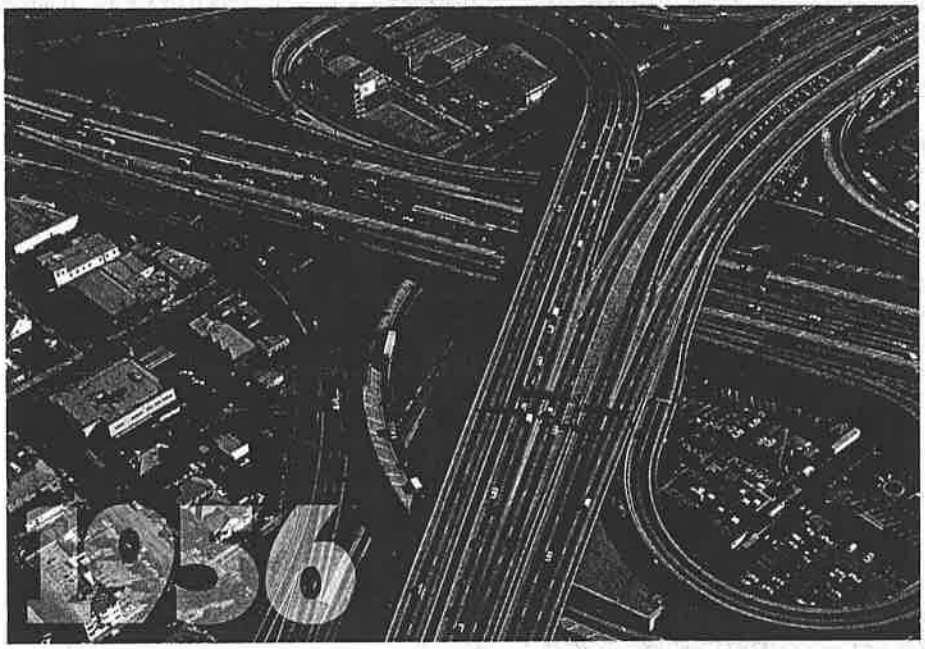
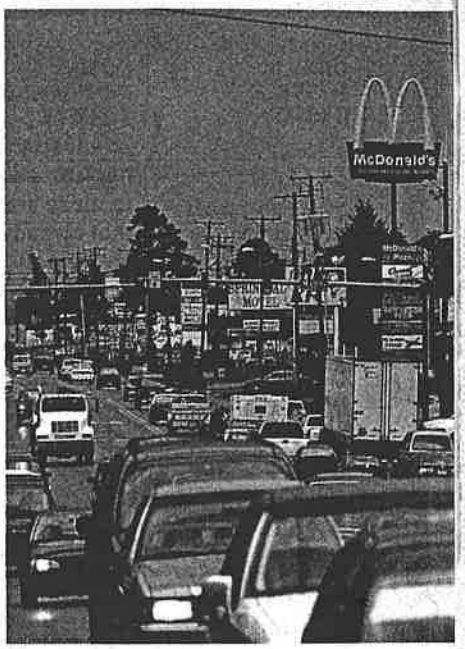




The Roads That Changed

Suburbia, shopping malls, fast food, and drive-in everything—the Interstate Highway System gave birth to much of American life as we know it

BY SAM ROBERTS

In 1919, a young army officer named Dwight D. Eisenhower led a cross-country military convoy on the narrow, barely paved buggy paths that passed in those days for America's highways. It took him 44 days, at an average speed of 6 mph, to get from coast to coast.

More than two decades later, when he was Supreme Commander of Allied forces in Europe during World War II, Eisenhower saw firsthand how quickly enemy troops could get around on Germany's highways, or autobahns, which Adolf Hitler had built in the 1930s.

Both experiences had a profound effect on Eisenhower, and in 1956, as President, he presided over the creation of the Interstate Highway System.

Fifty years and 47,000 miles of highway later, it's clear that the interstate program did much more than make travel easier. It ended up transforming the nation, giving us suburbia, shopping malls, fast food, and much of the America we know today.

Before the automobile, Americans rarely traveled long distances. And when they did, most went by train.

But by 1930, as a result of the mass production of modestly priced, reliable automobiles, more than half of American families owned a car.

The proliferation of cars and the availability of cheap gasoline spurred demands for a government road-building program after World War II ended in 1945. But it wasn't until 1956 that the federal government agreed to pay for most of it, in part due to Eisenhower's enthusiasm for the project.

