

Jason Shuler

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## Not by Choice: How Corporate Influence and the 1956 Highway Act Built a Car-Centric America

It's a typical morning at Tokyo Station. Tourists navigate the crowded station, searching for their train. Commuters sip on their coffee and glance at their watches. Eventually, they all reach their destination: the Nozomi Shinkansen bound for Osaka. At the same time, a family in Los Angeles pulls out of their driveway, beginning a road trip to San Jose. Two and a half hours later, the train arrives at Shin-Osaka station, and the passengers disembark and join the crowds in Osaka. Meanwhile, the family's car is on Interstate 5 near Bakersfield, still four hours away from San Jose, crawling behind trucks and an endless line of brake lights. The difference in these journeys is not simply a matter of personal preference, but the result of political choices made decades ago. In the United States, these choices were set in stone and concrete by the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956, which created the Interstate Highway System. J. Allen Whitt and Glenn Yago's 1985 work, "Corporate Strategies and the Decline of Transit in U.S. Cities," claims that the dominance of cars within American cities was the result of corporate influence.<sup>1</sup> While they focus on the decline of urban transit, I extend their argument to national energy policy: that corporations utilized a multi-decade campaign of propaganda and market manipulation, culminating in the Interstate Highway Act, to lock America into a fossil fuel dependent way of life. How did this corporate coalition systematically eliminate competition and manufacture public demand, paving the way for the 1956 Highway Act to create a landscape where fossil fuel consumption was a necessity?

Before the invention and popularization of the automobile, public transportation was a central part of travel in the US. This was notably seen with railroads, which were vital to connecting American cities across the country. In *Nature's Metropolis*, William Cronon characterizes this era as the creation of a "second nature," an artificial landscape "improved

<sup>1</sup> Whitt, J. A., & Yago, G. (1985). Corporate Strategies and the Decline of Transit in U.S. Cities. *Urban Affairs Quarterly*, 21(1), 37-65. <https://doi.org/10.1177/004208168502100106> (Original work published 1985)

country, their construction also highlights America's early commitment to public transportation. The completion of the first transcontinental railroad in 1869 was the most visible symbol of this technological triumph. On the day of its completion, the Charleston Daily News hailed it as "the noblest work which Western civilisation has successfully accomplished, [and] must hold the first place in the material achievements of the century."<sup>3</sup> This new network allowed goods and people to travel from coast to coast at a fraction of the cost and time. A previously dangerous journey that once took weeks to complete by wagon or on horseback was suddenly replaced by a safe, comfortable trip of less than a week.

The dominance of rail travel in public transportation was not limited to cross-country railroads. Across the country, the electric streetcar was transforming everyday travel, both in cities and in rural communities. These streetcars were seen as vehicles of progress and community. In his 1898 article "The Trolley in Rural Parts," Sylvester Baxter, a writer and city planner who helped create Boston's Metropolitan Park System, described "the evolution of the electric railway" as having "grown from an experiment to a universal institution."<sup>4</sup> This claim is supported by data; as J. Allen Whitt and Glenn Yago note, "for most of the period between 1890 and 1918, urban transportation ridership grew faster than the urban population."<sup>5</sup> Beyond the numbers, Baxter captured the genuine optimism that surrounded electric public transportation, asking, "Is there a more festive-looking vehicle than the open electric car, with its happy-faced occupants?"<sup>6</sup> However, this thriving, non-fossil fuel network stood as the primary commercial obstacle to the expansion of the auto and oil industries.

To eliminate this threat, this coalition did not simply wait for the celebrated electric streetcars to fade from existence as more people acquired their own automobiles, but instead systematically targeted them, seeking to create a fossil fuel dependent market for their own benefit. The primary evidence for this strategy comes from the 1948 Supreme Court Case, *United States v. National City Lines*. The defendants in this case, General Motors, Standard

Oil

<sup>2</sup> William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991), pp. 56

<sup>3</sup> *United States v. National City Lines, Inc.*, 334 U.S. 573 (1948) The Charleston daily news. (Charleston, SC) 12 May. 1869, p. 2. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, [www.loc.gov/item/sn84026994/1869-05-12/ed-2/](http://www.loc.gov/item/sn84026994/1869-05-12/ed-2/).

