explained, "the officers of the Convoy were thoroughly convinced that all transcontinental highways should be constructed and maintained by the Federal Government."¹⁹ Nearly twenty years later, the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1938 requested that Thomas MacDonald of the Bureau of Public Roads, along with the Secretary of Agriculture and the Secretary of War, conduct a study of the feasibility of a network of Interstate toll roads. In 1939, President Roosevelt transmitted the report, *Toll Roads and Free Roads*, to Congress. He emphasized "the need of a special system of direct interregional highways, with all necessary connections through and around cities, designed to meet the requirements of the national defense and the needs of a growing peacetime

¹⁸ E.R. Jackson, "Report on First Transcontinental Motor Convoy," *Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library*, October 31, 1919, 1, http://www.eisenhower.archives.gov/research/online_documents/1919_convoy/report_Jackson_to_Moody.pdf.

¹⁹ Jackson, "Report on First Transcontinental Motor Convoy," 29.

traffic of longer range.”²⁰ The study concluded that although toll roads were not a practical solution, a vast system of “interregional” highways was essential to satisfying the needs of national defense and economic growth, as well as solving traffic problems in and between major cities.²¹ Five years later, the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1944, specifically section 7, authorized the designation of 40,000 miles of Interstate highways in conjunction with state highway departments. However, it did not specify how the project would be financed and so the project remained only an idea on paper. That same year, as Supreme Commander of the Allied forces in Europe, Eisenhower witnessed the military and economic benefits of modern highways when he toured the German autobahn. In his book, “At Ease: Stories I Tell to Friends,” Eisenhower explained:

After seeing the autobahns of modern Germany and knowing the asset those highways were to the Germans, I decided, as President, to put an emphasis on this kind of road building... This was one of the things that I felt deeply about, and I made a personal and absolute decision to see that the nation would benefit by it. The old convoy had started me thinking about good, two-lane highways, but Germany had made me see the wisdom of broader ribbons across the land.²²

Germany proved that modern highways could be used to support enormous economic growth. But, Germany also proved that modern highways could be used as a strategic weapon of war and national defense.

However, during Eisenhower’s first year as President in 1953, Richard Weingroff explains that highway construction was not yet a priority because “[Eisenhower] was preoccupied with bringing an end to the war in Korea and helping the country get through

²⁰ Department of Agriculture, *Toll Roads and Free Roads*, Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1939, http://transportationfortomorrow.com/final_report/pdf/volume_3/historical_documents/06_toll_roads_and_free_roads_1939.pdf.

²¹ Department of Agriculture, *Toll Roads and Free Roads*.

²² Eisenhower, *At Ease*: 166-167.

the economic disruption of the post-war period.”²³ It became priority about a year later with the passage of the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1954 which Eisenhower described as “one effective step in meeting the accumulated needs” of the nation, but he knew it wasn’t enough.²⁴ In a news conference two months later, when asked how he thought the Interstate project should be financed, he explained that he was in favor of any plan that was “self-liquidating,” and that he didn’t believe, “that we can proceed on the theory that we can forever live on deficit spending; it can’t be done.”²⁵ Satisfying national defense and economic needs, as well as solving traffic problems on the outdated highways and roads, was absolutely necessary for the well being of the nation. But the real problem was figuring out, and agreeing on, how to pay for such a massive project.

The Federal-Aid Highway Act, proposed by Representative George H. Fallon of Baltimore, and the Highway Revenue Act, proposed by Representative Hale Boggs of Louisiana, comprised the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956. The Highway Trust Fund, part of the Highway Revenue Act, funded the entire Interstate project on revenue generated from federal taxes on gasoline, diesel fuel, oil, tires, etc. and thereby avoided putting the nation in debt. This is especially impressive when one considers that the federal government was responsible for ninety percent of the total Interstate cost, with states footing the rest of the bill. This system of funding the project was known as “pay-as-you-go,” a term popularized by Senator Harry Flood Byrd (a.k.a. “Mr. Economy”).²⁶ The whole system could be understood literally as, “pay-as-you-move,”

²³ Richard F. Weingroff, “Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956: Creating the Interstate System, *Public Roads* 60, no. 1 (Summer 1996): 4. <http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/publications/publicroads/96summer/p96su10.cfm>

²⁴ Weingroff, “Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956,” 4.

