

LYNDON B. JOHNSON

XXXVI *President of the United States: 1963-1969*

449 - Remarks at the Signing of the National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act and the Highway Safety Act.

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Distinguished Members of the Congress and the administration, friends:

Over the Labor Day weekend, 29 American servicemen died in Vietnam. During the same Labor Day weekend, 614 Americans died on our highways in automobile accidents.

Twenty-nine on the battlefield.

Six hundred and fourteen on the highways.

In this century, more than 1,500,000 of our fellow citizens have died on our streets and highways: nearly three times as many Americans as we have lost in all our wars.

Every 11 minutes a citizen is killed on the road. Every day 9,000 are killed or injured--9,000!

Last year 50,000 were killed.

And the tragic totals have mounted every year.

It makes auto accidents the biggest cause of death and injury among Americans under 35. And if our accident rate continues, one out of every two Americans can look forward to being injured by a car during his lifetime--one out of every two!

Now this is not a new problem. Ten years ago in the United States Senate I told my colleagues that "the deadly toll of highway accidents demands our prompt action." And that this was a responsibility Congress must someday face. Now, finally, we are facing it.

What is the answer to this shocking problem?

Well, there are those who tell us that better roads are the answer. Some say safer cars. Others, tougher licenses. Some, stricter judges.

We know there is no one answer; there is no magic solution. But we are determined to examine every answer.

We are going to cut down this senseless loss of lives. We are going to cut down the pointless injury. We are going to cut down the heartbreak.

Today, I will sign two bills into law: First, to protect the driver--the Traffic Safety Act will ensure safer, better-protected cars in the event of an accident.

Second, to achieve safer driving--the Highway Safety Act will set up a national framework for the State safety programs.

The first act we sign into law is the Traffic Safety Act. It calls for nationwide Federal vehicle safety standards to be developed, first under the direction of the Secretary of Commerce, and, soon, I hope, under the Secretary of Transportation.

Starting with our 1968 models, American and foreign,

--We are going to assure our citizens that every new car they buy is as safe as modern knowledge knows how to build it.

--We are going to protect drivers against confusing and misleading tire standards.

We are going to establish Federal research and testing centers to probe the causes of traffic accidents.

For years now, we have spent millions of dollars to understand and to fight polio and other childhood diseases. Yet up until now we have tolerated a raging epidemic of highway death--which has killed more of our youth than all other diseases combined.

Through the Highway Safety Act, we are going to find out more about highway disease--and we are going to find out how to cure it.

In this age of space, we are getting plenty of information about how to send men into space and how to bring them home. Yet we don't know for certain whether more auto accidents are caused by faulty brakes, or by soft shoulders, or by drunk drivers, or even by deer crossing the highway.

Local and State information has been too meager. The Highway Safety Act will create a Federal-State partnership for learning these facts.

--We are going to establish a National Driver Register to protect all of our citizens against drivers whose licenses have been suspended or revoked.

--We are going to support better programs of driver education and better programs for licensing and auto inspection.

--We are going to ask every State to participate in safety programs and to conform to uniform driver and pedestrian safety performance standards.

Now there is nothing new or radical about all this. Every other form of transportation is already covered by Federal safety standards. The food we buy, the food we eat, has been under Federal safety standards since way back before I was born--1906.

But the automobile industry has been one of our Nation's most dynamic and inventive industries. I hope, and I believe, that its skill and imagination will somehow be able to build in more safety--without building on more costs.

For safety is no luxury item, it is no optional extra; it must be a normal cost of doing business.

But no matter how hard we try, no matter how well we all try to work together, the full impact of these bills can be achieved only if and when we create a Cabinet-level Department of Transportation. So today, again, I call on, I plead with, and I urge the Congress to enact--this year--the bill which will give us that department.

We owe a great deal to a great many people for this historic legislation that we are meeting here to formalize this morning.

I want very much to salute all the Members of Congress and all the individuals who have participated in bringing about these measures.

I cannot single out each of you by name, although I do point with pride to each contribution made. I would like to single out the distinguished chairmen of the two committees of the Congress who guided this legislation to successful enactment, Senator Magnuson of the Senate committee and Representative Harley Staggers of the House committee. I want to particularly thank, again, each Member of the Congress who has given leadership and talent to this program.

Finally, I am happy to announce today that one of the Nation's leading traffic safety experts has responded to my call for help. His name is Dr. William J. Haddon, Jr. He is a graduate of MIT and the Harvard Medical School. He is the author of more than 40 publications on accidents and safety. He is a distinguished public administrator. I am nominating Dr. Haddon to be Administrator of the new National Traffic Safety Agency. He and his colleagues will be working with the automobile industry to establish reasonable yet realistic safety standards.

I am, as I believe you are, proud of these bills.

I am very proud of the 89th Congress which took my proposals and brought forth these bills which will very shortly become law.

I am especially proud at this moment to sign these bills which I believe promise, in the years to come, to cure the highway disease: to end the years of horror and to give us, instead, years of hope.

Thank each of you very much.