<sup>4</sup> Baxter, Sylvester. "The Trolley in Rural Parts." *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, vol. 97, June 1898, pp. 60.

<sup>5</sup> Whitt, & Yago, Corporate Strategies and the Decline of Transit in U.S. Cities. 37-65.

<sup>6</sup> Baxter, "The Trolley in Rural Parts," pp. 61

of California, Firestone Tire, and their partners, had allegedly “conspired to acquire control of local transportation companies in numerous cities....and to restrain and monopolize interstate commerce in motor busses, petroleum supplies, tires and tubes sold to those companies.”<sup>7</sup>In 1949, a federal jury convicted GM and its partners of this criminal conspiracy. However, as Bradford Snell detailed in his 1974 testimony to the US Senate, the court’s punishment was merely a slap on the wrist. General Motors was fined \$5,000, and the GM treasurer, H.C. Grossman, who had orchestrated the entire scheme, was fined \$1.<sup>8</sup> This trivial punishment was far from a deterrent, and proved that this corporate strategy was a success. This court decision paved the way for national adoption of the car-centric, fossil fuel-dependent model.

While the auto and oil industries dismantled rail systems, they simultaneously promoted the car, ensuring public enthusiasm and cementing the car as the symbol of the American future. This promotion was highlighted by the General Motors’ *Highways and Horizons* exhibit at the 1939 New York World’s Fair. This exhibit hosted the “Futurama” ride, a massive scale-model simulation of the year 1960 that attracted over 5 million visitors. This exhibition promoted the Interstate Highway System as the nation’s destiny, and framed General Motors not as a corporation selling automobiles, but as the bringer of national prosperity. The company claimed that *Highways and Horizons* would help the public “foresee somewhat of the character and almost unlimited possibilities of that eventual contribution” of new roads. General Motors also portrayed the entire exhibit as a philanthropic project, emphasizing that the goal wasn’t to help the automobile industry but “more importantly, to enrich the lives of all the people.”<sup>9</sup> By making this public commitment to the welfare of the nation, the corporation redefined the narrative of progress that had previously defined electric railways, and subtly promoted fossil fuel consumption as a necessity for economic growth.

The Futurama exhibit not only sold the nation on progress, but on a specific vision of freedom, an individual autonomy that only the automobile could provide. According to GM, the only thing preventing Americans from enjoying this freedom was the outdated design of cities, saying “As every driver knows, there is still little pleasure in being at the wheel when entering or

<sup>7</sup> *United States v. National City Lines, Inc.* 334 U.S. 573. Supreme Court of the US. 1948. [Justia, supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/334/573/](https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/334/573/).

<sup>8</sup> Snell, Bradford C. *American Ground Transport: A Proposal for Restructuring the Automobile, Truck, Bus and Rail Industries*. U.S. Government Printing Office, 1974.

<sup>9</sup> Geddes, Norman Bel. *General Motors Highways & Horizons: New York World’s Fair*. General Motors Corp., 1939. *Internet Archive*, [archive.org/details/generalmotorshig00geddrich](https://archive.org/details/generalmotorshig00geddrich), First quote pp. 2 and second quote pp. 3.

leaving large cities. No one thing will add more to the efficient use and joy of the motorcar than the correction of this condition.”<sup>10</sup>In the promotional images for the exhibit, highways are emphasized directly cutting through the city, allowing for the smooth flow of traffic. However, there is no sign of public transportation anywhere, nor is public transportation mentioned anywhere in *Highways and Horizons*. The car was presented as a liberator, offering personal sovereignty, and promising the freedom to choose one’s own schedule and life. The wide open Futurama model, which emphasized this freedom, was the blueprint for this individualist, car dependent lifestyle. In *Divided Highways*, historian Tom Lewis analyses this strategy, calling the exhibit a “terrible temptation...that Americans would find irresistible.”<sup>11</sup> The scale and optimism of this display left visitors in awe, cementing the belief that this car-centric world was not a corporate product, but the inevitable shape of American progress.

