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Atomic Anxiety and the Interstate

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Why 1956: The Interstate Act

By: Andrew Oidtman

The National Interstate and Defense Highways Act of 1956 was, on the surface, a direct response to the growing nation's need for an expanded, federally funded, interstate system. The interstate system was defunct and it had been for decades by the 1950's but the federal government was never able to pass significant legislation to provide funding. Special interest groups, for decades, clamored for widespread projects but they died on the vine, rarely gaining enough governmental support to garner a vote. The automobile rose to prominence in the early 1920's yet only two federally funded expansion projects occurred during that time. As the automobile gained popularity the American public crafted a unique relationship with the open road. The open road provided a semblance of freedom that the average American could not find in their daily life. It seemed as though consensus regarding the creation of an interstate system was an impossible feat. The frequent roadblocks revolved primarily around funding. The American people did not want to pay more taxes and the federal government lacked the causation to override public sentiment. Another issue boiled down to leadership. Private companies along with government subcontractors vied for the immense contract and as a result, cannibalized the effort from within. A major incident or event would be required for interstate legislation to gain support from both the American public and the federal government. The Cold War, with all of its potential for devastation, provided the necessary conditions to once again revisit the creation of a nationwide interstate system. The National Interstate and Defense Highways Act of 1956 was different than previous iterations of roadway reforms. Atomic and communist anxiety, brought on by the warming of the Cold War, was the missing piece of the puzzle. The federal government, led by Dwight D. Eisenhower, fashioned the narrative that the interstate system was a matter of national defense. This seemingly simple connection allowed the American people to accept a tax hike while also forcing the federal government to pass legislation. The National Interstate and Defense Highways Act of 1956, a matter of national defense, was aided by nuclear age anxiety and as a result the American people unintentionally altered their relationship with both the federal government and the open road.



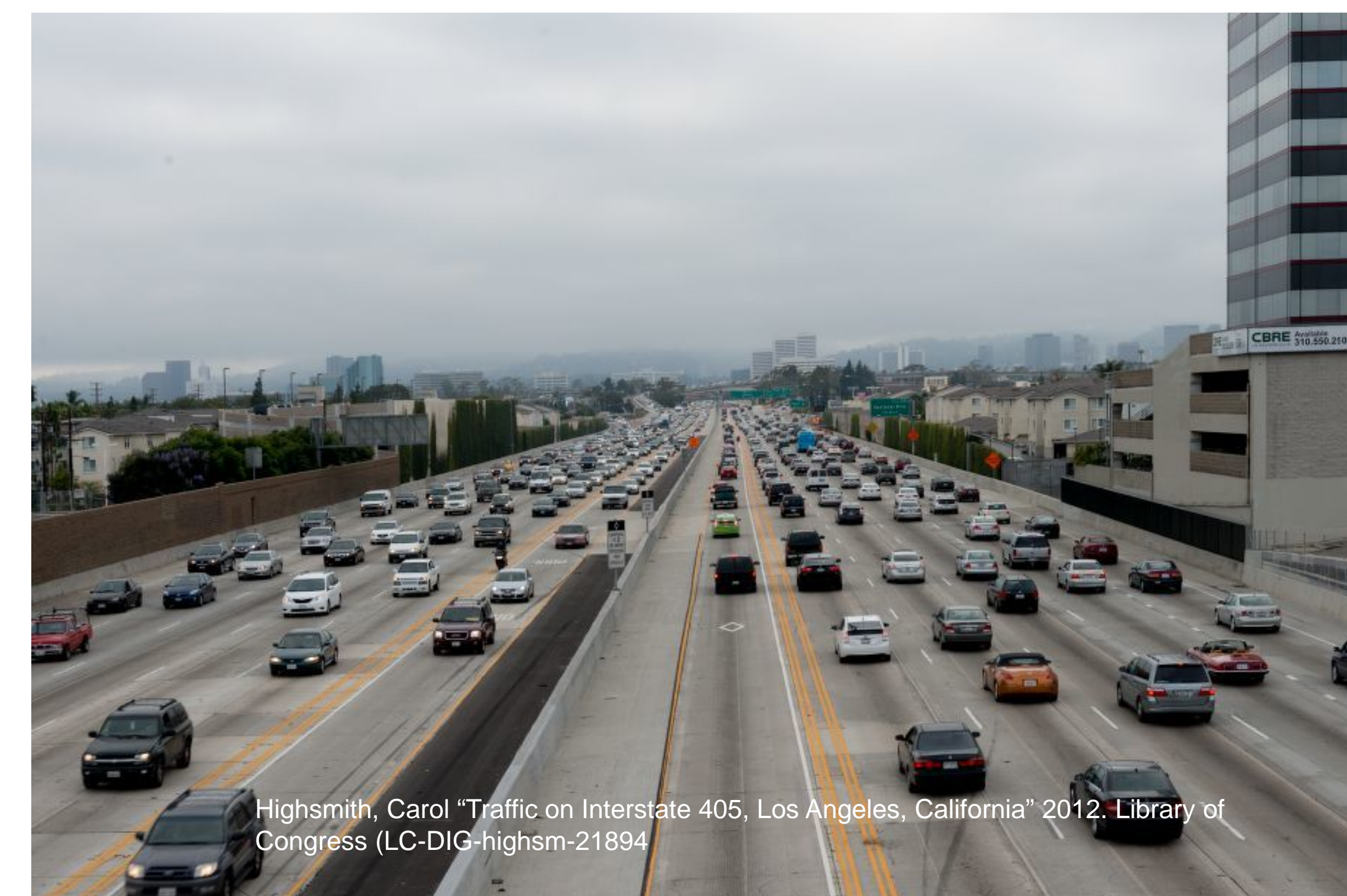
The American people were subjected to the grim reality of nuclear warfare. Pictures of the sheer devastation were common in everyday life. Initially, the American people were utterly terrified of the destruction. As the Cold War progressed the attitude shifted. The nation settled into an attitude of atomic anxiety. Businessmen wore suits that were supposed to protect them from radiation, school children practiced duck and cover drills in the class room, and everyday citizens built bunkers in their backyards. The home took on a whole new role of importance during the nuclear age. It provided a beacon of safety in an otherwise dangerous world. Nuclear families digested television in their suburban home with all the luxuries of a consumerist society. Outside the home, the nation was anxious. The National Interstate and Defense Highways Act of 1956 passed the rigors of Washington D.C. because the American people yearned to feel safe. The atomic age presented the right opportunity for the federal government to pass legislation that had previously received little support.

