



Racist Interstates?

Revamping some of the national highway system makes sense—but basing those decisions on vague notions of social justice is not the way to do it.

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The Interstate Highway System, which the U.S. began constructing in the 1950s, has a complicated legacy, to say the least. Boosters see it as the greatest infrastructure program undertaken in the country during the second half of the twentieth century, connecting vast areas in new and important ways, unlocking largely untapped regions outside of cities that helped spark a new kind of middle-class living. Detractors accuse the system’s planners and builders of emptying out cities and encouraging the rise of low-density suburban sprawl. That process, critics argue, prompted “white flight” to the suburbs, while stranding poor minorities in urban neighborhoods disfigured by the highways that bisected them. To these critics, the Interstate Highway System is just another example of America’s racist past.

Though this view of our highway system is not new in academic circles and at urban-planning conferences, it now has emerged as part of the larger reevaluation of everything from federal monuments to the reputations of America’s Founding Fathers in the wake of George Floyd’s death in May at the hands of a Minneapolis cop. Critics argue that it’s not enough simply to see our highways as the product of discrimination; it’s time to begin dismantling them, in the same way that mobs are pulling down statues of old Confederates. “Want to tear down insidious monuments to racism and segregation? Bulldoze L.A. freeways,” the opinion section of the *Los Angeles Times* asserted earlier this year. “Neither the Klan nor legally dubious covenants nor flagrantly unconstitutional land grabs were arguably as effective as the automobile and its attendant infrastructure at turning Los Angeles into an intentionally segregated city,” the op-ed declared modestly.

This is apparently more than idle chatter. A month after the *Los Angeles Times* piece appeared, a report from Pew Stateline described emerging movements to pull down sections of highways running through minority neighborhoods, including a section of I-10 known as the Claiborne Highway, which bisects the Tremé neighborhood in New Orleans. The report also noted that minority communities were increasingly protesting plans to expand or widen highways in their

neighborhoods. “In the current climate, advocates say it’s time for cities to confront and resolve the racist planning decisions their predecessors made 60 years ago,” Stateline said.

There’s little doubt that the construction of the Interstate Highway System, coming as it did during a period of broader enthusiasm for “urban renewal,” yielded its share of ill-conceived projects, some of which were forced on communities. The contention that this amounted to a specific war on black communities ignores the breadth and scope of those efforts and the many communities affected. Indeed, perhaps the most infamous case of a community torn apart by construction of a highway is described by Robert Caro in the chapter titled “One Mile,” from his massive biography of Robert Moses, *The Power Broker*. There, Caro notes how Moses obliterated the working-class, largely Jewish, community of East Tremont in the Bronx in order to build the Cross Bronx Expressway. Moses inaccurately compared the 54 apartment buildings that he tore down with the Lower East Side of Manhattan tenements that poor Jewish immigrants occupied when they first arrived in America.

Another notorious highway project of that period was Boston’s Central Artery, which slashed through the city center to provide quicker auto access to the central business district. Planned before the federal highway system, the effort displaced thousands of residents and hundreds of businesses in Boston’s largely Italian-American North End. It was so ill-conceived—separating whole sections of the city from other neighborhoods—that soon after its completion, the city began talking about how to replace it.

Still, highways were hardly at the center of the often-misguided frenzy of the urban-renewal era. In New York, for instance, city government seized hundreds of businesses in East Harlem, many of them ethnic Italian, Jewish, and Puerto Rican, to build huge public-housing projects that undermined what was once a vibrant commercial community. The state displaced hundreds of businesses on the Lower West Side of Manhattan to construct the World Trade Center—in the process, eliminating a small business district and replacing it with a foreboding office complex that disrupted crucial street traffic in lower Manhattan. Unlike the highways, these and other projects had no ostensible purpose other than urban renewal, and they reflected a misbegotten faith in central planning as a form of neighborhood revival.

Central to the notion that the highway system is racist is the idea that it spurred white flight, a race-based exodus from cities. (See “The Truth About White Flight.”) Yet substantial evidence suggests that the urban exodus began long before the U.S. started building a national highway network. As Randal O’Toole, a senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute who blogs under the name “The Anti-Planner,” has argued, a series of innovations dating back to the nineteenth century—including electrification, the telephone, and, especially, the automobile—jump-started the process of outmigration from cities decades before the highway project. Visionaries from H. G. Wells to Henry Ford to Frank Lloyd Wright saw these future migration patterns unfolding years before the highways appeared. Astute observers of urban America like the novelist Philip Roth saw the same thing. Writing in *Goodbye Columbus*, published in 1959, Roth described the relentless movement of Newark’s Jews out of the city as they prospered and followed generations of other Americans into the suburbs, well before the highway system was there to transport them: “The old Jews like my grandparents had struggled and died, and their offspring

had struggled and prospered, and moved further and further west, towards the edge of Newark, then out of it, and up the slope of the Orange Mountains, until they had reached the crest and started down the other side, pouring into Gentile territory.”

Many other social and economic changes also contributed to the spreading out of metro areas. Though manufacturing was mostly located in urban industrial districts for much of America’s early history, during World War II both the government and its private-sector partners discovered that they could quickly increase industrial capacity by constructing one-level facilities in open spaces outside of cities. That strategy survived World War II, helping to push jobs out of the cities prior to the advent of the highways.

Still, the cultural reevaluation going on after the Floyd killing has given some hope to urban planners, who, for years, have dreamed of dismantling large urban parts of the highway system. Advocates have even borrowed a concept from the social-justice movement to cast a critical eye on urban highways, demanding that these projects now be evaluated based on “racial equity”—that is, rather than simply looking at how they serve the transportation needs of a community, road projects should also be judged in terms of their racial impact.

Certainly, projects exist from the era of the federal highway system that went wrong and could be recast today. *City Journal* has argued, for instance, that downtown Hartford has long suffered from a central city meeting of routes I-84 and I-91, which disastrously cut the city’s riverfront off from much of the rest of Hartford, leading to decline in what was once a vibrant area. Planners are looking at ways of making that connection again.

But these kinds of projects are not for the fainthearted, and rushing into them seeking ambiguous and contested ideals of social justice could be ruinous. Boston transportation advocates finally mustered the collective will to fix the Central Artery disaster. But a project that began in the 1970s, dubbed the Big Dig, wasn’t completed until 2005, at a cost five times what was originally projected. The \$15 billion price tag, paid for largely with debt, has weighed down the state’s balance sheet for years.

Untangling federal highway systems from many cities might prove equally expensive. Deciding whether we should proceed based on “racial equity” is likely to distort our judgment—and potentially lead to the same kinds of planning mistakes that advocates say they want to fix.