It was the height of the Cold War between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, and the President saw the massive road-building effort not only as a matter of national defense, but also as a boon to the economy. He signed the Federal-Aid Highway Act on June 29, 1956. (In 1991, the interstate system was named the Dwight D. Eisenhower National System of Interstate and Defense Highways.)

OUT TO THE SUBURBS

The interstates built in the following decades, marked by distinctive crest-shaped blue-and-red signs *(see box, p. 18)*, had profound effects on an America in which people suddenly were a lot less constrained by geography.

One of the biggest changes was the explosion of the suburbs—and the decline of the cities they surrounded.

America

INTERSTATES 10 AND 110 cross in Los Angeles *(far left)*; the highways led to strip malls like the one in Springdale, Ark. *(center)*, and sprawling suburbs like Sun City, Ariz. *(above)*.

Built, in part, to evacuate cities in case of nuclear attack, the interstates enabled millions of middle-class, mostly white residents of cities like Detroit, Baltimore, and New York to escape to greener pastures. Many were veterans using low-interest mortgages from the G.I. Bill to buy their first homes in suburbs that seemed to sprout overnight in what had been wheat and potato fields. The American Dream became a house with a yard and a two-car garage, and the interstates filled with commuters who spent their days at work but headed home to the suburbs at night.

The change in culture was reflected on television. On *I Love Lucy* in 1957, Ricky and Lucy and Little Ricky—the quintessential city family—packed up their apartment in New York and moved to the Connecticut suburbs.

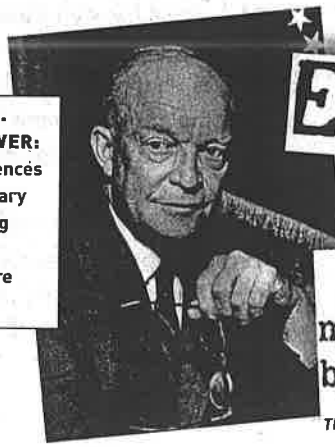
FAST-FOOD NATION

Entire new industries developed to serve commuters and long-distance travelers, including chain motels like Howard Johnson's and Holiday Inn, and of course, McDonald's and other fast-food purveyors. (The first McDonald's franchise opened in 1955 in Des Plaines, Ill.; there are now nearly 14,000 in the U.S.)

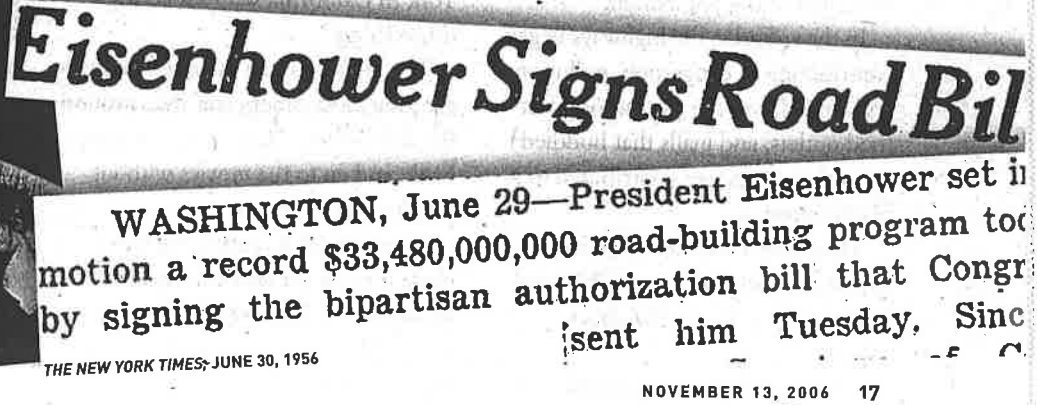
As time went on, suburban life became more separate from that of the city. Shopping centers and huge malls were built, as department stores followed their customers to their new homes, further draining business activity from struggling downtowns.

Some of the highways cut right through cities like Chicago, destroying

Sam Roberts is urban affairs correspondent for The New York Times.



DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER: His experiences in the military left a lasting impression on the future President.

