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**Research on the Problem of Violent Aggressive Driving**

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Mr. Chairman, members of the Surface Transportation Subcommittee, I am David K. Willis, President and Chief Executive Officer of the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety. The AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety is a publicly supported, charitable research and educational organization affiliated with the American Automobile Association, a federation of 99 motor clubs serving more than 39 million motorists in the United States and Canada.

I appreciate the invitation to testify before you this morning concerning our recent research on the problem of violent aggressive driving. That research is presented in a March, 1997 report by the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety titled Aggressive Driving: Three Studies, which is being submitted for the record as part of my written testimony.

My testimony today will focus on the findings from the first of the three studies included in our report. This research was conducted for the Foundation by Mizell & Co. International Security, a Bethesda, Maryland-based firm which specializes in tracking crime and terrorism trends. Mizell has constructed a proprietary database of newspaper and police reports on all kinds of crimes dating back to January, 1990. Most of the firm's research work is done for law enforcement and national security agencies.

The Mizell study was commissioned as a result of the widespread media attention given to two April, 1996 news stories from the Washington, DC area:

First, on April 12, AAA Potomac released the results of a Gallup poll on motorists' principal highway safety concerns. Forty percent of the respondents identified

"aggressive drivers" as their #1 concern. Amazingly, drunk drivers came in #2, being the principal concern of only 33 percent of those polled.

Second, less than a week later, on April 17, there occurred the now notorious incident in which Narkey Keval Terry, age 26, and Billy M. Canipe Jr., also 26, confronted each other in a showdown of vehicular aggression that ended in death on the George Washington Memorial Parkway in McLean, Virginia. Canipe was killed when his car crossed the median and slammed head-on into another vehicle, also killing its driver. At the same time a second innocent driver was killed when Terry's Jeep hit and sheared off the end of Canipe's car, which then flew into a mini-van. This was a particularly notorious incident because it occurred during the early morning rush hour on a major commuting artery in the Washington, DC metropolitan area, had numerous eyewitnesses, and raged on for at least 15 minutes at top speeds approaching 80 m.p.h. Terry was convicted of two counts of involuntary manslaughter and one count of reckless driving and was ultimately sentenced to 10 years in prison.

These two news stories started our phones ringing. Reporters from around the country wanted to know if this was just another form of "Potomac fever," or was aggressive driving truly a national problem? Was it principally a phenomenon of congested urban areas, or as it happening everywhere? Who were the typical aggressors? What was "setting them off?" Was the problem getting better or worse? We didn't have the answers to these questions, so we set out to find them.

Before I detail the Mizell report's findings, you need to be aware of a couple of important caveats regarding this research:

First, and most importantly, this study is not a census of the aggressive driving problem. It is more a frightening "snapshot" of the most violent kinds of aggressive driving incidents -- ones in which drivers cross over from driving aggressively to committing acts of often incredible violence. "Road rage" has become the popular term in the U.S. for this outlandish behavior, though the Australians have coined another term, "predatory driving," which also well describes the problem. For every incident identified in the Mizell study, there are probably tens of thousands of other less violent, but still scary, aggressive driving encounters. These more mundane instances, such as near misses caused by drivers running red lights or weaving in and out of traffic at high speeds, never show up in newspaper or police reports, which are the sources of the information underlying the Mizell report.

Second, because it relies on a database of crime reports, the Mizell report uses quite a restrictive definition of "aggressive driving." More specifically, "'Aggressive driving' is defined for this study as an incident in which an angry or impatient motorist or passenger intentionally injures or kills another motorist, passenger, or pedestrian in response to a traffic dispute, altercation or grievance. It is also considered 'aggressive driving' when an angry or vengeful motorist intentionally drives his or her vehicle into a building or other structure or property." Not

included are "... cases in which people were injured or killed as a result of random snipings, so-called thrill shootings, violent carjackings, or by objects thrown from overpasses." Also, the study "... does not include people injured or killed by armed robberies of motorists or other common highway crimes, and it does not include people killed or injured in 'ordinary' drunk driving or hit-and-run collisions."