Having captured the public’s imagination with “Futurama” and dismantled their competition in courts, the path was cleared for a national highway system. However, proponents of this plan faced a significant hurdle: convincing Congress and the American public to finance a massive infrastructure project without inflating the national debt. To secure the funding, the project was framed not just as infrastructure, but as a national necessity. This strategy was calculated to exploit President Eisenhower’s geopolitical fears. The Formosa Straits Crisis, which began in late 1954, brought the US and China to the brink of conflict, amplifying the threat of nuclear war. As the Federal Highway Administration documented, the crisis caused Eisenhower to worry about the inadequacy of the present roads for evacuating cities and relocating Congress in case of a nuclear attack.<sup>12</sup>

Capitalizing on this fear, the “Clay Committee,” a presidential advisory group appointed by Eisenhower, formalized a solution. In their cover letter submitting the plan to the president in January 1955, the Chairman, Lucius D. Clay, listed the “urgent need to improve our highways as quickly as possible... to serve the national defense” as one of the primary goals of the project.

The committee argued that in the atomic age, the highway system was essential for the evacuation of key cities, framing it as an important measure of civil defense. To pay for this enormous project without raising taxes immediately, the letter proposed a complex system of bonds, promising that “it would, in effect, be a self-liquidating program....entailing no increase

<sup>10</sup> Geddes, *General Motors Highways & Horizons: New York World's Fair*. General Motors Corp., pp. 12.

<sup>11</sup> Lewis, Tom. *Divided Highways : Building the Interstate Highways, Transforming American Life* /. Cornell University Press, p. 44.

<sup>12</sup>“Civil Defense, 1955.” *Highway History*, Federal Highway Administration, U.S. Department of Transportation, <https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/infrastructure/civildef.cfm>.

in...the national debt limit."<sup>13</sup> This financing proposal, however, would become the central point of contention in the legislative battles that followed.

