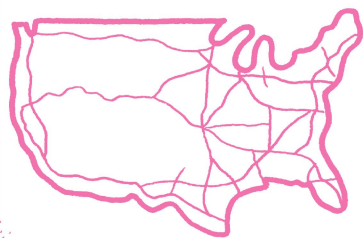
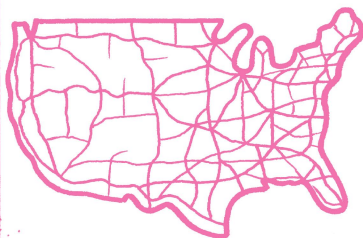


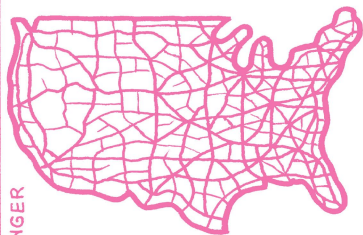
A HIGHWAY MAP OF THE U.S.A.



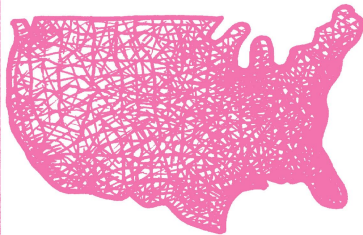
1900



1950



2000



2050

Why does the U.S. have so many cars and highways? Why do highways produce sprawl? How do our transportation choices impact our politics, neighborhoods, and lifestyles? These are questions cartoonist Andy Singer examines in *WHY WE DRIVE*—a pictographic examination of American transportation.



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Why WE Drive

The Past, Present, and Future of
Automobiles in America

ANDY SINGER



"Makes this set of difficult issues easy to understand and points the way to a happier mode of existence in places that are worth caring about and worth living in."

—JAMES HOWARD KUNSTLER, author of *GEOGRAPHY OF NOWHERE* and *THE LONG EMERGENCY*

Why WE Drive

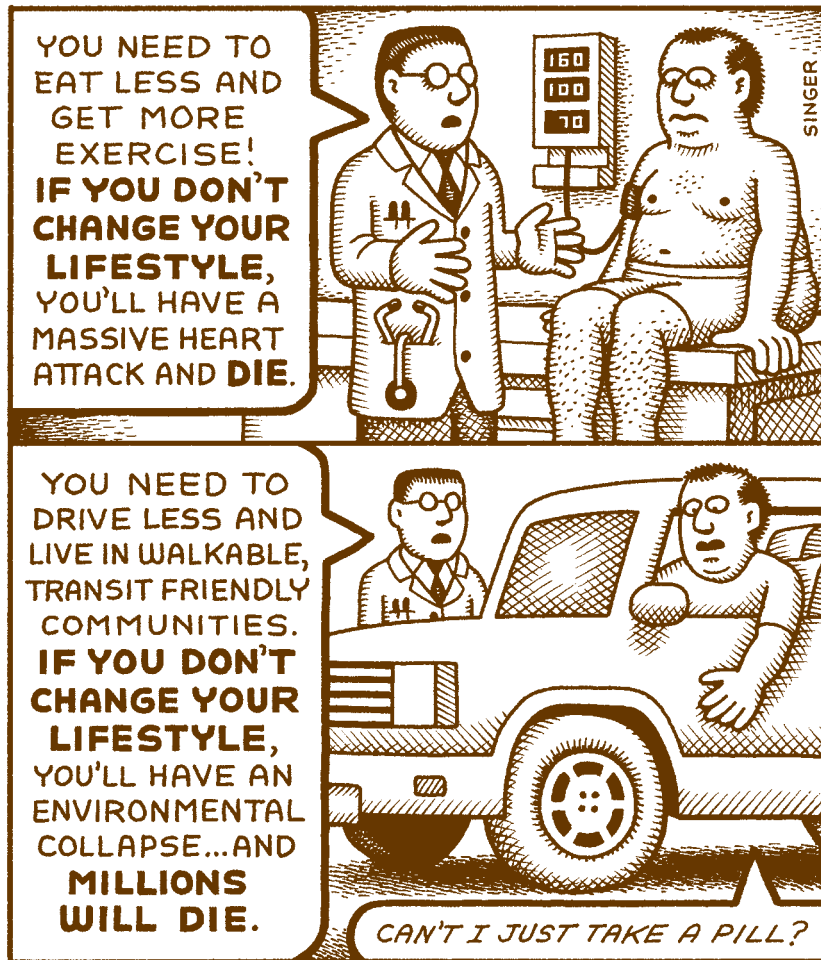


{ The Past, Present, and Future of
Automobiles in America }



ANDY SINGER

WHAT WOULD YOU DO, IF YOU WERE TOLD THAT:



Many people believe that America's addiction to automobiles is a cultural problem. The thinking is, if engineers, elected officials and the public were better educated about transportation issues, they'd shift the country away from cars and towards public transit and better land use. In reality, our country's automobile addiction has more to do with politics, government agencies, and our tax structure. For nearly two decades, polls, referendums, and increased use show overwhelming public support for better transit and automobile alternatives.¹ Yet the development of these alternatives has been slow or, in some states, non-existent. To understand why, this book first discusses the problems caused by cars. Then it examines the history and mechanics of highway politics. And finally, it suggests some ways that money can be directed away from highway building and towards non-automotive transportation.

