

ARTBA's June 29 Dinner – 50th Anniversary of the U.S. Interstate Highway System

GENERAL COLIN POWELL: Thank you so very much, ladies and gentlemen, for that warm welcome.

I cannot tell you how pleased I am to be part of this 50th Anniversary celebration. And I congratulate the ARTBA and its leadership for doing such a great job in organizing this commemoration. And my thanks to ARTBA Chairman Gene McCormick, the Foundation Chairman Dave Kraemer, to Pete Ruane and all the others who did such a great job...

We celebrate 50 years since President Eisenhower signed that landmark legislation. But the ARTBA was formed in its infancy over 50 years before that, with a vision of what a national road network could do for this country.

Long before the Model T, and long before any of this happened, your original founder, Horatio Earle, saw the potential. While the country was still covered in dirt roads and while the automobile industry was coming along and while the technologies for building highways were still in their infancy, he saw the potential and he had the vision that brought us to this moment in time.

The potential of a government highway that would connect the capitals of all the states into a national network. It was quite a vision for its time.

And the organization that he founded, which eventually became the ARTBA, pursued that vision and you've pursued it with dedication. And you pursued it with research and investment and cooperation. And you helped create a national system and set the stage for Dwight Eisenhower coming along in 1956 with his vision, and with that marvelous political solution to the funding problem, by user taxes on fuel and by a partnership with the states. And as a result, we have created one of the greatest road networks transportation systems in all of history.

And we all know what inspired Eisenhower. The story is well-known and you tell it, I'm sure, at all of your meetings. How in 1919, he traveled across the country as an observer for the first transcontinental road trip. And how as a soldier in the '30s, before war was on the horizon, Marshall and Eisenhower and Patton and all of these other great leaders were at military colleges, at Leavenworth and other places, worrying about the potential of a war long before political leaders saw that war coming.

And Eisenhower knew then what would be required to prevail in such a war. And then fate intervened and he became the supreme allied commander. And after D-Day, as our armies raced across Europe, when they got to Germany, was where Eisenhower really crystallized his vision of what could be, when he saw those German autobahns and used them in the way that Hitler never had intended for them to be used, to assist in the destruction of the Third Reich and the bringing of peace and freedom and liberty to all of Europe.

Eisenhower then becoming the President had that vision, had his earlier experience and was determined to make sure that America was taking advantage of this kind of technology and this kind of potential.

Eisenhower, who with all of his heart, prayed that he would never be involved in a conflict again of the kind that he was involved in and led us to victory in World War II, was faced nonetheless with the prospect of a cold war, a cold war against an enemy that was presenting a competing ideology, and enemy that said, there is a better way than democracy, an enemy that believed in communism, and enemy represented by the Soviet Union, and in league with other communist nations, such as China.

And Eisenhower realized that this was the challenge that had to be met and he met it as President. But he also knew that the nation had to prepare itself.

And so all of these needs and visions came together in 1956, when he put in-place this matter plan, this brilliant vision of an interstate highway system that would serve our national security needs. But I think Eisenhower knew as President, far from just being a shoulder, but as President, he knew that it would have a greater impact on America than just helping us in times of mortal military danger.

He knew that this interstate highway system would be of a transforming nature, a transforming nature that only a circulatory system, such as this, could be.

And so the system was born, building on earlier important work that was done that led in this direction. And because of the work of great engineers and great workers and dedicated business leaders, many of whom are here this evening, but one of the most significant engineering marvels in all of history was brought to completion in a relatively short period of time as one measures such things.

I came of age in the age of the interstate. President Eisenhower signed my commission as a young second lieutenant, 21 years old, in 1958. As a soldier, of course, I understood the significance, the military significance of the interstate system that was being built as I was entering on my military career.

And over the course of my military career, the strategic significance of the interstate system became more and more obvious. As a corps commander in Germany, during the height of the Cold War, I knew that the reinforcements that I would need if that war ever became hot would come by airplane, would come by sea, but ultimately, it would begin with a highway and railroad system of the most robust kind that would deliver the troops and the goods to the ports of embarkation.

As Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, at a time of great danger in 1990 and 1991, when we had to assemble a massive army in the deserts of the Persian Gulf, we knew that we needed airlift, we knew that we needed sealift, but above all, we needed the ground transportation to get us to the ports. And not only here in the United States, but ironically, half that force came from Germany and we're using those autobahns, originally designed by the Third Reich and originally admired and used by President Eisenhower.

My real admiration for the interstate system, however, is not what it did for me as a soldier or what it did for our national security, but what it did for our country and for our society.

As a young man growing up in the Bronx section of New York City, I admired our first parkway, the Bronx River Parkway, in my hometown burrow of the Bronx. The New York State Thruway demonstrated the potential of the national system, and I still remember as a young lad, driving from New York to Buffalo on that marvelous road, eight whole hours. We thought it would go on forever and it was incredible.

As a New Yorker, a very provincial New Yorker, the Jersey Turnpike seemed to be the end of civilization when you got to the end of the Jersey Turnpike and all this wilderness was beyond, across the Delaware water gap.

I remember all the debates that took place in the '50s and early '60s, about what this interstate system would mean; communities would be left behind and communities would be bypassed. And it was going into the middle of nowhere and cities would be overlooked, how could we possibly adjust to this new feature on the landscape? But adjust, we did.

Some saw it as a soulless, barren feature spread boringly across the land. But it gave Americans a new freedom, a freedom to rapidly go to faraway places, the freedom to just get in the car and take off and go to a Disneyland or a Disneyworld or to go visit relatives halfway across the country.

It gave birth to new communities. It gave birth to new industries. And it reshaped our economy for the better, so much for the better. And it helped to create, as Jim Owens alluded to, an industry of master builders. It did build up companies such as Caterpillar, and so many others that are represented here tonight.

There was a synergy between the interstate highway system and the economy of America. We built these highways with an original concept that they might be used for khaki military convoys. But they got instead, UPS brown and FedEx and Wal-Mart convoys. A trucking industry that is second to none, a trucking industry that has grown and thrived because of what you all did, because of the vision that General President Eisenhower did.

Larger outlet stores opened, removing the worry about those stores that might be bypassed. A new hospitality industry opened up and thrived as a result of the interstate system, with motels, hotels, tourist attractions, Six Flags, all sorts of things that took advantage of this access that existed to the country and to the citizens of the country. The Howard Johnsons and the McDonald's, and the Waffle Houses, all, all benefited as a result of this.

It introduced new phrases into American English; phrases such as the cloverleaf, the off-ramp, the onramp, and that most famous of new phrases in the American language, Are We There Yet, Poppy?

And it created the need for new technologies. And perhaps, it created one of the greatest technological developments of our age, cruise control, something that was

not needed before the interstate highway system was created. It advanced the science of radar and laser detectors to by great distress.

It had a special meaning for me as a black man. In those days, a black person traveling in this country had to plan their travels very carefully. Once you got off the western end and the southern end of the Jersey Turnpike, you better have everything you need if you were going into the deep south. You'd better have a cousin living somewhere along the way in the Carolinas that you could stay at, because there wouldn't be a convenient motel. And you'd better have a picnic basket full of food because there were so many restaurants that would not serve you.

In my early days in the army with my new wife, we traveled from the end of the Jersey Turnpike down to the Fort Benning, Georgia area, and to Birmingham, Alabama. And in those days, there were only two that I can recall, I was talking to Alma early today, there were only two places that we can remember that a black person could find a bed for the night, the motel in South Carolina and there was another hotel on the western route in Bristol, Tennessee. Just imagine that, it isn't ancient history, it's my generation, it's my lifetime, it's my personal experience and the personal experience of my family.

There was a time when I could be heading to Vietnam and driving down Route 1 to Woodridge, Virginia, just 20 minutes from here, where you couldn't stop to relieve yourself at a gas station because of the nature of our society at that time.

1956, the year that Eisenhower signed this historical bill was also the year that Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on the bus. It was the beginning of the Montgomery Bus boycott. It was the beginning of the ministry of a wonderful man that we all loved so deeply, Martin Luther King, Jr.