While the act itself received bipartisan support, the consensus collapsed when it came to the method of funding. Representative George Fallon (D-MD), Chairman of the Subcommittee on Roads, promoted the new highways, promising that "the American people will ride safely upon many thousands of miles of broad, straight, trouble-free roads, four to eight lanes wide, criss-crossing America from coast to coast and border to border, built to the very highest standards that our highway engineers can devise."<sup>14</sup> But while this vision was shared, the way to pay for it was not. Eisenhower was very clear in his opposition to raising taxes, stating in 1955 that it was "sounder to finance this program by special bond issues, to be paid off by the...revenues which will be collected during the useful life of the roads and pledged to this purpose, rather than by an increase in general revenue obligations."<sup>15</sup> Congressional Democrats sharply rejected this debt-based proposal, with Senator Harry F. Byrd revealing that the bond plan would waste \$11.5 billion on interest payments, meaning 55 cents of every dollar would go to bankers rather than to funding the infrastructure. To avoid this debt, Democrats countered with a "pay-as-you-go" plan funded by immediate tax increases. According to the proposed Title II, this plan financed the system by greatly increasing taxes on the entire supply chain of the automobile, from gasoline and diesel fuel (Sections 202, 205), to tires, trucks and buses (Sections 203, 204).<sup>16</sup> While the trucking and petroleum industries supported the construction of the highway system, this tax plan triggered a revolt. They argued that the bill would raise taxes "to a confiscatory, ruinous and unjustified level."<sup>17</sup> This corporate pressure successfully shut down the 1955 version of the bill. The legislation only passed in 1956 after this financing structure was adjusted to secure industry support. As the *New York Times* reported, "The truckers and others, including representatives of tire manufacturers, were said to have been won over by revision of the tax proposals to scale down their share of the increased burden."<sup>18</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Clay, Lucius D., et al. Letter to Dwight D. Eisenhower. 11 Jan. 1955. *Eno Center for Transportation*, [enotrans.org/en-resources/clay-committee-report-original-transmittal-letter/](http://enotrans.org/en-resources/clay-committee-report-original-transmittal-letter/), Both quotes pp. 1. <sup>14</sup> John D. Morris, "Roads Bill Sent to White House; 'Gas' Tax to Go Up," *The New York Times*, 27 June 1956, p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> Eisenhower, Dwight D. "Message to the Congress Regarding a National Highway Program." 22 Feb. 1955. *Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library*, [www.eisenhowerlibrary.gov/sites/default/files/research/online-documents/interstate-highway-system/1955-02-22-message-to-congress.pdf](http://www.eisenhowerlibrary.gov/sites/default/files/research/online-documents/interstate-highway-system/1955-02-22-message-to-congress.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956. Pub. L. 84-627. 29 June 1956. *Statutes at Large*, vol. 70, pp. 374-402. *GovInfo*, [www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-70/pdf/STATUTE-70-Pg374.pdf](http://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-70/pdf/STATUTE-70-Pg374.pdf). <sup>17</sup> Weingroff, Richard F. "Moving the Goods: As the Interstate Era Begins." *Federal Highway Administration*, U.S. Department of Transportation, 8 Sept. 2017, [www.fhwa.dot.gov/interstate/freight.cfm](http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/interstate/freight.cfm). <sup>18</sup> "House Favorable to Big Roads Bill." *The New York Times*, April 27, 1956, p. 15.

This compromise cleared the way for a dedicated financing structure that would revolutionize American infrastructure.

This new financing mechanism was the Highway Trust Fund. Unlike traditional government funds, the capital generated from these taxes was not deposited into the general treasury, but was funneled directly into this dedicated account. Crucially, this fund was designed in a way that made the dominance of the automobile inevitable. According to the legislation, the "Federal share payable on account of any project on the Interstate System... shall be increased to 90 per centum of the total cost thereof."<sup>19</sup> This left states to cover only 10 percent of the cost. In stark contrast, the Act provided no federal funding for mass transit. This created the economic incentive for state governments to prioritize roads over rail, as building highways became a federally subsidized asset, while building and maintaining transit infrastructure was as expensive as always. In addition, the Act explicitly limited Trust Fund expenditure to obligations "attributable to Federal-aid highways."<sup>20</sup> This meant that the billions of dollars being generated by taxes were locked into highway construction, preventing states from using the revenue to improve their public transportation networks. This arrangement established a perpetual cycle: increased fuel consumption generated the tax revenue to build more highways, which in turn induced more driving, further cementing the car's dominance. The 1956 Act therefore bound the nation in a car-centric model, making the use of the automobile a part of national energy policy, while systematically eliminating the only alternatives.

The immediate victim of this policy was the American rail system. As the federal government committed billions of dollars to the Interstate System, the nation's railroads spiraled into financial trouble due to unfair competition. The Eisenhower administration itself acknowledged the uneven playing field for the rail industry, stating in the 1955 Presidential Advisory Committee on Transport Policy that federal policy was based on "obsolete regulation." The report noted that the government had "failed to keep pace" with the development of the automobile industry, while continuing to regulate railroads with the "historic assumption that transportation is monopolistic." The report further elaborated that these policies "borne heavily on the common carrier segment of the transportation industry" and "holds regulated competitive forces within a tight rein," preventing the railroads from freely competing like the automobiles

<sup>19</sup> *Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956*, § 108(e), 70 Stat. at 379.