An acronym used repeatedly throughout this book is "D.O.T." or "DOT" for short. This stands for "Department of Transportation." Almost every state has one. This is the agency that builds and maintains all your state and federal highways. If you're lucky, it also builds and maintains a few bikeways and a little public transit. In Minnesota, we have the "Minnesota Department of Transportation" or "MnDOT." Some states, like Massachusetts or Pennsylvania also have "Turnpike Authorities" in addition to DOTs. In many respects, these function much like DOTs. So, when I refer to DOTs, I'm also referring to Turnpike Authorities.

¹ Across the U.S., from 2000-2010, of the 367 state transit ballot measures proposed to voters, 70% have been approved, double the rate of ballot measures generally. "Trends over a Decade," a 2-page press-release, Center for Transportation Excellence, <http://www.ctfe.org/>

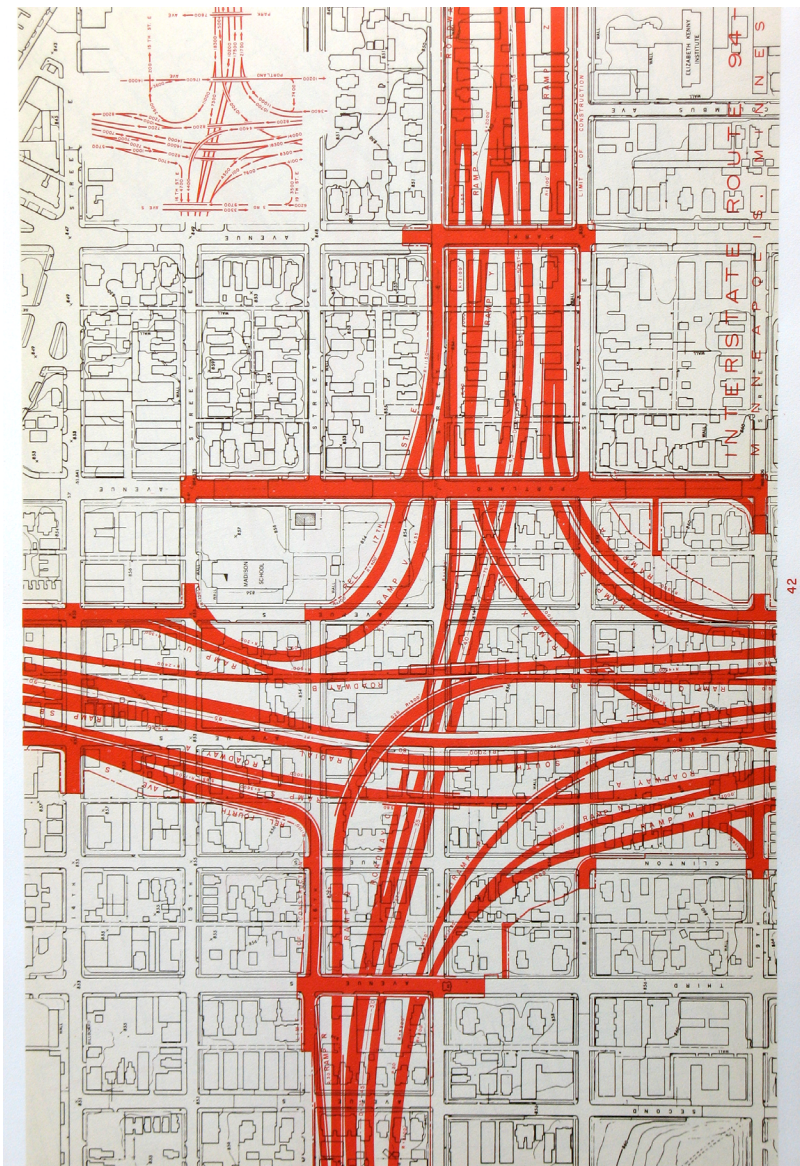
Leigh Ann Renzulli, "Transit Ridership Surges, Despite Fare Increases and Service Cuts," *Governing Magazine*, June 4, 2012, <http://www.governing.com/blogs/fedwatch/gov-transit-ridership-surges-despite-fare-increases-and-service-cuts.html>

Amtrak trains carried 31.2 million riders in fiscal 2012, the most in its history, Joan Lowy, "Amtrak's annual losses at lowest level since 1975," *Associated Press (The Big Story)*, January 10, 2013, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/amtraks-annual-losses-lowest-level-1975>



