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The Vietnam War claimed 47,355 American lives in combat over 17 years, from 1957 to 1973. In addition, over 150,000 Americans were injured in that unpopular and unsuccessful war. Each year in the United States as many lives are lost in motor vehicle accidents as during the entire Vietnam War. For decades, 40,000 to 50,000 people have been killed each year in U.S. traffic accidents.[1] In only one year, 1968, did the complete death toll of U.S. soldiers in Vietnam exceed the death toll on roads back home in America. Where is the public uproar, the journalistic indignation, the public cry for an end to the slaughter? For years, self-styled consumer advocates have been pressuring Congress to mandate automobile safety, but the death toll remains high. No one has apparently realized that the root of the problem might be public roads, rather than private automobiles.

Since the wide acceptance of the automobile in the 1920s, over two million Americans have died in traffic accidents.[2] That is far more than the roughly 824,000 Americans who have died in U.S. wars and conflicts dating back to the American Revolution, including Civil War Confederate combat deaths.[3] Motor vehicle accidents are the leading cause of accidental death in the United States. For young people, ages 15-24, motor vehicle accidents are the leading cause of death—accidental or otherwise.[4] That statistical trend has been stable for many years.

The symptoms of roadway mismanagement are common knowledge. Mothers Against Drunk Drivers (MADD) formed in the 1980s as a grassroots effort to focus attention on drunk driving. Numerous studies have reported on the state of the aging U.S. transportation infrastructure. And there are ongoing minute-by-minute broadcasts on the roadway congestion common to metropolitan areas. Unsafe, aging, and overcrowded roadways might be expected in a Third World nation, but not in the world’s largest, freest, most economically advanced country.

Americans may watch with curiosity as they see television news coverage of Eastern Europeans literally standing in line to buy staples such as bread, meat, and soap. But American commuters participate in our mixed economy’s form of a waiting line by crawling through rush hour traffic. The goods may be different, but segments of our economy are equally mismanaged based on the same wrongheaded idea of “public goods.”

Socialist management practices have been proven to be futile, yet America’s roadways are largely managed on the basis of a command economy. Roadway management is government-controlled and dangerously ineffective. Decision-making is based on political expediency rather than consumer preference, economics, or engineering. This results in poor maintenance, pork barrel construction projects, growth for government’s sake, and a short-term focus on managing crises. Maintenance, safety, and customer satisfaction are overlooked in exchange for political gain.

Spiro Agnew resigned as Vice President in a scandal based in part on questionable payments he received from roadway construction and engineering firms while he was governor of Maryland. As Agnew himself put it, “anyone who’s been around the political scene in the United States, who would expect that campaign contributions don’t come from contractors doing state and federal business, is quite naive.”[5] Agnew’s case is characteristic of a bad system.

Some may suggest the automobile is the source of these problems, that the so-called social costs of the automobile are simply too high. But city streets were congested before Henry Ford made the first mass-produced, affordable automobile. The ascendancy of the automobile only serves to illustrate that...
government management of roadways is inept. Over time, roadway managers have not responded to the challenge of the demand for motor vehicle travel through market pricing, technological innovation, and specialized roadways.

In fact, President Eisenhower’s 1956 approval of the National System of Interstate and Defense Highways for connecting the country through a web of interstate freeways was motivated by Ike’s interest in moving servicemen and matériel in the event of war; the civilian traveler was a secondary concern. The success of the automobile and the independence of the commuter may be unmanageable problems to government planners, but to a businessman they present a market opportunity for voluntary exchange for mutual gain. The success of airline deregulation in the late 1970s hints at the potential success of a free market in roadways.

The mismanagement of existing roadway transportation facilities has helped to create the transportation “crisis” which in turn has stimulated demand for mass transit consultants, contractors, and administrators. Of course, many such experts’ proposed solutions call for an increase in taxation to support infrastructure modernization, ever more freeways, and mass transit projects on the scale of the Pharoahs’ Great Pyramids.

In addition, motor vehicle transportation is subject to the burden of capricious government regulation with the subsequent limitations on consumer choices (e.g., mandatory speed limits, airbag, seat belt, and shoulder harness requirements). We have shock-absorbing bumpers that can withstand crashes at speeds of five miles per hour, yet there are no physical safeguards to prevent one from driving while legally intoxicated. One should be skeptical that this reflects the will of consumer demand.

In spite of lower speed limits, increasing the legal drinking age to 21 in all 50 states, and narrower blood-alcohol test limits, roughly half of all fatal traffic accidents are still alcohol-related.[6] America continues to suffer ongoing slaughter on its roadways. With more than two million dead, reasonable limits were exceeded decades ago. No private industry could tolerate such high rates of mortality and injury.

It is not that our government roadkeepers are unaware of these problems. The federal government has several agencies keeping score on various aspects of motor vehicle and roadway safety. The National Safety Council, the Department of Justice, the Federal Highway Administration, the National Center for Health Statistics, the Surgeon General, the Department of Transportation, and other agencies compile and analyze roadway safety statistics. Much of this statistical effort is originated or extended by various departments and agencies of the 50 states.

