

A Historian's Perspective on the Interstate Highway System: Patterns and Consequences

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The National System of Interstate and Defense Highways were funded in 1956 and the resulting highways have become the backbone of the nation's road network. In this discussion, I propose to examine three different aspects of this vitally important infrastructure system, with the general intention of helping us understand how we have reached the present situation in terms of the American highway system, of which the Interstate roads are the pinnacle. First, I will review the historical background to the Interstate program, believing it is important to understand how the Interstate initiative emerged from enduring policies and approaches that shaped the American road network from the late 19th century through the present. Then I will examine some of the key factors behind the decision to bring the Interstate program into existence, starting with the most preliminary plans in the 1930s through Congressional authorization in 1944 to development of a funding mechanisms in 1956. In short, I'll examine in broad brush strokes the politics –and funding -- of the Interstate system in the 1950s. Finally, I'll review a few of the ways the Interstate program delivered on the promises and expectations offered by the road systems' supporters, and then review areas where the system fell short of the mark. Then I'll discuss some of the consequences – expected or unanticipated – of the Interstate highway system. My concluding comment will apply the general lessons of large infrastructure projects to the Interstate system.

- 1. Historical Patterns associated with the U.S. Highway system and integral to the Interstate program.**
 1. The role of the National Government
 2. The Good Roads Movement and Reform
 3. The Federal-aid Partnership
 4. Paying for Roads
 5. Planning in the Partnership
- 2. Winning Approval for the Interstate Highways**
- 3. Lessons learned from the creation and implementation of the Interstate network**
 1. Accurate Projections
 2. Less Accurate Outcomes
 3. Consequences of the System
- 4. Final Comments: Interstate as Infrastructure**

Basic Bibliography

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