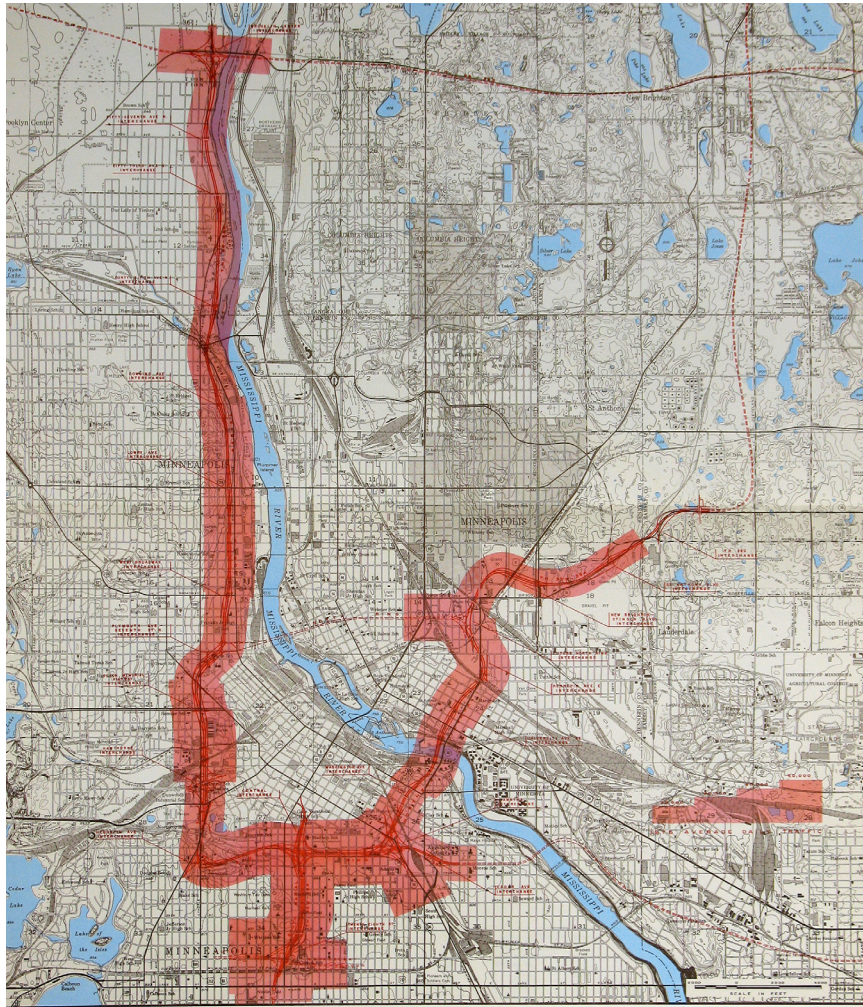
Highways, streets, and parking lots destroy a city's property tax base by eliminating taxable property—property that pays for schools, public safety, libraries, and health services. Whenever I look at a highway or parking lot, I consider what formerly existed on the land it now occupies and what could exist.

This is a photograph of Interstate 35W approaching downtown Minneapolis. Large townhomes and apartment buildings formerly occupied the land underneath this freeway. They represented millions of dollars in annual property tax revenue.



To illustrate this loss of property tax revenue and space more graphically, here is a map, prepared by the Minnesota Department of Transportation in 1953. It shows just one section of the then “proposed” Interstate 35 that MnDOT ripped through the heart of downtown Minneapolis. You can see each property that had to be destroyed for this interchange—over one hundred and fifty properties, just for this one section.

Very conservatively, let’s assume an average property tax of \$3,500 per building, per year. Multiply that by the hundred and fifty properties destroyed on this section of highway and the loss of property tax for this section is more than \$525,000 per year!



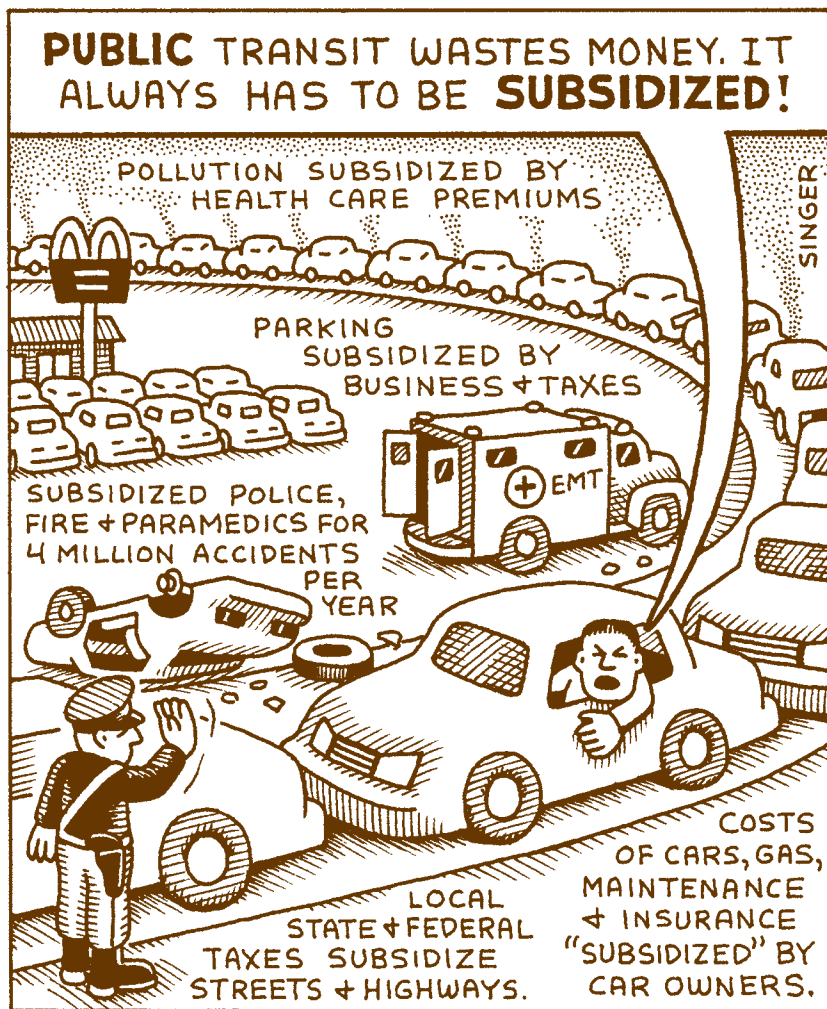
PROPOSED INTERSTATE ROUTES
METROPOLITAN AREA
MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA

Now multiply that section by at least a hundred, for Interstates 35, 94, 610, State Highway 55 and all the other highways in Minneapolis, and you'll see that, conservatively, the city loses at least \$52,500,000 in property tax revenue each year!

The aforementioned freeways were but a few of the major highways that DOTs ripped through American cities after World War II. They physically and financially gutted the cities and fueled an explosion of driving, suburban sprawl, and U.S. oil consumption.

Taxpayers had to pay hundreds of billions (in today's dollars) to compensate the families and businesses who lost their property and they paid billions more in lost property tax revenues in the decades since these freeways were built.

In the last 20 years, Portland (Oregon), Milwaukee, San Francisco and other cities have been able to make money by tearing down old freeways and not replacing them. They're able to put real estate on some or all of the property the freeways formerly occupied and thus recover some of their property tax base.

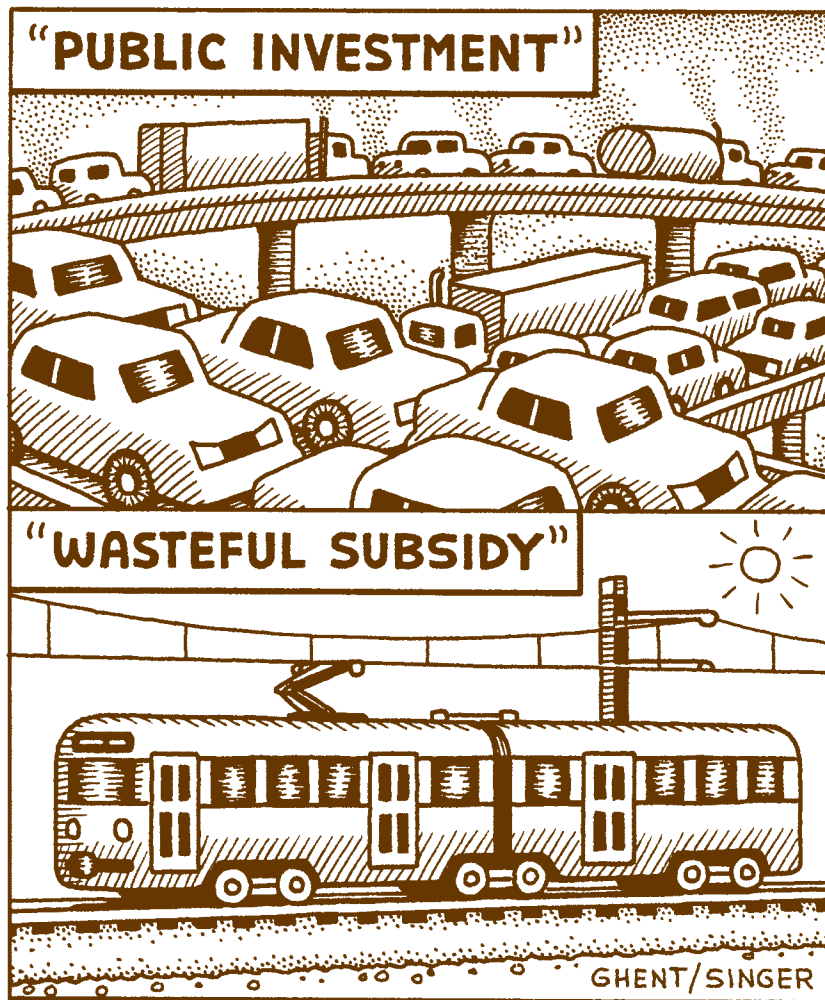


This loss of property tax revenue is a hidden subsidy that motor vehicles receive from our society. This cartoon shows a few of the other subsidies. These include the billions of dollars in healthcare costs and lost productivity associated with air pollution, and the costs of subsidized parking to businesses, employees, and customers. Seventy percent of all state and local law enforcement activities are expended on cars and traffic management issues. 15 percent of all fires and 16 percent of all paramedic calls are related to cars.¹⁶

Then there are the costs of the highways and cars themselves and the costs of the 5.4 million U.S. highway accidents and 33,000 deaths each year.¹⁷ Lastly, there are the so-called “external” costs of maintaining armies and carrier battle groups in the Persian Gulf, and the costs of global warming, water pollution, and a host of other environmental problems.