<sup>20</sup> *Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956*, § 209(f), 70 Stat. at 399.

were able to.<sup>21</sup>In response, the railroads were forced to retreat. In its 1957 Annual Report, the New York Central Railroad bluntly stated their intentions: "increased commutation fares and...the discontinuance of passenger service on (their) heavily-losing Putnam Division."<sup>22</sup> By pouring billions into highway infrastructure while leaving railroads to fund their own maintenance, the 1956 Act created an insurmountable economic disadvantage. This ensured that for future generations of Americans, the car would effectively be the only available means of transportation.

With the rail industry crippled by this economic disadvantage, the corporate coalition shifted their focus to selling the new system. The corporate campaign to build public support for highways went far beyond just General Motors, as many other industries stood to profit from the use of fossil fuels. Companies like Portland Cement, which manufactured new-type concrete needed to develop new infrastructure, also promoted highways in their advertisements. For example, one ad promoted the Major Deegan Expressway in New York City, portraying it as an essential piece of infrastructure that "Saves New Yorkers 25,000 hours a day."<sup>23</sup> By promoting the highway this way, the company reinforces the narrative that these highways were for the public good, and not for any kind of corporate gain. The advertisement's visuals are also critical to its persuasive power. It ignores all problems with highways such as pollution and congestion, only showcasing a flat, empty road that promises speed. Notably, the train tracks are put off to the side, demonstrating how little public transportation mattered in this vision of the American Future.

<sup>21</sup> United States, Presidential Advisory Committee on Transport Policy and Organization. *Revision of Federal Transportation Policy: A Report to the President*. U.S. Government Printing Office, 1955, First quote pp. 2 and second quote pp. 3

<sup>22</sup> New York Central Railroad Company. *Annual Report 1957*. 1958. *Canada Southern*, [www.canadasouthern.com/caso/images/annual-nyc-1957.pdf](http://www.canadasouthern.com/caso/images/annual-nyc-1957.pdf).

<sup>23</sup> Portland Cement Association. "Major Deegan Expressway of New-Type Concrete Saves New Yorkers 25,000 Hours Each Day!" *Advertisement*, 1956.





A 1956 Portland Cement Association advertisement highlighting the Major Deegan Expressway

Another key piece of corporate propaganda was the 1956 film “Highway Hearing,” produced by Dow Chemical, a major supplier of plastics and construction additives. To sell the new system, Dow went beyond the statistics, instead staging a dramatic, fictional town hall meeting in “Connorsville” to persuade viewers that the new highways were a public necessity. The story centers on residents voicing their concerns about the highway to the State Highway Commissioner: farmers worried about their land being taken and business owners afraid of being bypassed. However, the film resolves these concerns by reframing the highway as a necessity and a moral duty to future generations. The Commissioner warns that the country is facing an impending crisis, showing “more than 65 million automobiles” crowding on outdated roads, and insists that “it’s clearly time for national action.” The narrator presents the Federal-Aid Highway Act as a heroic response, highlighting “the staggering sum of 51 billion dollars” that was dedicated to the 41,000 mile network. By the end of the meeting, the previously angry and concerned residents are convinced that the highway, while requiring some sacrifice, will create a safer and more convenient world for them, and more importantly, their children. The film promises that highways will “open up vast new areas for suburban living,” relieve traffic congestion, and reduce road fatalities by “at least fifty percent.”<sup>24</sup> By combining a public hearing with positive statistics, the film depicts this car-centric planning as common sense, and hides the corporate interests driving this message.

<sup>24</sup>“Highway Hearing.” C-SPAN Classroom, C-SPAN, [www.c-span.org/classroom/document/?23609](http://www.c-span.org/classroom/document/?23609). 8