This definition of "aggressive driving" is important to keep in mind, because it can exclude some truly horrific incidents. For example, in April of this year, five people were killed in the deadliest single episode of aggressive driving of which we are aware. Once again precipitated by a 26 year-old, this incident occurred on route 104 in Wayne County, New York, just east of Rochester. William Glerum was allegedly being tailgated by the driver of another car, 67 year-old Herbert Francis. Francis kept trying to pass Glerum on this 2-lane, rural road, yet each time he did so, Glerum sped up to thwart him. On his last attempt to pass, Francis' car collided with another car; the drivers of both vehicles were killed, as were three children riding in the Francis car. Glerum was arrested as the result of eyewitness accounts of the incident and has been charged with two counts of reckless endangerment and reckless driving, all misdemeanors. While Glerum's "passive-aggressive" behavior resulted in 5 traffic deaths, this case would not have shown up in the Mizell study, because it did not involve intentional injury to another person or property.

Thus, the 10,037 incidents of violent aggressive driving identified in the Mizell study are but a microcosm of the full extent of the aggressive driving problem in America today. Still, it is the best information on the problem we have been able to uncover, and the study offers some fascinating insights into who and what causes "road rage" and how awful the results can be when drivers lose total control. The great American orator Robert Ingersoll once opined that "anger blows out the lamp of the mind." That's exactly what happens to violent aggressive drivers.

The Mizell research uncovered 10,037 incidents of violent aggressive driving between January 1, 1990 and August 31, 1996, the nearly seven-year period studied. At least 218 men, women and children are known to have been killed as a result of these incidents, and another 12,610 were injured. The problem is national in scope, not just a phenomenon of congested urban areas.

And the problem has been getting progressively worse. In 1990, there were 1,129 reported incidents of violent aggressive driving; that figure has grown steadily each year during the 1990s, reaching 1,708 at the end of 1995. The figure through the end of August, 1996 (the end of the study period) was 1,201, putting us on track to reach another record of about 1,800 reported incidents in 1996. That's a compounded annual growth rate of nearly 7 percent.

The Mizell study found that the majority of violent aggressive drivers are males 18 to 26, though persons up to age 75 have been involved. Females were identified as the aggressors in only 4 percent of the 10,037 incidents reviewed.

Here's an example of a seemingly mature, middle-aged adult "crossing the line":

On February 20, 1994, in Massachusetts, Donald Graham a **54-year-old** bookkeeper [and church deacon] became embroiled in a heated, on-going traffic dispute with Michael Blodgett, [age] 42. After the motorists antagonized each other for several miles on ... Interstate [95], they both pulled over to an access road and got out of their vehicles. At that point Graham retrieved a powerful crossbow from his trunk and murdered Blodgett with a razor-sharp 20-inch arrow.

Indeed, no one profile fits the aggressive driver, even though:

... as might be expected, the majority of aggressive drivers are relatively young, poorly educated males who have criminal records, past histories of violence, and drug or alcohol problems. Many of these individuals have recently suffered an emotional or professional setback, such as losing a job or a girlfriend, going through a divorce, or having suffered an injury or an accident. It is not unusual for friends and relatives to describe these individuals as "odd," "disenfranchised," or "a loner."

But hundreds of aggressive drivers -- motorists who have snapped and committed incredible violence -- are successful men and women with no known histories of crime, violence, or alcohol and drug abuse. When the media interview the friends and neighbors of these individuals, they hear that "he is the nicest man," "a wonderful father," or "he must have been provoked."

Violent traffic disputes are rarely the result of a single incident, such as a stolen parking space or being cut off in traffic by another driver. Rather, they seem to be the result of personal attitudes and the accumulation of stress in the motorist's life.

Whatever the cause, "Motorists involved in fender-bender collisions and silly traffic disputes are increasingly being shot, stabbed, beaten and run over for inane reasons." Mizell analyzed the so-called "reasons" given for violent acts of "road rage" and collected the following list. Each of the "reasons" listed below is associated with at least 25 incidents that resulted in death or injury:

"It was an argument over a parking space.."

"He cut me off"

"She wouldn't let me pass"

"He hit my car," so I shot him to death

"Nobody gives me the finger ..."

"He was playing the radio too loud," so I shot him

"The bastard kept honking and honking his horn ..."

"She was driving too slowly"

"He wouldn't turn off his high beams"

"They kept tailgating me"

"I would have never shot him if he hadn't rear-ended me"

"He practically ran me off the road -- what was I supposed to do?" (from a driver accused of murder)

"We was dissed" (from a teenager charged with murdering a passenger in another vehicle)

As Mizell also notes in the report:

The so-called "reasons" for disputes are actually triggers. In most human behavior there is a stated and unstated, or conscious and unconscious, motivation. The motivation for traffic disputes is no exception. While the event that sparks the incident may be trivial, in every case there exists some reservoir of anger, hostility, or frustration that is released by the triggering incident.