²⁵ Dwight D. Eisenhower: “The President’s News Conference,” July 14, 1854. Online By Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=9947>.

²⁶ Tom Lewis, *Divided Highways: Building the Interstate Highways, Transforming American Life* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 114-115.

as in, people driving their cars and paying the necessary taxes to keep those cars driving would pay for more roads to drive on, which generated more tax revenue to construct more roads.

As long as the gasoline remained cheap then the system worked just fine. Average citizens did not mind the gas tax so long as gas was cheap, and oil and gas companies did not mind as long as it did not negatively impact their profits and/or consumption patterns. Corporations and unions were often automatically opposed to any legislation that increased taxes on their product, but as Tom Lewis notes, “by 1956, almost everyone...realized that the taxes proposed were insignificant in comparison with the benefits that would be reaped.”²⁷ American citizens were convinced that Interstates were a necessity and they were willing to pay for them. This self-liquidating, self-replicating system of funding Interstate construction had a direct impact on the transformation of American culture, and more specifically car culture.

Car Culture

The modern perception of car culture is often associated with the 1950s and early 1960s. However, most historians agree that car culture began around the turn of the twentieth century. Once the Good Roads movement made automobile usage practical on better roads, the vision of the average citizen owning their own car became possible. According to John Burnham, by the turn of the century “automobilists had taken up the good-roads movement of the previous century in an effort to obtain highways on which to drive their vehicles.”²⁸ Flink and Ray B. Browne et al both support the idea that the closing of the frontier in 1893 signified a pivotal moment for the birth of car culture.

²⁷ Lewis, *Divided Highways*, 119.

²⁸ John Chynoweth Burnham, “The Gas Tax and the Automobile Revolution,” *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 48, no. 3 (1961): 436. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1891987>.

Browne et al claims that the automobiles helped keep American society mobile after the closing of the frontier.²⁹ Flink concurs, and explains that “automobility” replaced the frontier as the major source of economic and social mobility. He defines automobility as, “the combined impact of the motor vehicle, the automobile industry, and the highway plus the emotional connotations of this impact for Americans.”³⁰ Car culture, then, is a culture of personal automobility. Technological and economic innovations eventually made personal automobility a reality, and allowed the average citizen the ability to afford their own vehicle. Henry Ford was at the forefront of these innovations.

In 1908 Ford released the Model T, which is widely renowned as the first automobile made for the common American. The reason the Model T was such a success, aside from its affordability, was the fact that average Americans had waited for an affordable car to appear on the market for years. Flink contends that, “a mass market for automobiles existed in popular sentiment long before volume production of the Ford Model T,” and that car culture gave rise to the auto industry, not the other way around.³¹ As Paul Graves-Brown contests, “we are not simply consumers of car culture - we are also its makers.”³² And in the words of historian Tom Lewis, “Ford...had helped to make Americans auto mobile.”³³ In this sense, Henry Ford provided Americans with the product they had demanded for years.

From 1908 until 1927, the Model T remained the quintessential car of the average American. Ford began using the assembly line in his production process in 1913, but the

²⁹ Ray B. Browne, Marshall W. Fishwick, and Kevin O. Browne, *Dominant Symbols in Popular Culture* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1990), 61-62.

³⁰ James J. Flink, *The Car Culture* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1975), 1-2.

³¹ Flink, *The Car Culture*, 18-19.

³² Paul Graves-Brown, “FROM HIGHWAY TO SUPERHIGHWAY: The Sustainability, Symbolism, and Situated Practices of Car Culture,” *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Social and Cultural Practice*, 41, no. 1 (1997), 66, accessed February 2, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23171732>.