America's relationship with the open road changed dramatically with the inception of the national interstate system. Prior to the creation of the interstate system the American people had a simple yet fulfilling relationship with the road. The open road provided freedom at a time when American's were working on an assembly line or wasting away in gray flannel suit corporate America. The road was redemption for all that was wrong with ordinary life. The destination was important but the journey is what defined the open road. Americans took backroads through small heartland towns, stopped at mom and pop diners, and traversed the natural beauty of America. The Interstates Act of 1956 replaced the beauty of the open road with the tedium of American life. Backroads were replaced by interstates and interstates erased the journey. America's relationship with the road was forever altered.

The beginning of the atomic age and the subsequent National Interstate and Defense Highways Act of 1956 eventually gave way to a return to a semblance of normalcy. The extreme anxiety of the 1950's was replaced with a general indifference of the 1960's and 1970's. There were bigger, domestic issues to worry about. The interstate highway system took thirteen years to complete so the change in road culture was not immediate although some changes happened quickly. The most notable change post-1956 was the way automobiles were advertised. The traditional advertisement showed a nuclear family on a journey with a natural backdrop. After 1956 automobile advertisement's generally showed a single driver, in a suburban or urban setting, with much more emphasis on specs. The car no longer served the same purpose as it had in the beginning of the twentieth century. Increased horsepower allowed Americans to reach their destination faster and increased gas mileage prevented frequent stops. Although the interstate system was supposed to alleviate traffic jam's they became more frequent. The nation's relationship with the open road was also drastically altered. The car became synonymous with a commute rather than adventure and highway driving increased stress. Americans still find joy in driving but it comes from road trips through rural parts of the nation, away from the stress of everyday life.



The epitome of open road culture in early twentieth century America, travelers, in open cab automobiles, traversing the difficult roads of the countries national parks. National Parks gained popularity in the first half of the twentieth century because the majority of Americans had to drive a great distance to reach them. Establishing and maintaining roads in the National Parks was imperative to accommodate the great many travelers that desired to see the nation's beauty. The natural beauty of the parks was the destination but the American people desired the journey more than anything. It is likely that after a day of exploring the wilds of Olympic National Park these travelers stayed at a roadside motel. Often referred to as "gypsying" roadside camping made long distance automobile travel possible without breaking the bank.



References

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