

Editorial

65 mph speed bill needs a green light

Last week the Senate passed a bill allowing states to change the speed limit on some rural interstate freeways from 55 mph to 65 mph. This is an important bill because it gives individual states the authority to set their own speed limits on certain stretches of freeway.

Changing the speed limit to 65 mph is popular with Western states, but not as popular with those in the East. Nearly every Western congressperson is in favor of allowing states to set their own speed limits, including Sen. Slade Gordon, R-Wash., and Sen. Bob Packwood, R-Ore. But Rep. Jim Howard, D-N.J., chairman of the House Public Works and Transportation Committee, has threatened to kill the bill in committee — postponing debate on the bill until Congress adjourns, effectively killing the measure.

Howard, along with a handful of predominately Eastern lawmakers, is concerned that raising the speed limit would hurt fuel conservation efforts and endanger lives. These arguments have their merits, but letting this bill die without a debate infringes on states' rights, particularly the rights of those out West. Congressman Howard and other opponents of the bill fail to realize the difference in driving conditions that exist between the densely populated Eastern seaboard and the widely distributed West.

Eastern lawmakers have little experience driving on Western interstates and should not have a say in setting another region's speed limit. Sen. Phil Gramm, R-Texas, recently summed up this point well, saying, "If Easterners don't want to drive in the West, they don't have to."

The 55 mph law, when enacted in 1974, was designed as an energy conservation measure. At the time, the United States was threatened by an oil embargo, and the U.S. public feared that domestic oil reserves were running dry. Most of us can recall the long lines at gas stations and talk of the ominous "energy crisis." But economists note that a sustained embargo against the United States, a major petroleum buyer, was financially imprudent for the embargoing nations.

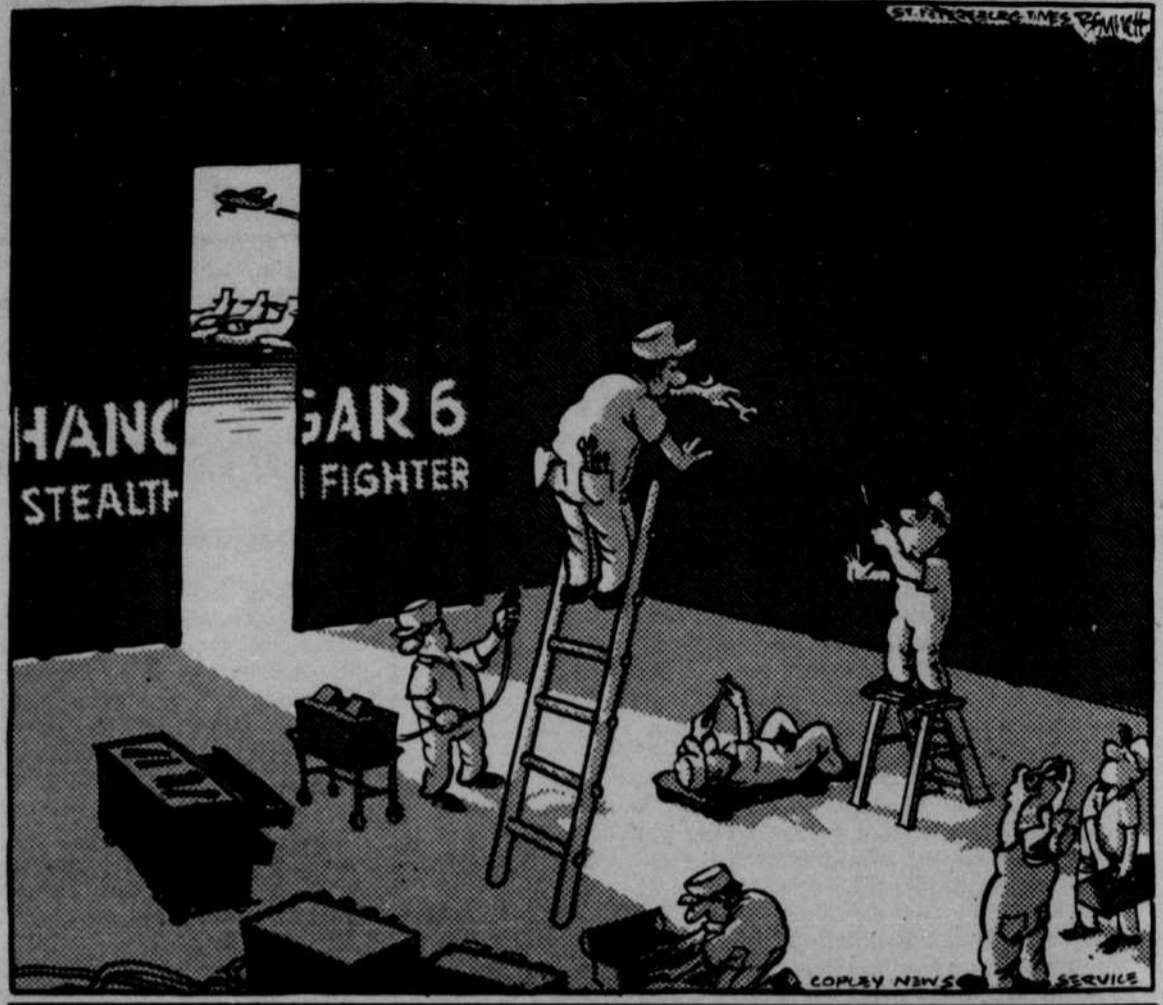
Economists also note that oil reserves were ample, embargo or no embargo, and there was no need for the "panic at the pumps." Still, folks topped off their tanks when the needle registered half empty.