³³ Lewis, *Divided Highways*, 33.

monotonous nature of assembly line work contributed to a high turnover rate of factory employees, and so Ford addressed this problem by increasing the daily wage of his employees to five dollars and reducing the work day from nine to eight hours.³⁴ In 1910, before the implementation of the assembly line, Ford's company produced just over 32,000 Model Ts.³⁵ Just four years later, the assembly line helped them produce over 300,000 cars.³⁶ Increased production allowed for a decrease in the purchase price of the Model T year after year, which made it available to more and more people. In 1908 the Model T sold for \$850, but by its final production year of 1927 it sold for less than \$300.³⁷ That same year, 1927, the United States led the world in the national ratio of people to cars with 5.3 people for every car; the next closest was New Zealand with a ratio of 10.5 people for every car.³⁸

Flink cites Roderick Nash to explain the impact of the Model T on American culture during the interwar period; "The flivver, along with the flask and the flapper, seemed to represent the 1920s in the minds of its people as well as its historians."³⁹ However, car ownership was much more prevalent in metropolitan areas, where good roads already existed - as were "the flask and the flapper". In rural areas, car ownership was held back mostly because of terrible road conditions. The film *The Road to Happiness*, produced by the Bureau of Public Roads in conjunction with the Ford Motor Company in 1924, was intended to rally support for the Good Roads movement.⁴⁰ The

³⁴ "Henry Ford's \$5-a-Day Revolution," accessed April 1, 2014, <http://corporate.ford.com/news-center/press-releases-detail/677-5-dollar-a-day>.

³⁵ Flink, *The Car Culture*, 53.

³⁶ Ford Motor Company, "The Model T Put the World on Wheels," *Heritage*, <http://corporate.ford.com/our-company/heritage/heritage-news-detail/672-model-t>.

³⁷ Flink, *The Car Culture*, 53, 67.

³⁸ Flink, *The Car Culture*, 70.

³⁹ Flink, *The Car Culture*, 68.

⁴⁰ Ford Motion Picture Laboratories, "The Road to Happiness," Ford Motor Company, 1924.

film is careful to show the main character , a farmer using a horse and carriage to get from farm to market, and the difficulty he had on old, muddy, bumpy roads. The film is also careful to show that when the main character is in Washington, D.C. he is virtually surrounded by cars driving on paved roads. By the end of the video, the main character helps bring good roads to his rural community and farmers begin to use cars and trucks to transport their goods to the market. Good roads helped cement car culture as a prevailing aspect of American culture.

The economic prosperity of the post-war period allowed more Americans than ever before to own a car, but it also caused major problems. Traffic was perhaps the most urgent problem, especially in and around cities due to urban sprawl and high population density coupled with outdated highways. “In some ways the nation was falling victim to its own progress and improving economy,” says Lewis.⁴¹ As mentioned in the previous section, the government’s solution to growing traffic problems was the Interstate system. The Bureau of Public Roads published *General Location of National System of Interstate Highways*, also known as the “Yellow Book,” in 1955. The Yellow Book had a profound influence on the decision of Congress to approve the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956, mainly because it convinced both Congress and city governments that urban Interstates would be beneficial.⁴² In this way, the Interstate system accommodated the needs of the growing car culture. The Interstates then transformed car culture, specifically in the development of roadside dependent industries such as fast-food, motels, and drive-ins.⁴³

The Interstates, along with the mass production of cars, can also “be seen as part of a wider

<http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/interstate/video/roadtohappiness.wmv>

⁴¹ Lewis, *Divided Highways*, 84.

⁴² FAQs, “Was President Eisenhower really surprised to discover that the Interstate System included urban freeways?” *Federal Highway Administration*, <http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/interstate/faq.htm#question23a>.

⁴³ Loretta Britten and Sarah Brash, *OUR AMERICAN CENTURY: The American Dream: The 1950s* (Richmond: Time Life Books, 1998), 102.

process by which experience has been *privatized*.⁴⁴ Paul Graves-Brown argues that technological developments, such as the automobile, inherently lead to “individualized [*sic*] experience:”

From the mass cinema of the interwar period to the TV and ultimately the video...From the horse drawn coach, to the train to the private car. From the mainframe computer to the PC. Technology increasingly puts power in the hands of the individual, and in doing so shares it more widely - we choose what to listen to, what to watch, where to go, what to eat.⁴⁵

Furthermore, as the Interstates made travel easier, car buyers considered style and aesthetics more important than functionality. “Automobiles in the 1950s were anything but basic transportation. A car was status, freedom, and personal identity.”⁴⁶ By the end of the decade car culture and American culture were virtually indistinguishable.

