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Book Review

John E. Robson

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This book is about the men and institutions who promote highways and how they destroy our churches, schools, homes and parks.¹

This is not the reviewer's characterization of *Superhighway—Superhoax*. It is the author's. Mrs. Leavitt's list of concrete commandos omits Adolph Hitler, who built Germany's Autobahn superhighway on the way to nearly destroying the world and Julius Caesar, who bricked over many a hectare on the way to conquering it. But all the rest are there, depicted in their Lucifer costumes as they slink off to dark seances in the continuing conspiracy to pave America over.

There is much to question and criticize in the federal highway program (and state programs too). There is no doubt that the corpulent highway trust fund, dining regularly for the past decade and a half on a rich diet of gasoline (and other) taxes, has gravely distorted the balance of our transportation system in favor of the private automobile. Nor is it open to question that the diverse factions making up the so-called "highway lobby" have battled ferociously and with ingenuity to sustain and enhance road programs. And one consequence of all this has been to inflict harm on both the environment and the citizens of many urban areas.

But the book's untamed anti-highway hyperbole overwhelms a rather useful collection of relevant information and observation. And it was more in sorrow than anger that I found her case flawed by an intemperate brief.

In Mrs. Leavitt's view, "our highway system is less the result of an attempt to provide transportation than it is a side benefit of highway construction undertaken for construction's sake and insured automobile sales."² And "hungry highway promoters" dismiss the tragic highway death toll as an "inevitable consequence of our culture." Anti-highway spokesmen "refer" to a subject. Pro-highway spokesmen "crow," "ingenuously comment," or "warn darkly." Their fellow travelers of the press "burst forth with dire

1. H. LEAVITT, *SUPERHIGHWAY—SUPERHOAX* 20 (1970).

2. *Id.* at 12.

warnings" when a highway project is threatened. All newspaper publishers are lumped wholesale into the pro-highway lobby. And Mrs. Leavitt even tags the highway crowd with posturing falsely as patriots (by publishing Fourth of July editorials) as they proceed to their conquest of the Republic. The *coup de grace* is the conspiratorial implication found in the fact that the headquarters of the American Road Builders Association, admittedly one of the heavy hitters on the pro-highway team, is "appropriately located" next to the building which houses the United States Department of Transportation's Federal Highway Administration. The probative weight of this evidence is somewhat diminished by the revelation that the Department of Transportation was neither created nor housed until three years after the Association's headquarters was constructed.

It's just a little too much.

But Mrs. Leavitt's strident rhetoric is not an isolated instance in the annals of the protracted highway conflict. It is relatively old stuff. Moreover, anti-highway forces were pioneers in the protest movement. They early mastered the public meeting forum, vigorously exercised their right to petition government and, on occasion, engaged in civil disobedience.

This has brought both good and bad.

Anti-highway militancy has surely been one of the effective instruments in blocking various questionably conceived local highway projects (*e.g.*, the one in San Francisco). And it has no doubt contributed to today's environmental groundswell which, in addition to other forces, is now causing the national executive and legislative branches to question previously unquestioned commandments which gave birth and sustenance to the highway program.

But the level of intemperance of anti-highway forces, their not infrequent *ad hominem* attacks, and their persistent claim on the highway trust fund for urban mass transportation projects, completely polarized the "pros" and the "antis." The conflict became like the range wars between the cattlemen and sheep ranchers. Rational dialogue was abandoned. It became a matter of choosing highways or mass transit. The effects of this polarization should be examined in the environment of the early days of the present federal-aid highway program.

A substantial national highway program was needed. Mass transportation offered little sex appeal to a car-hungry suburbia-headed post-war America. The "antis" were not as politically skillful or as well organized as the "pros" and they spent much of their energy wondering how to get their hands on trust fund money instead of building a counter-force federal-aid program.

From the interplay of these factors, it is not surprising that the highway dominates the urban transportation landscape. This presents a somewhat different story than Mrs. Leavitt's simplistic view:

Our motor vehicle traffic was supposed to consist of trucks, buses and a few interurban private cars

But by the end of World War II, highway boosters had decided to make the private automobile the dominant form of urban transportation³

The federal-aid highway program has bestowed on the nation considerable mobility and economic benefit. But Mrs. Leavitt has a point. The private automobile has become the dominant form of urban transportation. And unless steps are taken (mostly more dollars) to restore the tattered condition of mass transportation (rail, bus, etc.) it threatens to become the only form.

