



Highway

Several decades before he became the thirty-fourth president of the United States in 1953, General Dwight D. Eisenhower traveled as an observer on the U.S. Army's first intercontinental truck convoy as part of the government's research of truck and rail travel. It took 62 days to move 81 vehicles the 3,000 miles from the East Coast to the West Coast. Although slower than trains, the convoy demonstrated the feasibility of the truck as a means to transport large numbers of troops and amounts of matériel from one location to another. Transport of goods by truck heralded the breakup of the monopolies owned by the great railroad barons as the proliferation of the truck gave rise to a kind of commercial individualism, which allowed commerce to deliver its goods when and where it wanted to, without a centralized network such as the railroad.

Influenced by the German autobahn and the efficiency of its unhindered four-lane byway, in 1956 Eisenhower initiated the largest public works project ever undertaken, spending \$50 billion to construct 40,000 miles of road known as the National System of Interstate and Defense Highways. This remarkable network is the lifeblood of modern intercourse, a defining characteristic of contemporary American culture. In 1957, Eisenhower funded the Advanced Research Projects Agency, which would lay the groundwork for the Internet.

Together, the united forces of our communication and transportation systems are dynamic elements in the very name we bear—United States. Without them, we would be a mere alliance of many separate parts.

President Dwight D. Eisenhower



I think that cars today are almost the exact equivalent of the great Gothic cathedrals: I mean the supreme creation of an era, conceived with passion by unknown artists, and consumed in image if not in usage by a whole population which appropriates them as a purely magical object.

Roland Barthes,
Mythologies