The federal government encouraged the growth of car culture through highway building, which then contributed to urban sprawl and suburbanization as people were able to leave the center cities. Mimi Sheller, a sociology professor and director of the Mobilities Research and Policy Center at Drexel University, describes the relationship between the Interstate system, car culture, and suburbanization as “a culture of automobility.”⁴⁷ Elisabeth Rosenthal of the New York Times questioned just last year whether car culture was coming to an end, in an article “The End of Car Culture.” She cites a decrease in total number of miles driven, a decrease in car ownership, and fewer young people obtaining a driver’s license.⁴⁸ However, car culture cannot and will not “end,” but rather adapt to changing times as it always has, because personal automobility has become so entrenched in other aspects of American culture, such as suburbanization and civil activism.

⁴⁴ Paul Graves-Brown, “FROM HIGHWAY TO SUPERHIGHWAY, 69.

⁴⁵ Paul Graves-Brown, “FROM HIGHWAY TO SUPERHIGHWAY, 69.

⁴⁶ Loretta Britten et al., *OUR AMERICAN CENTURY*, 95.

⁴⁷ Elisabeth Rosenthal, “The End of Car Culture,” *The New York Times*, June 29, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/30/sunday-review/the-end-of-car-culture.html?_r=0

⁴⁸ Elisabeth Rosenthal, “The End of Car Culture.”

Suburbia

More than sixteen million Americans served in the United States military during the war. When these soldiers returned home there was a “severe housing shortage.”⁴⁹ There was also the problem of integrating millions of people into the workforce. Not surprisingly, the economy initially faced troubles transitioning from war-time to peace-time consumption and production patterns. Immediately after World War II, Congress passed the GI Bill which guaranteed a mortgage loan to all veterans, as well as the opportunity to receive a higher education or learn a trade so that they could get back into the job market and earn a decent living to afford their mortgage.⁵⁰ Just five years later, the Federal Housing Act of 1949 “offered builders profit incentives to construct large developments, usually single-family homes in suburban areas.”⁵¹ President Truman described the project “as a national objective the achievement as soon as feasible of a decent home and a suitable living environment for every American family.”⁵² These two pieces of legislation helped pave the way for suburban development.

Suburbia was created within the decade preceding the creation of the Interstate system. Nevertheless, highways were of utmost importance when considering where to establish a new suburb. The first suburb, Levittown, was named for its creator, William J. Levitt. It was constructed on Long Island, New York between 1947 and 1951 and consists of over 17,000 single-family homes which sold for around \$8,000.⁵³ In 1944 only 114,000 single-family homes were built in the entire country, but almost 1.7 million

⁴⁹ Lewis, *Divided Highways*, 74.

⁵⁰ Lewis, *Divided Highways*, 74.

⁵¹ Lewis, *Divided Highways*, 74.

⁵² Harry S. Truman, “Statement by the President Upon Signing the Housing Act of 1949,” July 15, 1949. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=13246>

⁵³ “A Brief History of Levittown, New York,” *Levittown Historical Society*, <http://www.levittownhistoricalsociety.org/history.htm>

had been built in 1950.⁵⁴ As car culture was caused by the availability of automobiles, suburbanization was caused by the availability of a home. The site Levitt chose for his development was located within a triangle of highways, or expressways, that the infamous road builder, Robert Moses, had constructed several years earlier.⁵⁵ By doing so, Levitt guaranteed that his suburb would be directly connected to New York City, where most Levittown residents worked. Whereas the first upper-class suburbs had been established mostly along railroads, automobile dependency made it necessary to locate the newer middle-class suburbs along roads and highways. Without highways, and later Interstates, living in suburbia would be inefficient and impractical.