Despite the unified support presented in films like *Highway Hearing* and exhibits like “Futurama,” public opinion surrounding the Interstate Highway Act was far more divided than these corporate narratives suggested. Concerns began to arise even before the legislation was finalized. A January 1956 *Better Homes and Gardens* article, while promoting the new system as a solution to “shabby death-trap roads,” revealed that it was “from the merchants and innkeepers along these older roads,” whose businesses would be bypassed entirely, “that the angriest attacks are coming.” The article further emphasized that drivers feared becoming “captive customers” to the “monopoly concessions” at service stations, realizing that their freedom of choice that the auto industry promised might actually become restricted.<sup>25</sup> As construction began, this resistance grew, becoming a major logistical obstacle. A 1958 *Christian Science Monitor* report noted that “getting public opinion in back of the locations for the new Interstate Defense Highway System (had) become one of the most difficult problems” facing highway developers.<sup>26</sup> This backlash reached its peak in urban neighborhoods, where residents pushed back against the destruction of their homes. Urban critic Jane Jacobs captured this sentiment perfectly, stating “This is not the rebuilding of cities. This is the sacking of cities,” a sentiment shared by many whose neighborhoods were slated for demolition to make room for the construction of more highway infrastructure.<sup>27</sup>

The construction of these highways greatly changed urban grids, which led to a new, car-dependent reality. Historian Kenneth Jackson describes this shift in *Crabgrass Frontier*, arguing that the 1956 Act “virtually guaranteed that future urban growth would perpetuate a centerless sprawl.” While Jackson critiques this failure of foresight, noting that Congress likely “hadn’t the faintest notion” of the urban damage they were causing, the result was a landscape that functioned exactly as the auto and oil industries hoped.<sup>28</sup> Everything from shopping to commuting to work required a car, as the “centerless” design of the suburbs meant almost nothing was within walking distance. The promises of “individual freedom” that were promoted by Futurama were realized, but led to things like a 10 minute drive to the grocery store or a 30 minute drive to work. This reliance on the car is seen by the 1960 US Census Data, which reported that just 12% of all US workers used public transportation to commute to work,

<sup>25</sup> Fales, Edward D. “More Super-roads Coming!” *Better Homes and Gardens*, vol. 34, no. 1, Jan. 1956, ProQuest, [www.proquest.com/docview/1715452498](http://www.proquest.com/docview/1715452498), Both quotes pp. 131.

<sup>26</sup> “Public Called Key to Roads.” *The Christian Science Monitor*, 4 Mar. 1958, p. 2. ProQuest, [www.proquest.com/newspapers/public-called-key-roads/docview/509749436/se-2](http://www.proquest.com/newspapers/public-called-key-roads/docview/509749436/se-2). <sup>27</sup> Jacobs, Jane. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Random House, 1961. <sup>28</sup> Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), First quote pp. 249 and second quote pp. 250.

compared to 64% using a private automobile or carpool. This dependence was even more pronounced in the suburbs, where 72.5% of workers relied on cars to commute.<sup>29</sup> The old urban grid, often designed around the streetcar, allowed for ample use of public transportation and walking. With the rise of suburbia and the vast distance that it entailed, the car became a necessity. In 1960, 4 years after the Highway Act passed, 21.5% of households didn't own a vehicle, and 21.5% owned two or more. Just 30 years later, only 11.5% of households didn't own a car, while 54.7% of households owned two or more cars.<sup>30</sup> As Jackson concludes, the automobile had "fundamentally restructured the pattern of everyday life," eliminating the ability to live car-free and ensuring the perpetual market growth and profit of the auto and oil industries that had created this system.<sup>31</sup>

The ultimate consequence of this dependency was the weakening of the "national security" the Highway Act was supposed to protect. By the early 1970s, the US was consuming incredibly high amounts of oil to sustain its car-centric life. This dependency was so high that the nation's demand for oil was 31.4% of the world's total oil production.<sup>32</sup> This reliance on fossil fuels made the US very vulnerable to oil embargos, which came to reality during the 1973 OPEC oil embargo. When oil producers in the Middle East ceased exports to the US, oil prices skyrocketed, and gas lines stretched for miles. This crisis demanded immediate government intervention, and on November 21, 1973, President Nixon announced a ban on all gasoline sales on Saturdays, and ordered a 15% reduction in oil deliveries.<sup>33</sup> However, this dependence only grew in the following years; by 1978, oil's share in the total US energy consumption peaked at 49%.<sup>34</sup> This crisis exposed the failure of the Clay Committee's original vision. In 1955, they promised a highway system that would strengthen national defense; instead, by locking America into a transportation monopoly dependent on foreign energy, they created a massive geopolitical