¹⁶ Outdoor Air Quality, American Lung Association, 2013, at <http://www.lung.org/associations/charters/mid-atlantic/air-quality/outdoor-air-quality.html>
Jane Holtz Kay, *Asphalt Nation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pgs. 124, 126

¹⁷ National Highway Safety Administration, Traffic Safety Facts, 2010 Motor Vehicle Crashes: Overview, Revised February 2012, <http://www-nrd.nhtsa.dot.gov/Pubs/811552.pdf>

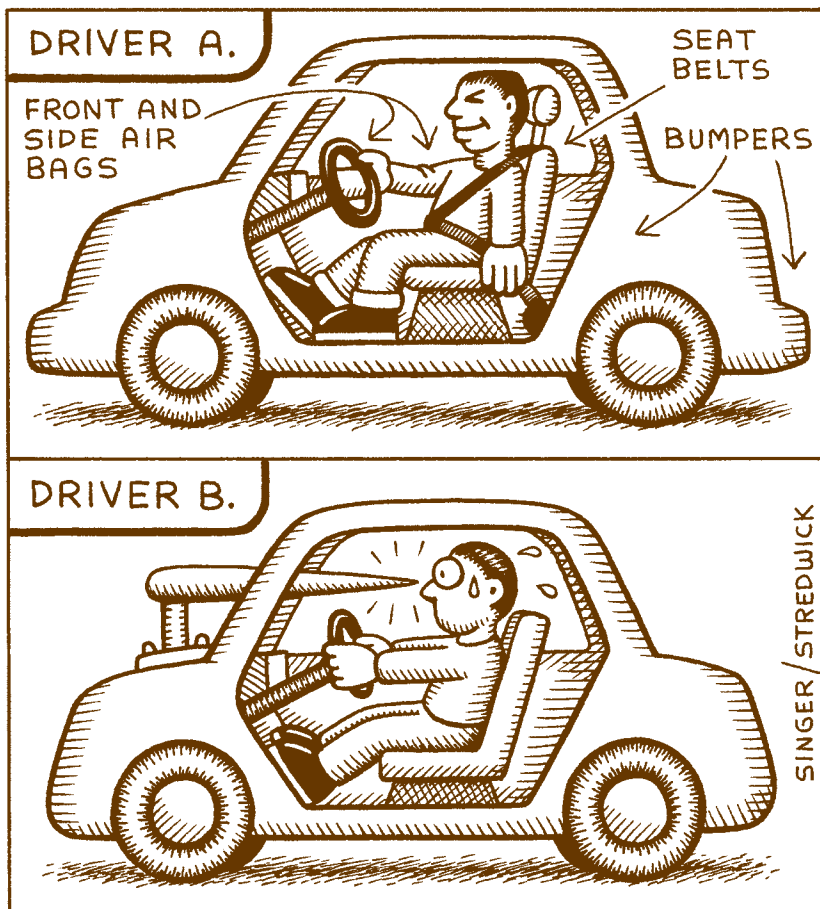


With the help of groups like the Minnesota Tax Payers League, cars have managed to completely twist language and public thinking. Gas taxes and user fees pay just 51 percent of highway costs. The remaining 49 percent is paid out of general tax revenues like sales taxes, property taxes, or other non-vehicle sources. Many of the taxpayers paying for these highways don't even own cars.¹⁸

¹⁸ Joseph Henchman, The Tax Foundation, January 17, 2013, <http://taxfoundation.org/blog/road-spending-state-funded-user-taxes-and-fees-including-federal-gas-tax-revenues>

"Analysis Finds Shifting Trends in Highway Funding: User Fees Make up Decreasing Share," Subsidy Scope, Initiative of the Pew Charitable Foundation, updated November 25, 2009, <http://subsidyscope.org/transportation/direct-expenditures/highways/funding/analysis/>

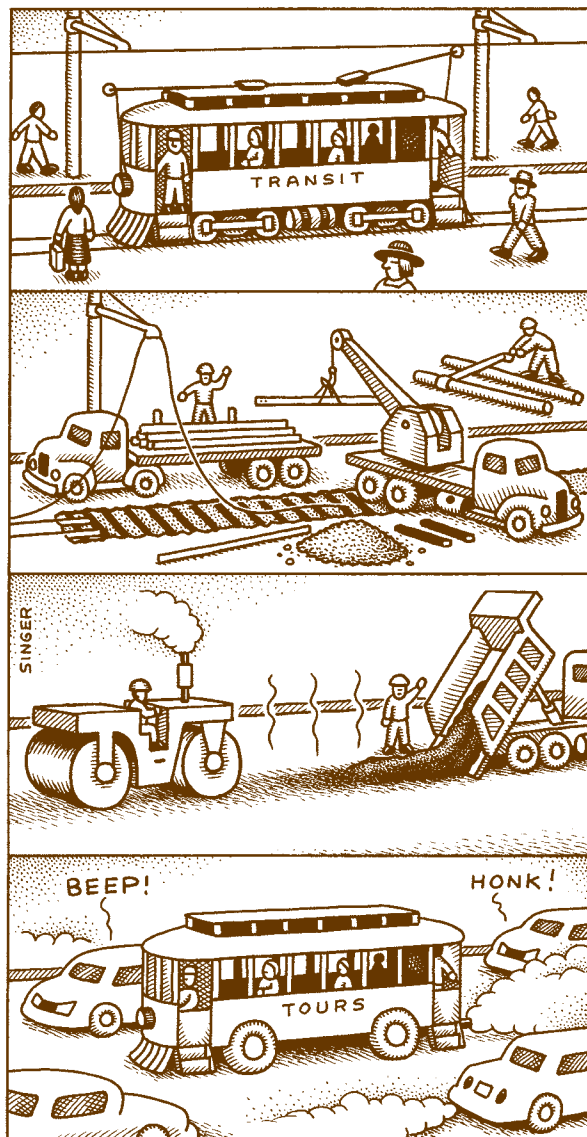
WHO WILL DRIVE MORE CAREFULLY?