Other Levittowns were created in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Maryland, and Virginia. All were almost identical, save for the fact that Levitt houses had model years just the same as automobiles. As Tom Lewis explains, “like the automobile, which had begun as a toy of the rich before trickling down to the rest of America, the single-family suburban house, once exclusive to those of means, now became available to any veteran who held a job.”⁵⁶ The federal government subsidized housing through the GI Bill, Federal Housing Act, and Federal Housing Administration mortgages, and each Levittown home came fully furnished with all of the latest household appliances, including a television. In this way, the federal government helped to subsidize not only housing for veterans, but an entirely new lifestyle and culture that had never before been experienced by so many. Robert Fishman argues that Levittown homes “became the defining ‘consumer good’ in our consumer society - the mark of middle-class status in a

⁵⁴ Frederick M. Binder and David M Reimers, *The Way We Lived: Essays and Documents in American Social History* (Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1992), 249.

⁵⁵ Lewis, *Divided Highways*, 81.

⁵⁶ Lewis, *Divided Highways*, 74.

middle-class society.” Never mind that the houses were basically identical and that the federal government subsidized the purchase of almost every home, William Laird Levitt, adamantly believed that, “no man who owns his own house and lot can be a communist...he has too much to do.”⁵⁷ For Levitt, owning one’s own home gave Americans a sense of individuality that ensured against the spread of communism.

Cheap suburban land and easy access to the Interstates enticed many manufacturing companies to leave the central cities which led to urban sprawl and the demise of many central cities. The same principle dictated why people who could afford to kept leaving the city, and why many people who left the cities never went back. Historian Robert Fishman compiled a list of “The top-10 influences on the American metropolis in the past 50 years.” The Interstate Highway Act of 1956 ranks #1, Federal Housing Administration long-term, fixed-rate mortgages were second, fourth was the Housing Act of 1949, and fifth was Levittown. The first 3 are government measures that directly influenced the birth of suburbia, while Levittown was literally the first modern suburb. Of the Interstate system’s influence, Fishman argues, “more than any other measure, the 1956 highway act created the decentralized, automobile-dependent metropolis we know today.”⁵⁸ According to the Federal Highway Administration, eighty percent of the population of the United States live in metropolitan areas, whereas only fifty-six percent of the population lived in such areas in 1950.⁵⁹ Furthermore, whereas in 1950 metropolitan areas were comprised of roughly fifty percent urban and fifty percent suburban, they are now roughly

⁵⁷ Lewis, *Divided Highways*, 76.

⁵⁸ Robert Fishman, “The American Metropolis at Century’s End: Past and Future Influences,” *Housing Policy Debate*, 11 (2000), 202.

⁵⁹ “The Changing Face of America,” *Federal Highway Administration*, <http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/interstate/densitymap.htm>

two-thirds suburban and growing.⁶⁰ Fishman and many other historians recognize that slum clearance, the destruction of neighborhoods, discriminatory housing practices and segregation, and eventually the urban riots of the 1960s were a direct result of the Interstate system and suburban growth.

Civil Activism

The Interstates were an effect of the Good Roads movement, which itself was a form of civil activism. But the Interstate system is also a cause of the highways revolts and environmental movement of the 1960s and 1970s because citizens started to become aware of the unintended consequences of Interstates, especially in urban areas. Urban renewal was associated with Interstate construction because it usually meant demolishing the poorest neighborhoods to make the right-of-way. Citizens in cities all over the country protested against their neighborhoods getting destroyed and being displaced from their homes. The ones who remained in their neighborhood fought to preserve historic landmarks, and also protested the air, water, and even noise pollution caused by the Interstates. Although the Interstates were intended to solve urban problems and generate urban renewal, they accomplished the opposite. As Fishman explains, “the failures of urban renewal...worsened the plight of the cities and thus accelerated suburbanization and sprawl.”⁶¹ On the other hand, the Interstates proved extremely useful in organizing massive anti-war and civil rights protests in cities like Washington, D.C., Chicago, and San Francisco.

The GI Bill of 1944 and the Federal Housing Act of 1949 helped create vibrant and thriving suburbs, but in doing so contributed to the destruction of urban environments and

⁶⁰ “The Changing Face of America,” *Federal Highway Administration*.

