Improving traffic safety culture in the United States: The journey forward

J. Peter Kissinger

Preface

As a traffic safety professional, I know that roughly 43,000 Americans are killed each year in traffic crashes, and that traffic crashes are the leading cause of death for children, teens, and young adults in this country. It is quite simply what motivates me, and my associates, each and every day, to learn more about what can be done to reduce this public health crisis. Unfortunately, I do not believe the average motorist in this country appreciates the full implications of these tragedies.

I know that over the past several decades the traffic safety community has been successful in substantially lowering the risks associated with motor vehicle travel. But, I also know that over the past decade progress has slowed, despite the fact that much research suggests that we could probably cut this toll in half or better if only we would implement a few proven lifesaving countermeasures that we already know about. So, why don't we?

That is the central question that emerged from a two-day workshop of nationally recognized traffic safety experts that the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety convened to consider a long-term traffic safety research agenda.

What we heard, over and over again from the group, was that we as individuals, and our society on the whole, are simply way too willing to accept the toll from these traffic crashes, apparently as an inevitable consequence of the mobility we enjoy.

At the same time, contrast this apparent "complacency" with what has happened since September 11, 2001. Americans have accepted the expenditure of billions upon billions of dollars to combat terrorism, and have accepted innumerable inconveniences and intrusions into their privacy that previously would have been considered unacceptable. When we get "outraged" about something, our society can marshal the requisite resolve and resources to make a difference!

Although the U.S. has improved traffic safety in many ways, we're not doing as well as many other countries. Prior to the mid 1960's, the U.S. enjoyed the greatest level of traffic safety in the world by any measure; whereas today, the U.S. has fallen behind most of Western Europe in terms of fatalities per mile driven, and ranks near the bottom of the OECD in terms of traffic fatalities per capita. The evidence suggests that these countries have achieved—and are still achieving—greater safety gains than the United States. Experts believe this is because they are willing to set more ambitious safety performance goals than we are, and because they are willing to do more to achieve them.

In this country, the official safety performance goal of the U.S. Department of Transportation is to reduce the motor vehicle fatality rate to one fatality per 100 million vehicle-miles of travel by

the year 2008. The most recent statistics reveal that the U.S. has just seen its first increase in the fatality rate in two decades. We are no longer moving in the "right direction" too slowly—as we had been for the past decade—now, we're moving in the wrong direction. Moreover, even if we were to achieve the stated goal, that would still have us writing off roughly 30,000 annual deaths on our roads as the socially accepted price of our mobility, and that's before accounting for the projected travel increases.

Again, this provides stark contrast to the picture in much of Europe and Australia, where motor vehicle traffic injuries, deaths, and rates of both, have dropped substantially over the past decades; where the target is a safe system that minimizes opportunities for crashes to occur and virtually precludes disabling or fatal outcomes by limiting crash severity; and where the measuring stick is the actual number of traffic casualties, rather than a rate that accepts the notion that increases in driving must lead to increases in crashes, injuries, and deaths.

To make real progress, which other countries have demonstrated is indeed possible, we need to transform our way of thinking. **We need to transform our culture**, from a culture that accepts loss of life and limb as a price of mobility, to one in which elected officials, transportation professionals, and individual citizens expect safety, demand safety, and refuse to accept that an annual casualty count roughly equal to the population of Arkansas is a fair price to pay for mobility. Until this happens, many safety measures known to work will remain unimplemented, with their lifesaving potential unrealized. We need to treat traffic safety with seriousness commensurate with the scope of the problem that it is. We need to get "outraged!"

We hope this compendium is a start along this new path. The AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety has made a long-term commitment to focus its research program on "traffic safety culture." As discussed in the various papers in this report, we are hoping to learn much more about "What is safety culture?" "How can we measure it?" And eventually and most importantly, "What can we do to change it?" We are also hoping that it will lead to an increased national dialogue about this issue, and most importantly, a new culture that is unwilling to remain complacent! Working together, we can and will make a difference!

Biographical Statement

J. Peter Kissinger has over 30 years of progressively responsible experience in transportation safety. He has been President and CEO of the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety since May of 2002. The AAA Foundation is a not-for-profit affiliate of AAA and the AAA motor clubs that supports research and develops educational products to enhance traffic safety. Other relevant experience includes ten years with the Civil Engineering Research Foundation where he managed "Innovation Centers" that evaluated new technologies for the public works and transportation community, and eight years as the Managing Director of the National Transportation Safety Board. Previously, he served as a Transportation Safety Specialist with NTSB, conducting evaluations of transportation safety programs, and an Operations Research Analyst with the U.S. Coast Guard where he evaluated proposed Federal safety standards and managed a research and development program. He has an MS in Operations Research from George Washington University and a BS in Engineering from the U.S. Coast Guard Academy.