Automobile advocates have even twisted around the notion of “safety.” They’ll argue for widening or straightening a road to increase safety, but safety for whom? Certainly not for pedestrians. Each year in the U.S., cars kill 5,000 pedestrians and cyclists, and seriously injure over 100,000.¹⁹ In developing countries, cars have surpassed most diseases to become one of the leading killers of human beings, especially children. By killing and maiming us, cars take away our public space. We put safety devices in cars to protect drivers, but do little to protect pedestrians, cyclists, and people outside of cars. Maybe if driving was more dangerous for drivers, they would slow down and drive more carefully.

¹⁹

Bicyclinginfo.org and Walkinginfo.org (looking at statistics for the past decade).



By the late 1920s, most Americans lived in cities. The automobile was just starting to take hold. Car makers had glutted the market for cars, primarily by selling them to suburbanites and rural folks. If automobile manufacturers wanted to expand the market for cars, they needed to sell them to people in cities. In 1923, General Motors president Alfred Sloan said, “[the leveling of demand for new cars] means a change from easy selling to hard selling ...[it is necessary to] reorder society, ...to alter the environment in which automobiles are sold.”²⁴

Since people in cities had great public transit and interurban rail systems, GM and other auto makers decided that they needed to eliminate these systems or convert them to buses, thus inducing more urbanites to buy cars. GM began building buses as early as 1925 and formed and owned a controlling interest in Greyhound. GM then joined forces with Standard Oil of California, Firestone, Mac Truck, and Philips Petroleum to form and finance a front company—National City Lines—whose job was to buy up urban rail networks and convert them to buses. Aided by the depression and the “Public Utilities Holding Company Act” of 1935, National City Lines was able to buy up and dismantle over 100 rail transit systems in over 45 U.S. cities.

In 1949 GM and its partners were convicted of conspiracy, a conviction that was upheld by a federal appeals court in 1951.²⁵ Unfortunately, the punishment for destroying America’s transit systems was a slap on the wrist. Each company got a five thousand dollar fine. No one went to jail, and the companies pocketed billions of dollars from the increased sales of cars and buses.

²⁴ Stephen Goddard, *Getting There: The Epic Struggle Between Road and Rail in the American Century*, (New York: Basic Books, 1994), pg. 125-126

²⁵ United States v. National City Lines, 186 F.2d 561, C.A.7 (Ill.), 1951



This is one of my favorite pictures of that era because it depicts politics at its sleaziest. It was taken in Saint Paul, Minnesota, in 1954. The man on the right is Fred Ossanna. He was a former National City Lines attorney with links to organized crime. In 1949, he was put in charge of Twin Cities Rapid Transit company (TCRT). The Twin Cities had an extensive public transit system with 530 miles of track and over 700 transit cars, many of which were built right in Minneapolis. Ossanna brought in General Motors as a consultant, who helped him to finance the conversion of Twin Cities Rapid Transit to GM buses. Ossanna ripped up the tracks, sold off some of the trolleys to Mexico and burned the rest. Here he is receiving a check for his handiwork from TCRT vice-president James Towey as the last of the trolley cars burn. Six years later, both men would be convicted of fraud, conspiracy, and embezzlement.²⁶

While there were other factors that contributed to the destruction of public transit, auto and oil industry greed for increased sales and profits were major factors. Having done this, the auto manufacturers needed more roads and highways for their cars. In 1920s and 1930s America, building roads across county and state lines was legally and practically very difficult. So car makers and the car clubs they created (like AAA) turned to state and federal governments.

²⁶ United States Court of Appeals Eight Circuit, *Isaacs v. United States*, 301 F.2d 706 (1962).