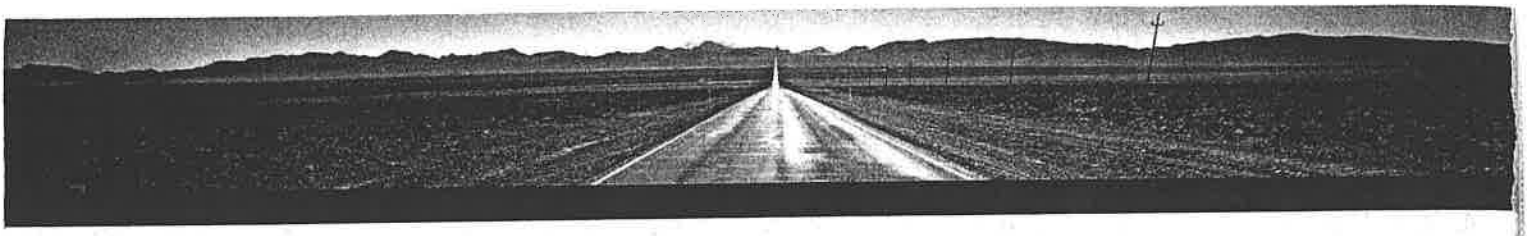


Eisenhower Signs Road Bil

WASHINGTON, June 29—President Eisenhower set i
motion a record $33,480,000,000 road-building program to
by signing the bipartisan authorization bill that Congr
sent him Tuesday. Sinc

THE NEW YORK TIMES, JUNE 30, 1956

TOP: (L-R) DOUGLAS SLONE/CORBIS; DAVID BUTOW/CORBIS; GETTY IMAGES; BOTTOM: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



ROUTE 66, in Arizona. The interstates made for much faster, if less scenic, travel.

neighborhoods and making cities even less-desirable places to live.

"First, we moved our homes out past the traditional idea of what constituted a city. This was the suburbanization of America, especially after World War II," *Washington Post* reporter Joel Garreau has written. "Then we wearied of returning downtown for the necessities of life, so we moved our marketplaces out to where we lived. This was the malling of America, especially in the 1960s and 1970s."

GO WEST, AND SOUTH

Another monumental change brought about by the highways was the movement of people and jobs to less congested, less expensive areas in the West and South. (Advances in air-conditioning technology were another big factor, allowing for comfortable living in warmer climates.)

Like the railroads a century earlier, highways turned the small towns that they bypassed into ghost towns. By the 1960s and 1970s, even many of the biggest cities in the East and Midwest had stopped growing or started losing population.

In the suburbs, the highways began contributing to congestion, pollution, and sprawl, and the gas stations, fast-food outlets, and malls that huddled around interchanges contributed to a bland sameness.

The writer John Steinbeck had predicted as much. In his 1939 novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck immortalized the Dust Bowl caravans that plodded west from the Great Plains along U.S. 66 during the Great Depression. Often called "the main street of America," Route 66 linked Chicago to Los Angeles and went through small towns and rural landscapes, giving travelers a sense of the wide range of communities in the United States.

"When we get these thruways across the whole country, as we will and must," Steinbeck wrote in 1962, "it will be possible to drive from New York to California without seeing a single thing."

The highways had the effect of reorganizing most Americans' lives around the automobile. They could eat, shop, bank, and go to the movies without ever leaving their cars.

But as the 20th century drew to a close, there was a backlash against the sprawl, the traffic jams on suburban roadways crammed with too many cars, the cookie-cutter houses and shopping centers that made one suburban enclave look like every other. Some people began moving back to cities like New York and Washington, relishing the energy and cultural vitality lacking in many suburbs.

"The American Dream really became realized along the Interstate system. People started moving out further and further," says Dan McNichol, who wrote *The Roads That Built America*. "And now...we're starting to see where people have gone maybe, maybe too far, maybe to the outer limit. And I think we're starting to see a reverse of the trend."

STILL GROWING

If you think of the Interstate Highway System as a concrete belt, it is currently long enough to wrap around the equator—twice. It has cost $130 billion to build and affects daily life in countless ways.

"Virtually every product in every American home, from your toothbrush to your favorite CD, has traveled on an Interstate highway at some point," a federal highway official wrote. "The interstate system has stimulated development around the country—homes, businesses, shopping malls, hotels, office complexes, and more."

And what lies ahead for America's interstates?

The highway system, said Francis C. Turner, a former Federal Highway Administrator, "will never be finished because America will never be finished." ●

INTERSTATE HIGHWAY FACTS

- **Total length of the system > 47,000 miles**
- **Odd-numbered routes > run north and south**
  The lowest numbers start in the West
- **Even-numbered routes > run east and west**
  The lowest numbers start in the South
- **The shortest Interstate > I-878 — 7/10 of a mile**
  In New York State
- **The longest Interstate > I-90 — 3,020 miles**
  From Boston to Seattle
- **The most Interstates > New York — 29 of them**
  But Texas boasts the most Interstate miles > 3,233
- **Highest speed limit > 80 mph — I-10 and I-20**
  In western Texas

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