A decade later, the climate has calmed, and the 55 mph speed has emerged as the most flouted federal law since prohibition. Surveys show that an overwhelming majority of the driving public exceeds 55 mph. So the saving of energy netted by the 55 mph speed limit has been, at best, marginal.

When the 55 mph speed-limit law was put into effect, the hardest hit were drivers of large, gas-guzzling cars. Since then the auto industry has substantially reduced its production of large automobiles, and today's cars are much more fuel efficient.

Safety concerns, as an afterthought, were also a consideration in enacting the 55 mph law, based on the reasonable assumption that slower is safer. Sen. Robert Stafford, R-Vt., who is chairman of the Senate panel in charge of the highway bill and a major opponent of repealing the 55 mph law, said that raising the speed limit was "too much of a price to pay" — in terms of human lives lost — for the few hours of total driving time the motorist would save each year.

Again, the fact that most motorists do not observe the 55 mph limit weakens the safety argument. In essence, the West has been experimenting with a 65 mph limit for some time. What's more, highway safety measures and safety awareness have proven to be much more important factors in reducing highway fatalities.



Commentary

Need for South African minerals makes Reagan fear sanctions bill

When Chief of Staff Donald Regan so tactfully asked, "Are American women willing to give up their jewelry?" he offended the sensibilities of women and men alike.

His remark was meant to illustrate the effects of a ban on importing South African diamonds, and it provides an inside look at why the Reagan administration is so reluctant to deal strongly with the South African government.

Whatever else Reagan may fear concerning South Africa, his most pressing and legitimate fear is U.S. mineral dependency on South Africa.

Critics are quick to agree with Rep. Ronald Dellums, D-Calif., who was quoted by the Los Angeles Times as saying Reagan's foreign policy "is without principles, without integrity, and without a moral basis, and lacks validity and consistency."

But the executive order proposed by Reagan to hold off an override of his veto against sanctions outlines Reagan's

priorities. The order would not ban coal or uranium, and calls for a study to pinpoint alternatives to U.S. mineral dependency as well as determine whether sanctions would increase U.S. dependence on materials from Soviet bloc countries.

Mineral dependency caused West Germany to veto a ban on coal imports from South Africa, with the effect of diluting the sanctions imposed by the European Economic Community. According to The New York Times, the Common Market countries spend about \$1.2 billion buying South African coal each year, more than twice as much as the roughly \$500 million they spend on South African iron, steel and gold coins.

West German officials claim they vetoed the coal sanctions because they would cause undue hardship among black miners. This is the same argument Reagan has been using. In reality, the West German cement-making industry and its electric utilities are heavily coal-dependent.

The truth is, Reagan and the European leaders fear South African backlash from the sanctions, which could include denying access to critical minerals that have not been included in sanctions discussions.

According to Richard Barnet, author of "The Lean Years: Politics in the Age of Scarcity," South Africa controls 83 percent of the world's chrome reserves, 86 percent of the platinum reserves, 64 percent of the vanadium, 40 percent of the gold, 48 percent of the manganese and one-third of the uranium.

The U.S. and European ban on steel will probably increase domestic steel production, but only if we continue to import chrome and manganese. There

are no substitutes for chrome and manganese in making steel, and the United States has no manganese reserves.

The United States also has abandoned the production of certain critical minerals and encouraged the development of mineral production in the Third World. An example is the production of cobalt, which the United States stopped producing in 1971, simply because it is cheaper to import cobalt than to extract it as a by-product of nickel production.

Moreover, according to Barnet, the black African states lack the common policy, technology and capital required to develop their mineral industries, and have become dependant on South Africa to maintain these industries.

Barnet said, "There are possible alternatives to huge dependence on southern Africa — conservation measures, alternative technologies, increased exploration and mining elsewhere."

According to the National Research Council, it would take five to 10 years to adjust to a cutoff of chrome and manganese from South Africa.

If Reagan had implemented the transition during his first term, the United States would now be in the process of alleviating its mineral dependency. Instead, he attributed his reluctance to concern for black South Africans and resisted anger in the white minority government.

Now, as Sen. Richard Luger, R-Ind., chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee has declared, the president's executive order is too little, too late. It may be just in time, however, to save the United States' credibility.

By Shawn Wirtz

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