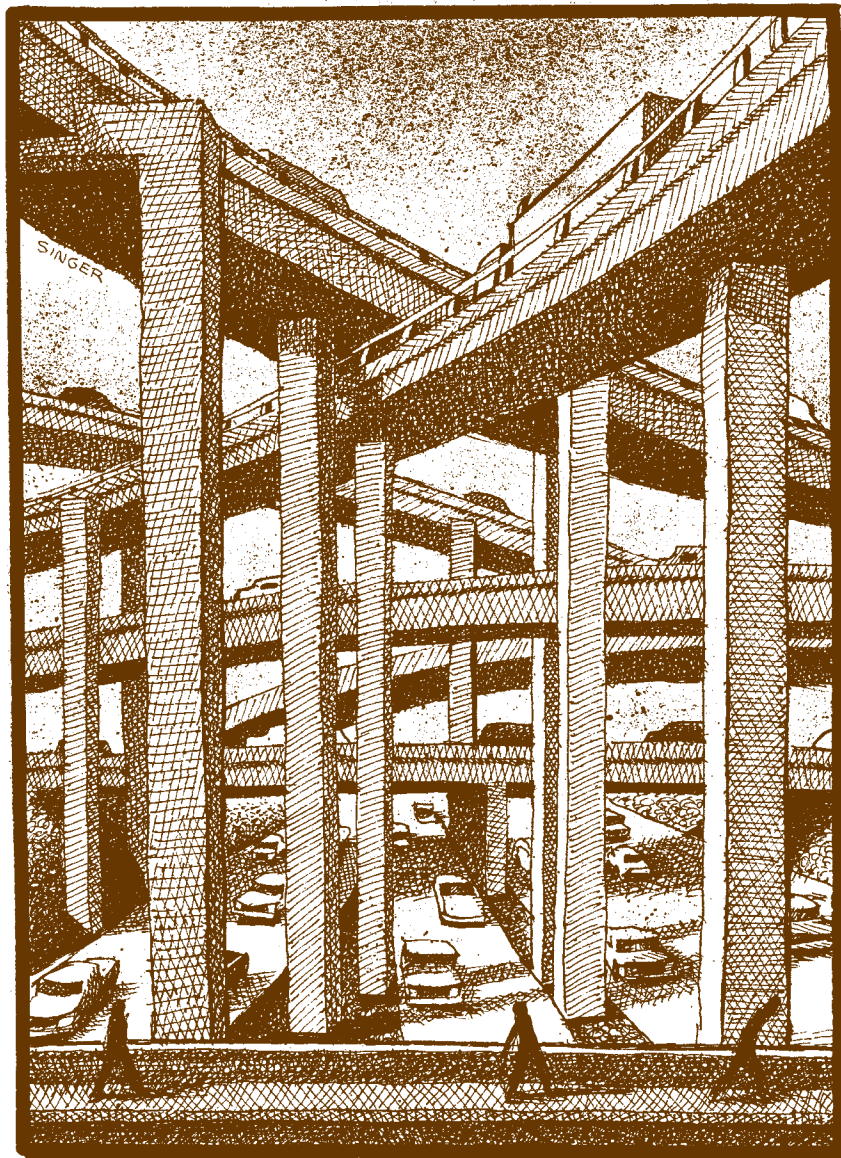
Photo courtesy of the Minneapolis Public Library, Minneapolis Collection.



In this 1920s photograph, the man on the left is Robert Moses, then a little known government bureaucrat in New York State. Beginning in 1920, Moses helped successive New York governors to streamline state government and helped create modern government “agencies.” He was also the first to create the modern highway department or “authority.” In the early days, the preferred way to finance roads and bridges was with tolls. Authorities were government sanctioned corporations that borrowed money by issuing bonds to pay for the construction of a particular road or bridge. The bonds would be paid off by charging tolls. Since drivers flocked to the new roads and bridges in record numbers, banks quickly realized that toll roads were a great investment and were willing to lend Moses and other state highway agencies huge sums of money based on projected toll revenues. All this money built yet more roads. More importantly, this money represented tens of thousands of jobs for unions, engineering firms, construction firms, lawyers, and public relations firms.

The ability to hire all these employees, gave Moses and other agency heads incredible political power. The highway agencies were no longer beholden to politicians to give them money. Quite the opposite, their control over toll revenues gave them power over the politicians and enabled them to extort even more money out of state legislatures.

One man who learned this from Moses was Franklin Delano Roosevelt. He’s seen here, sitting to the right of Moses, when he was governor of New York. When Roosevelt became president in 1932, he borrowed many of Moses’ ideas and created federal agencies like the WPA and the Bureau of Reclamation, to help revive the U.S. economy. He also borrowed Moses’ love of the automobile and many of the WPA’s projects were highways and bridges for cars.



Prior to Moses and Roosevelt, political power lay strictly in the hands of the wealthy and in physical communities. If a party boss wanted to be re-elected, he had to give jobs, money, and graft back to the community in which he lived.

In the new system—the agency system—political power lay in broader groups. These included unions, professional trade associations, and interest groups associated with a particular agency. All of these groups crossed physical community boundaries and thus political power ceased to be community based. A party boss could now put a freeway through part of his neighborhood, or destroy it entirely and still be re-elected. In the new system, government agency chiefs and the agencies themselves wielded ultimate political power. Politicians came and went, but the chiefs and the agencies remained. Sometimes the politicians could control the agencies and sometimes they couldn't. Term limits for elected officials in many states have only made this problem worse.