In 1947 Chicago had 512,000 registered automobiles—one for every 6.4 persons. In 1969 auto registrations had jumped to one for every 3.6 persons and transit ridership dropped 62 percent. That pattern has been repeated, for rapid rail and bus mass transportation, throughout metropolitan America. In a nation where a third of its citizens have no access to a car this is intolerable. And this does not reckon the public costs in air pollution and urban aesthetics, nor the devotion of large hunks of scarce urban land to roads and parking (up to 50 percent of some central business districts), nor the human costs of dislocation and neighborhood disruption.

The most troublesome thing about continued reliance on the automobile as the principal instrument of access to and circulation within the city is that there appears to be no end. Peak hour congestion establishes the "need" for more urban highways. Highway "needs" studies are presented. The new highways are built. With their self-fulfilling magnetism, the new highways shortly become congested again and the cycle starts all over.

Local political leaders and transportation planners cannot bear too heavy a share of the blame for the present condition of much of our urban transportation. For the presence of available federal dollars (up to 90 percent for interstate projects) and the paucity of funding for mass transportation has presented the uncomfortable options of turning down any federal aid at all, building highways, or scratching for scarce local money to improve mass transportation. Not surprisingly, this bias in federal fiscal policy has had its predictable consequence.

It is interesting (but impractical) to speculate on what the political lineup

3. *Id.* at 8.

in 1956 might have been had all the benefits and burdens of the federal-aid highway program to urban areas been anticipated and debated when the trust fund was established. Perhaps no different than it was. But whether mayors, conservationists, the black community (which was then spending its time on civil rights), and downtown merchants (not realizing that new roads would probably hasten the need for investment in suburban facilities) would have allied politically to limit the program or shape it differently is at least open to argument.

But we can't go back to 1956. And the important question is: Where are we headed now? Historically viewed, I think we have come quite a way. The big question is what will happen to the highway trust fund after completion of the presently authorized interstate system, now two-thirds finished. A number of recent indicators point to more balance in urban transportation systems.

It was reliably reported that the White House seriously considered discontinuation of the trust fund concept. While this revolutionary position did not emerge as administration policy, it is amazing that it was even given any serious thought. Moreover, Secretary of Transportation John Volpe and other high officials of the Department have publicly embraced the idea of a transportation trust fund. Presumably this contemplates amalgamating various tax sources into a transportation "pot" and permitting local and regional officials freedom to determine what modal emphasis and type of transportation system they want. Along the same line Senator Jennings Randolph of West Virginia (fingered by Mrs. Leavitt as a significant *bete noire* to the anti-highway forces) has introduced legislation which contemplates use of highway trust fund receipts to aid mass transit.

Congress has passed legislation which will offer three billion dollars in federal aid for mass transportation in the next five years. This marks the advent of some organization and political maturity among those with an interest in mass transportation. Moreover, the program will offer local and regional officials some financially meaningful options in developing their metropolitan transportation systems.

Even the states are re-thinking the problem. Witness the Governor of Illinois' recent proposal for an additional state gasoline tax to be used to aid the Chicago Transit Authority and other mass transportation in Illinois (which didn't pass).

The Department of Transportation has embarked on a major re-evaluation of the transportation planning process. This suggests the possibility that a condition to federal aid will be an insistence that planning for urban transportation be done on a truly multi-modal basis. Moreover the traditional

“highway needs” planning studies now are challenged as really being statements of highway wants.

Many members of Congress are growing increasingly skeptical and vocal over the massive allocation of tax dollars to the highway program. This is partly a product of general sensitivity to national fiscal policy and national priorities, and partly a focus of the highway program itself.

The rise of environmentalism and citizen protest has also impacted heavily on highway programs. Projects all over the country have been delayed or done in because of citizen opposition. Recently, Secretary of Transportation Volpe indicated to Congress that it is doubtful whether a number of now-planned urban segments of the interstate system can ever be built and that none of the roads are completely essential to an integrated national system. There is some considerable sympathy for this view among even the most dedicated pro-highway forces who wonder whether the political heat (and high costs) arising from new urban roads is worth the candle. In some instances court actions have been the instrument of blocking a highway project. The Department of Transportation’s new requirement that there be separate public hearings both on location and design for highway projects has enhanced the opportunity for citizen mobilization against poorly conceived projects. And Secretary Volpe recently decreed that no highway project can be commenced until all relocation of persons or businesses required has been completed.

Federal-aid highway programs are not going to vanish. More highways will be built. The highway lobby, in phalanx with some of its staunch congressional allies will press for a long-term continuation of the highway trust fund concept. However, the forces afoot, some of which are mentioned above, are going to become an increasingly prickly burr under the highwayman’s saddle. And it seems more likely than not that the highway program which Mrs. Leavitt has viewed as an apparently inexorable juggernaut will continue to be reshaped and redirected in ways more compatible with the values and true needs of our metropolitan areas.