And over the years that followed, a revolution took place in our country, a revolution that said if we would live the dream that our founding fathers had, then all of us had to be equal.

And I remember so vividly in a personal way, as does my wife and my children, how the country started to respond to that. And to a large extent, the opening of accommodations for people, the ability to go into any restaurant that you wanted to, really focused on those interstate highway systems.

You knew that as you drove down I-85 or I-95 now, you could pull off anywhere and you could go into a Holiday Inn or a Howard Johnson or the pancake house or International House or Waffle House, and you would be served just as anyone else would be served. It was an interstate system. It was a national system. It helped bring this country back together again. It helped move us into a better place in our national life and in our national history.

You may think that I am stretching the argument, but I'm not, because I remember vividly as a young officer, the difference between traveling without the interstate and traveling with the interstate. And so the interstate had so many effects on us in so many different ways. It made this an incredibly better country.

Ike was concerned about a Soviet Empire that was putting at risk everything we believed in and which we stood for. We built armies, we built alliances, we built fences and walls, and we built highways. They built armies and fences and walls, but they couldn't build highways. They didn't have that vision. They didn't have that ability. They didn't have that concept. They didn't have that dream of what could be.

Most of my life as a soldier was spent standing guard along those walls and along those fences and facing those enemies. And I have been so privileged to have watched all of that come down and to watch our world change from a world of battlefields to a world of playing fields.

Yes, we still have wars taking place. And we still have challenges in Iraq and in Afghanistan, and there are still dangers in the world, but there are great opportunities. Communism is gone. Democracy is on the march.

The world is seeking to operate on playing fields, not battle fields, and playing fields where the games are economics; where the United States is now in competition, not with a Soviet empire, but with the economy of China and the economy of India and the economy of the European union; a world where we are competing for energy because it is energy that is fueling the growth in these nations that used to be our enemies and are no longer our enemies, but our economic competitors.

It is a world where on this playing field, the game of education is being played, a game that is so important. We, a nation of 300 million people, are still the leaders of this world that wants to be free. We are still ready to compete with the Chinas and Indias and European unions of the world.

But we will only compete successfully if we invest in education, the education of our young people. And Tom Donohue of the Chamber of Commerce, and I have been talking about this in the course of the evening. It's not just great universities that we need, it's great high schools and middle schools and elementary schools to make sure that America maintains its lead.

What we have above all though is vision. What we have that will keep us in front is a willingness to take risk. What we have that will allow us to prevail on this 21st Century is that entrepreneurial spirit, that belief in things that are not yet seen, things that are still unknown, the kind of belief that Dwight David Eisenhower had in 1956. He could not have imagined everything that was going to be brought about by the interstate highway system. But he knew it was the right thing for that time.

And now the interstate highway system is 50 years old. And what do we need? We need a new vision. We need a new vision for a new world. We need a vision that expands our surface infrastructure. We need a vision that is prepared to invest. We need a Congress that is willing to invest. We need political leaders who may not see perfectly in the dim mirror, what is ahead, but as we bring to the cause the same kind of passion, the same kind of belief in our system that Dwight Eisenhower did 50 years ago.

It is your challenge. It is your responsibility.

This great association exists for the purpose of making that case for our business leaders to our workers to our political leaders that the best is yet to come. And that we have built this wonderful system, but now we must not only maintain it, it has to be expanded. It is that capacity and that capacity has to be increased.

And it'll only be increased and we will only seize this future and seize these opportunities that are before us, if we come up with a vision that is as far reaching and historic as the vision that President Eisenhower came up with.

Can we do it? Sure, we can. We're Americans. We've always believed in our ability to do anything that we put our mind and hearts to.

And so on this 50th Anniversary of the signing of this legislation, on the 50th Anniversary of the interstate highway system and the means by which we fund that system, let us rededicate ourselves and let this organization rededicate itself to the prospect that we have another 50 years of hard work in front of us.

And none of us can quite see what it will look like 50 years from now, but we know that if we apply ourselves now, if we do the right things now, if we take on the challenge now, our children and grandchildren will thank us for it. And let that be the motivating force behind this association.

Thank you. Happy birthday God bless you all.