To this day, much of what happens in politics is agency driven. You have intelligence agencies, defense agencies, energy departments, state university systems, housing authorities, space agencies, each with their own constituent base. Defense agencies have created a “military industrial complex.” The Bureau of Reclamation and its dams and canals have created a vast web of interests around irrigation and water policy. And highways have created what I like to call “the highway industrial complex.”



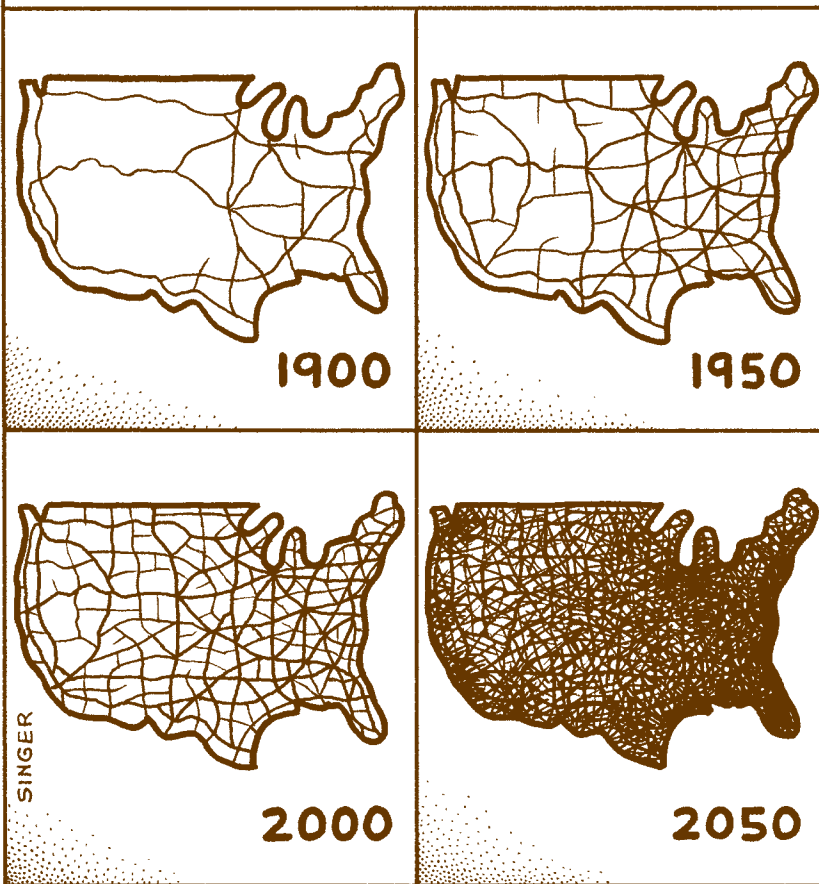
One reason why Roosevelt, states, and cities chose to pump public money into highways rather than railways and public transit was that, in 1930s America, all of the railways and public transit systems were privately owned and relatively profitable. So it didn't make much sense to subsidize them.

In Europe, by contrast, most of the railways and public transit systems had been battered by World War I and either received public financing or had been nationalized. Thus, European railway and transit agencies predated their highway cousins and could easily compete with them for public funding. After World War II, Europe poured a lot of its Marshall Plan money and government subsidies into rebuilding their railways and urban transit systems, even as the United States was pouring its money into building interstate highways. This is the reason why, to this day, Europe's rail and transit systems are vastly superior to those in America and the reason that Europe is a more urban society.²⁷

The U.S. didn't create public transit agencies and national railways (like Amtrak and Conrail) until the 1960s and 70s, when private railroads and transit companies started going bankrupt. U.S. railway and transit companies went bankrupt precisely because they were forced to compete with an ever-growing, largely free system of publicly subsidized highways.

²⁷ Photo by Joost J. Bakker Ijmuiden, licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic License, as posted at: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:TGV_Train_à_Grande_Vitesse.jpg

A HIGHWAY MAP OF THE U.S.A.



The nature of agencies is that they try to grow larger and more powerful, in order to get more money and jobs for themselves. Agencies that have external sources of revenue, outside of legislatures, have more political power. State university control of tuition dollars and private research grants are an example of this. Agencies that don't have external sources of revenue have less power, like certain welfare agencies that are entirely dependant on the legislature for their budget.

By the mid 1950s, highway agencies had managed to get exclusive control of billions of dollars in federal and state gas taxes. In this way, they became the most powerful political force in state politics. Politicians who challenged a highway agency were quickly ejected from office. Engineers or public officials who crossed them often had their careers ruined.

This basic paradigm of revenue control and agency politics is the reason that America has built and continues to build so many roads. It's why little or no money goes to transit and why the number of cars, oil consumption, and sprawl continues to grow. It's also a major reason why we spend billions of dollars on new bridges, highways, and lane expansions, even as our old bridges and highways fall apart.²⁸

²⁸ Curtis Tate and Greg Gordon, "U.S. keeps building new highways while letting old ones crumble," *McClatchy Newspapers*, February 3, 2013, <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2013/02/03/181506/us-keeps-building-new-highways.html#.UYoSiK7X-so>