<sup>29</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census. *Place of Work and Means of Transportation to Work: 1960*. Supplementary Reports PC(S1)-22, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1962. [www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1960/pc-s1-supplementary-reports/pc-s1-22.pdf](https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1960/pc-s1-supplementary-reports/pc-s1-22.pdf).<sup>30</sup> Davis, Stacy C., and Robert G. Boundy. *Transportation Energy Data Book: Edition 40*. Oak Ridge National Laboratory, 2022. [Oak Ridge National Laboratory, tedb.ornl.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/TEDB\\_Ed\\_40.pdf](https://tedb.ornl.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/TEDB_Ed_40.pdf).

<sup>31</sup> Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, pp. 248

<sup>32</sup> Davis, Stacy C., et al. *Transportation Energy Data Book: Edition 31*. Oak Ridge National Laboratory, July 2012. [Oak Ridge National Laboratory, info.ornl.gov/sites/publications/files/Pub37730.pdf](https://info.ornl.gov/sites/publications/files/Pub37730.pdf).<sup>33</sup> Cowan, Edward. "Gasoline Sales on Sunday Facing Presidential Ban." *The New York Times*, 21 Nov. 1973, p. 1. *ProQuest*,

[www.proquest.com/newspapers/gasoline-sales-on-sunday-facing-presidential-ban/docview/119746935/se-2](https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/gasoline-sales-on-sunday-facing-presidential-ban/docview/119746935/se-2).

<sup>34</sup> "U.S. Energy Facts Explained." *U.S. Energy Information Administration*, 29 May 2024, [www.eia.gov/energyexplained/us-energy-facts/](https://www.eia.gov/energyexplained/us-energy-facts/).

vulnerability. The cost of “individual freedom,” which was heavily promoted by the corporate coalition, was a nation held hostage by the volatility of global politics.

The family stuck in traffic on Interstate 5 did have another choice. They could’ve taken the Pacific Surfliner to Santa Barbara, then a connecting bus to San Jose: a trip taking over 9 hours. Even the hope of a modern alternative, a bullet train like the ones in Japan, remains paralyzed by the same political dynamics from 70 years ago. This was exemplified by the Trump administration’s 2019 decision to revoke nearly \$1 billion in federal funding for the project,<sup>35</sup> resulting in the project’s current state where, as of 2024, the rail system remains \$100 billion short of its budget with no set completion date.<sup>36</sup> Their decision to drive, therefore, was not so much a choice, but the result of a transportation system that has effectively eliminated every alternative option to driving: an enduring legacy of the 1956 Interstate Highway Act. By dismantling electric streetcars, using Cold War fears to secure federal funding, and selling the idea of a “Futurama,” the auto and oil industries created a transportation system built around fossil fuels. The “freedom” promised by General Motors and the government was an illusion; freedom requires options, and the policies in the 1956 Highway Act, based solely around the automobile, left Americans with no options at all.

<sup>35</sup> Vartabedian, Ralph. "Trump Administration Cancels \$929-Million Grant for California High-Speed Rail." *Los Angeles Times*, 16 May 2019,

[www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-high-speed-rail-grant-cancelled-20190516-story.html](http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-high-speed-rail-grant-cancelled-20190516-story.html).<sup>36</sup>

Shalby, Colleen. "Despite Some Progress, State’s High-Speed Rail Is \$100 Billion Short and Many Years from Reality." *Los Angeles Times*, 21 Mar. 2024,

[www.latimes.com/california/story/2024-03-21/high-speed-rail-update](http://www.latimes.com/california/story/2024-03-21/high-speed-rail-update).