

superstitious. The result was a massive public-health problem ; something like one vehicle in three was ending up with blood on it.

Second, automobile exhaust fumes had become a major source of air pollution, a matter then approaching the point of crisis.

Third, Federal highway construction was radically altering the design and function of American cities, usually to the sharp disadvantage of the inner-city poor, but with no means for taking such effects into account.

Fourth, the system of accident insurance and claims litigation was steadily paralyzing the American legal system, and at immense cost to everyone involved.

In a series of swift and decisive moves, Congress imposed Federal controls over each of the first three sets of problems. (In the case of highways it was essentially a matter of redirection.) Only the last remains untouched, and clearly this issue also is now being joined. Congressional hearings are about to begin ; automobile insurance is about to become a national issue.

The new era in traffic safety, in air pollution and in highway construction came quietly, almost stealthily. Starting in 1964, Congress began enacting legislation having to do with safety features for Government-purchased vehicles, tire standards, automotive exhaust controls and the like.

No great notice was taken until President Johnson in the 1966 State of the Union message proposed a general measure providing for safe cars. Then in a rush of events ending in a Rose Garden ceremony nine months later on Sept. 9, 1966, the decisive battle was fought and won. The largest manufacturing complex on earth, which into the sixth decade of the 20th century had persisted as an utterly unregulated private enterprise, was of a sudden subjected to detailed and permanent Government regulation.

Next, a Department of Transportation was established, making highway design a matter of Cabinet-level responsibility, with a clear mandate to end the mindless obsession of the Bureau of Public Roads with pouring concrete regardless of the consequences to the urban environment.

Nothing comparable has occurred since the establishment of railroad regulation in the late 19th century. But the process was essentially different. The establishment of the Interstate Commerce Commission in 1887 was the result of basic changes in the political attitudes of the nation, preceded by decades of controversy. The National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act of 1966, by contrast, was preceded at best by a few dozen articles in small magazines and professional journals, and perhaps three books written almost simultaneously with the legislation.

Probably not 50 men in the United States were even aware that President Johnson was going to send up a highway safety proposal. (And not one of them would have predicted it would pass the House of Representatives unanimously!) These were essentially apolitical events.

Thus, not one but two traffic safety bills were passed in 1966. The second of these, the Highway Safety Act of 1966, established pervasive Federal regulation of the traffic safety activities of state governments. Driver licensing, traffic laws, emergency medical services, driver training, all these previously exclusive state concerns fell under Federal control. It was surely the largest single transfer of authority from the state to the Federal level of this generation, indeed one of the largest in American history, but it passed almost without comment.

Similarly, official attitudes toward highway construction have profoundly, but almost silently changed. "Half the people in this building" an Assistant Secretary of Transportation remarked recently, "will die happy if we never again build a foot of urban highway. The construction of urban highways will continue, but the era when government viewed them as an unquestionable good is over."

What happened was that people changed their minds about the automobile. Or rather the people who have the power to direct such matters in America did so. The scientist Michael Polanyi has called attention to how much more common this process is than is generally recognized. One day a society appears to be operating within a well-established and untroubled system of belief, the next day it turns out to have abandoned its old convictions in favor of entirely new ones. (Walter Lippmann suggests something of the same process in his "law of accumulated grievances.")

The point is that the private automobile, as authors Alan K. Campbell and Jesse Burkhead say, "is undoubtedly the greatest generator of externalities that civilization has ever known." Its only possible rival, they add, would appear to be