



NATIONAL INTERSTATE AND DEFENSE HIGHWAYS ACT

Introduction

In the Constitution, Congress is charged with providing for the general welfare of the country’s citizens. Historically, this has meant improving transportation, promoting agriculture and industry, protecting health and the environment and seeking ways to solve social and economic problems.

In 1956, Congress passed the Federal-Aid Highway Act, popularly known as the National Interstate and Defense Highways Act, authorizing federal funding for the extension and construction of a robust network of interstate highways. This project was one of the largest public works in U.S. history establishing key transportation infrastructure that impacted lives of all Americans — changing communities, access and economic possibilities and also providing key routes for evacuating urban centers — a critical national defense issue in the Cold War era.

Analyzing primary source material, students discuss the origins and reasons for the National Interstate and Defense Highways Act. Then, they work with historical and contemporary maps as they consider the impact this important congressionally funded project. While intended for 8th grade students, the lesson can be adapted for other grade levels.



Estimated Time

One to two class sessions

National Standards

National Geography Standard 1

United States History National Standards

United States Era 9—Post War United States (1945–early 1970s), Standard 1A

Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts, grade 8

Writing 4

Speaking and Listening 1, 4

Common Core State Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies, grade 8

Reading 2, 6, 7

Learning Skills

Reading, analysis of primary source documents, group discussion, working with maps

Essential Question

What role did Congress play in the development of the national interstate system? What evidence did President Dwight Eisenhower cite to justify Congressional funding for the National System of Interstate Highways? How did the passage of the Federal-Aid Highway Act fulfill Congress' mission “to provide for the...general Welfare” (Article 1, Section 8, Constitution of the United States)?

Documents and Worksheets

Primary source material:

- President Eisenhower’s message to the Congress of the United States, February 22, 1955 (http://www.eisenhower.archives.gov/research/online_documents/interstate_highway_system/1955_02_22_Message_to_Congress.pdf)
- H.R. 10660, Federal Highway Act of 1956 ([here](#))
- Photograph of cars from the 1940s ([here](#))
- Map of National System of Interstate and Defense Highways, 1956 ([here](#))
- Access to Google maps or current map of the United states/your state

**Other resources for additional information:**

- <http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=88>
Full text of the H.R. 10660 Act
- <http://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2006/summer/interstates.html>
Secondary source, informational essay

Suggested Activities

- Ask students to imagine what travel may have been like before major highways or the interstate. Examine the photo from the CVC online exhibit. A Senate committee obtained this photograph of a muddy road in Tennessee in the 1940s as part of its study of road conditions in the U.S. At the end of World War II, urban centers in the United States were lacking evacuation routes, accessibility and opportunities for safe and efficient travel. What are some ideas students have to solve these problems? President Eisenhower proposed the Highway system as a solution.
- Individually, students examine Eisenhower’s message to Congress (February 22, 1955) and answer the following questions. What is the evidence Eisenhower cites to justify Congressional funding for the National System of Interstate Highways? What are his arguments? What are the details of his proposal (i.e. what amount of funding would the Federal Government allocate and for what specific projects)? Is Eisenhower’s solution a feasible one?
- As a whole class, share findings. Do students agree with President Eisenhower (i.e. an interstate will make travel and commerce more efficient and provide key routes for evacuation of urban centers)? When Congress committed \$24.8 billion to the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956, this was one of the largest public works in U.S. history. What might the impact of this major project have been on a student’s community, town, city, region, or state?
- Look at the “Map of National System of Interstate and Defense Highways, 1956” and a contemporary map (via Google map). Have students ever traveled on these highways? What are the major interstate highways closest to school?
- In pairs, students locate their state on both maps and answer the following questions: What interstate highway(s) are in our state? What state and local roads are in our state? What urban centers are connected by the interstate? Are there areas not along the interstate that have economic significance? Looking at this map, what might have been the impact of the interstate highway on life in our state? Share and compare student responses. What are the class findings?



Teacher Tip

When introducing maps, consider reviewing some general numbering systems for roadways. For example, interstate highways created in 1956 have a number starting with “I.” Older federal highways start with “US.” State or local roads may have other identifying characteristics. Also, for the most part, odd numbered highways run north-south and even numbered routes run east-west.

Extended Activity

- Students identify someone (parent, grandparent, community member) to interview about transportation when they were young. Brainstorm interview questions (or offer them a prepared list of questions) and have students conduct interviews and collect information about travel and transportation in their neighborhood, city or region in the past (even before the interstate!)
- Consider reviewing the following related lesson plan, *Building Suburbia: Highways and Housing in Postwar America* <http://edsitement.neh.gov/lesson-plan/building-suburbia-highways-and-housing-postwar-america#sect-introduction>