While the government keeps count of the victims of its own roadway mismanagement, a few others are looking to the disciplines of the marketplace, especially for easing congestion and raising capital to maintain and expand the transportation infrastructure. In Southern California, four sections of new highway are being built as privately funded and operated tollways with reversion to the state at the end of a 35-year management contract. Growing government budget deficits have opened the door for such semi-privatization experiments. Because of concerns about legal liability, ownership of the tollways remains with the state, so there will still be the lack of motivation to create the far safer roadways that theory suggests would exist in a free market.

In commercial aviation, airlines are low key in addressing the issue of safety in their marketing. They commonly make reference to their long experience in the sky and their use of state-of-the-art technology to be reassuring. Likewise, safety would clearly be a competitive issue in a free market for roadway transportation. High levels of safety and accident prevention are fundamental to the popularity of air travel; it is essential for the prosperity of the air transport industry, an industry with projected revenues of $48 billion in 1992.[7]
On average, a few hundred people die each year in commercial aviation accidents; air travel would slow to a trickle long before air accident rates began to approach anything close to the carnage of roadway accident rates. While it is true that many nations’ airlines are state-owned, they must adhere to the strict standards of excellence set by private carriers to remain competitive. In roadways, there is no such privatized leading light to set high standards of safety and efficiency.

Organ donor cards are combined with drivers’ licenses in many states. No cynic has suggested that this is an acknowledgment that roadway accidents are a leading cause of death for people who are otherwise in the prime of their lives, an ideal source of healthy human remains. Organ transplant recipients are unwitting beneficiaries of government roadway mismanagement. It is possible that motorcycles (donorcycles) would be prohibited in some privatized roadway systems, as the safety and liability issues might be too great for private enterprise to bear.

The Insurance Information Institute of New York estimated the economic loss from motor vehicle accidents and injuries at $93.9 billion in 1989.[8] For perspective, that amount equals 61 percent of the 1989 federal budget deficit.[9] But the fact that public roads have led to the deaths of millions of innocent people is overlooked. Yet the greatest cost of public roads is death and injury, not late or inconvenienced commuters. There must be a better balance among cost, safety, efficiency, and regulation. The marketplace would create a better balance than government planning provides today. The most cynical observer would suggest that poorly maintained roads are used as the basis for justifying increased construction and maintenance budgets; absent a profit motive, mismanagement is rewarded with increased funding. A well-tuned, smoothly operating system would provide less basis for ever increasing budgets.

The idea of roadway privatization is radical from today’s perspective, but by no means is it new or even foreign. The United States has a long and rich history of private roadways, turnpikes, and bridges. The first engineered and planned toll turnpike in the United States was a 62-mile, stone and gravel road completed in 1794 between Philadelphia and Lancaster, Pennsylvania.[10] In these times of government budget crises, such privatization alternatives are more frequently discussed as a means of financing new projects. The existing roads could be sold to private businesses as well.

**Innovation**

Innovations in private roads might include congestion pricing, faster construction to hold down costs, limitations on vehicle size and axle weight to improve efficiency and safety, more one-way routes in congested areas, additional tunnels and bridges (right of way permitting), and more use of roadway rights of way for pipelines and transmission lines. Other possible innovations include improved roadway surfaces and easier to understand signs and markings. Private road owners might prohibit the passage of cars with exploding gas tanks, cars in a clear state of disrepair, or vehicles that are prone to rolling over. Responsibility and liability would help enforce a new discipline on all parties. Licensing would not be done by governments, but by road owners, and police would not be used to enforce traffic regulations. They would actually be out catching criminals.

Today’s “free” roads are too dangerous and too crowded. Peter Gordon, in a paper for the Reason Foundation, quotes John Kain’s estimate that 95 percent of all urban roadway congestion is due to the mispricing of 5 percent of the roadways.[11] Such estimates are subject to academic and professional debate. If Kain is even close in his estimate, this suggests that America already has sufficient roadways to support today’s traffic if only there were some information upon which consumers could base their trip
decisions. That information would be expressed in the form of a price; a free market would be the only way to determine that price. Congestion pricing, just like long-distance telephone carriers’ peak hour rates, would cause many people to choose to avoid rush hour.

But emphasis on efficiency without regard to safety improvements is short-sighted. Nobody would use efficient, privately owned and operated, congestion-priced phone lines were there a risk of electrocution each time the telephone was used. We won’t wake up in a laissez faire, libertarian world any day soon, but roadway privatization is being given a trial in the name of efficiency. However, the longer term outlook must include safety.

It has long been argued that passenger vehicles subsidize roadway construction for commercial trucks and buses. In a free market, special highways might be built for some truck routes, trucks might be prohibited during parts of the day, and they would be charged fees more consistent with the cost they impose on the road owner. Government-subsidized road building puts the railroad industry at a disadvantage to the trucking industry. In this case, highway taxes and construction spending have become a political tug-of-war fought between special interest groups. This distorts the allocation of roadway resources compared to what would occur in a free market.

One can hope that the trend toward privatization will reach U.S. roadways and lead to safer and more efficient roads. Roadway slaughter can and must end. Our roadkeepers expose us to senseless risk of injury and death, and we often have to wait in line for the privilege. As America continues to enjoy the greatest freedom and prosperity known to mankind, one hopes that the world can look to America for leadership in roadway privatization and the resulting benefits of increased safety and efficiency.