⁶¹ Fishman, “The American Metropolis at Century’s End,” 201.

center cities. Michael Harrington, in his essay “Urban Poverty,” argues that part of the problem stems from the fact that many citizens from poor, rural areas moved to inner city for manufacturing jobs during World War II, and stayed even after the jobs were gone.⁶² This, in turn, helped to create and perpetuate slums. One of the primary goals of the Housing Act of 1949 was urban renewal. In the words of President Truman, “it equip[ed] the Federal Government, for the first time, with effective means for aiding cities in the vital task of clearing slums and rebuilding blighted areas.”⁶³ However, as Fishman points out, this also meant that the Federal Housing Administration would not insure mortgages on homes in urban areas, or to African-American home buyers; but they would provide and insure long-term, low interest rate mortgages to white people for suburban homes.⁶⁴ William Levitt expresses this sentiment most clearly in his oft-quoted reasoning for housing segregation; “we can solve a housing problem, or we can try to solve a racial problem but we cannot combine the two.”⁶⁵ While urban renewal did help cities get rid of slums, it also destroyed or divided many neighborhoods, especially in downtown/center city areas.

The Interstates that were supposed to help rejuvenate center cities, but they did not accomplish their goal:

The massive new urban highways, intended to move traffic rapidly in and out of downtown, quickly became snarled in ever-growing congestion, and their construction devastated many urban neighborhoods. Meanwhile, the new peripheral “beltways,” originally designed to enable long distance travelers to bypass crowded central cities, turned into Mains Streets for postwar suburbia.⁶⁶

During the first two decades after World War II, the discriminatory policies of the Federal

⁶² Frederick M. Binder et al., *The Way We Lived*, 263-264.

⁶³ Truman, “Statement by the President Upon Signing the Housing Act of 1949.”

⁶⁴ Fishman, “The American Metropolis at Century’s End,” 202.

⁶⁵ Lewis, *Divided Highways*, 78.

⁶⁶ Fishman, “The American Metropolis at Century’s End,” 201-202.

Housing Administration helped to reinforce racial segregation and job discrimination throughout the country. The combined impact of these policies led to widespread discontent, especially among urban populations. “Fueled by persistent unemployment, poor housing, and racial prejudice,” urban riots erupted during the 1960s in many major cities throughout the country.⁶⁷ The Kerner Commission concluded in 1967, after riots occurred in Newark and Detroit, that, “our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white - separate and unequal.”⁶⁸ In this way, the Interstate system, and other federal programs which enabled the growth of suburbia, directly contributed to the problems that were the focus of the civil rights movement. At the same time the civil rights movement focused on social problems caused in part by the Interstates, the environmental movement sought to deal with the environmental problems that the Interstate presented.

The environmental movement of the 1960s and 1970s was concerned with wilderness protection and resource management, but also with urban problems. Historic preservation was a major focus of the environmental movement in urban areas. The Vieux Carre Expressway, a section of the Interstate system which was designated to run through the historic French Quarter of New Orleans, was defeated in 1969. New Orleans residents protested that they did not want the Interstate to ruin the integrity of the historic district, while city officials argued that it was essential to the growth of the city. Although the federal government deemed the Vieux Carre eligible to receive National Historic Landmark status, and thereby protect it from destruction of any kind, the New Orleans City

⁶⁷ Fishman, “The American Metropolis at Century’s End,” 206.

⁶⁸ “Summary of Report,” *The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* (1967).
<http://www.eisenhowerfoundation.org/docs/kerner.pdf>

Council opted not to pursue it.⁶⁹ That same year, Laurence J. Aurbach, the Executive Assistant for Research and Program Development for the City of Cleveland, published “The Urban Freeway Manifesto.” His goals were numerous, but the overarching theme was that urban Interstates did not solve the problems they were supposed to, and in fact made them worse and created new ones. Aurbach urged for more community involvement in the decision on where to locate the urban Interstates and that there must be just compensation for exercising eminent domain.⁷⁰ The federal government was quick to respond.

The National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 specifically declares that the federal government will “preserve important historic, cultural, and natural aspects of our national heritage.”⁷¹ Around the same time, the air quality in some cities had become intolerable and citizens wanted a solution. Tom Lewis claims, “the nation’s air - especially in the cities - became more and more clogged with pollution as automobiles burned 130,000 gallons of gas each minute.”⁷² That year, 1970, the federal government passed the Clean Air Act Amendments, which were designed to help curtail air pollution by setting emission standards for vehicles.⁷³ At the same time the government tried to fix these problems, interest groups also began to take notice of the effect the Highway Trust Fund itself had on these mounting problems. They wanted to “bust the trust” that had helped bring about these problems in the first place.

Another important argument made by Aurbach in 1969 was that local and city

⁶⁹ Richard F. Weingroff, “The battles of New Orleans - Vieux Carre Riverfront Expressway (I-310),” *Federal Highway Administration*, last modified October 17, 2013.

<http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/infrastructure/neworleans.cfm>

⁷⁰ Laurence J. Aurbach, “Urban Freeway Manifesto,” *The Urban Lawyer* 1, no. 3 (1969), 292-295.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/27892663>

⁷¹ David Stradling, *The Environmental Movement* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012), 65.

⁷² Lewis, *Divided Highways*, 215

⁷³ Stradling, *The Environmental Movement*, 104-105.

governments ought to have the ability to allocate Interstate funds from the Highway Trust Fund in ways that would best serve the community, even if that meant using the funds for mass transportation instead of an Interstate.⁷⁴ The Interstate system, he argued, “which is excellent for interstate commerce, travel, and defense purposes, and for bypassing cities, is a rather marginal program for handling traffic within urban areas.”⁷⁵ The Highway Action Coalition, made up of environmental interest groups including the Sierra Club, Environmental Action, and Friends of Earth, united with the common goal of busting the trust.⁷⁶ The hope was that allowing cities to use federal highway funds on mass transportation needs would alleviate traffic congestion and all of the social and environmental problems associated with the Interstate highways.

Lastly, although the Interstate system was a significant cause of all of the above mentioned problems, it was also an important tool used to combat the same or similar problems. David Stradling contests that, “the increasing mobility of American tourists, many of whom drove deep into wild nature for hiking and camping, led to a growing concern about the fate of wilderness - defined principally as the absence of roads or cars - in the United States.”⁷⁷ In this sense, the Interstates were a necessary tool for getting people closer, both literally and spiritually, to nature. Similarly, protests and marches for civil rights and against the Vietnam War depended heavily on the Interstates to mobilize and assemble tens of thousands of activists from all over the nation. In 1963, over 250,000 people participated in the “March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.”⁷⁸ In 1965, the Students for a Democratic Society organized the largest anti-war protest of the

⁷⁴ Aurbach, “Urban Freeway Manifesto,” 292-295.

⁷⁵ Aurbach, “Urban Freeway Manifesto,” 295.

⁷⁶ Lewis, *Divided Highways*, 225.

⁷⁷ Stradling, *The Environmental Movement*, 5.

⁷⁸ March on Washington, August 28, 1963; Bayard Rustin Papers; John F. Kennedy Library; National Archives and Records Administration. <http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=96>.

time, a march on Washington, D.C. that consisted of roughly 25,000 protestors. “The Interstates are conduits of noise and pollution, conformity and blandness. They take us everywhere and nowhere. They have become the roads we love to hate, but we cannot imagine our world without them.”⁷⁹

Conclusion

The Interstate system is an effect of the combination of the four key elements of American culture discussed in this paper - federal involvement in defense and economic interests, especially highway construction, car culture, suburbia, and civil activism. According to David Stradling, during the post-war period, “the booming economy, industrial development, and the growing influence of automobile-reliant transportation led to a broad movement concerned with the preservation of wilderness, farmland, and urban environments.”⁸⁰ The Interstates were the cause of many social, economic, political, and environmental problems, but they all also played, and continue to play, a major role in American culture. The Interstate system became the foundation on which the core elements of modern American culture were able to transform and continue to thrive today.

⁷⁹ Lewis, *Divided Highways*, 263.

⁸⁰ Stradling, *The Environmental Movement*, 5.