When it comes to the weapons used during outbursts of "road rage," our study identified drivers' vehicles and firearms as the principal weapons of choice. In 35 percent of the 10,037 incidents reviewed for our study, a vehicle was used as a weapon. In **37 percent** a firearm was used. This high rate of use of firearms is especially alarming given the proliferation of "concealed carry" gun permit laws in this country. A motorist may have a legal handgun near at hand, never intending to use it for anything except self-defense. Yet a provoking incident occurs, and there the gun is, available for use -- and, in a moment of madness, it gets used. Indeed, the Mizell report notes that other ostensibly defensive weapons -- pepper sprays and Mace -- have also been used offensively by enraged drivers.

But almost any conceivable kind of weapon can be wielded by violent aggressive drivers -- fists and feet; tire irons and jack handles; baseball bats; knives, bayonets, ice picks and swords; beer and booze bottles; canes; wrenches; hatchets and golf clubs. In just one of many such incidents identified by Mizell, actor Jack Nicholson thought another driver had cut him off and retaliated by stepping out of his car at a red light, grabbing a golf club, and repeatedly striking the windshield and roof of the offending vehicle.

So, what's to be done about all this? How do we turn the "Wild, Wild West" out there on our highways into a more civilized driving environment? Let's start with some personal behavior tips from the Mizell report, as well as other sources.

First, it is important to understand the behaviors that can set-off other drivers:

- \* Don't change lanes without signaling or "cut off" other drivers. If you inadvertently do cut someone off, apologize -- immediately. A February, 1996 survey by Market Opinion Research found that being cut off was the #1 driving irritant.
- \* Don't block the passing lane. Move to the right for any vehicle overtaking you. While this is simple common courtesy, it is unfortunately the law in only 20 states. In 6 other states you must move over where posted. Yet, in the remaining 24 states, it's apparently just fine to stay parked in the left lane even though others want to pass and are stewing because they can't.
- \* Don't tailgate. According to the Mizell report, "Dozens of deadly traffic altercations began when one driver tailgated another."
- \* You are playing Russian Roulette if you raise a middle finger to another driver in the common sign of contempt. "Obscene gestures have gotten people shot, stabbed, or beaten in every state."
- \* Use your horn sparingly. If a stressed out motorist "is on edge," a loud honking noise may "set him off." "Scores of shootings began with a driver honking the horn."
- \* Don't allow your door to strike an adjacent parked vehicle. "Dings" can absolutely enrage some people [speaking personally, here].
- \* Don't use your high beams to "punish" other drivers.
- \* Don't allow your car phone to distract you. Mizell's data "... clearly show that aggressive drivers hate fender-benders with motorists who were talking on the telephone."
- \* If you have an anti-theft alarm, know how to turn it off quickly. People have been shot for this and other offenses to the ear.
- \* Finally, and probably most importantly, **avoid eye contact with an angry aggressive driver; keep it impersonal**. What may start as an impersonal encounter between two 3,000-pound metal boxes on wheels can quickly become a personal duel between two angry individuals once eye contact is made. **Give the angry "Road Warrior" wide berth. If he escalates the dispute, get out of there!** He's not behaving rationally and may be truly dangerous, so respond as you would to someone who was mentally deranged or highly intoxicated. Back off and seek help, such as at a police station, if you know where to find one quickly.
- \* Second, there are also many things drivers can do to reduce the likelihood that they themselves will "snap" and resort to "road rage" against another driver:
- \* Improve your driving environment. Listen to soothing music or a book on tape.

Practice relaxation techniques, such as diaphragmatic breathing. Adjust climate controls in your car to a comfortable level.

\* Accept the fact that you are bound to meet a "Road Warrior" someday. That way you may be less affronted when it happens and more mentally prepared to deal with the situation.

\* Learn how to manage your own anger. Anger management programs have been shown to reduce heart attack rates and are being adapted into courses for "hot-headed" drivers. The AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety recently pilot-tested two such courses in conjunction with John A. Larson, M.D., F.A.P.A., with the Institute of Stress Medicine, Norwalk, Connecticut, derived from Dr. Larson's 1996 book Steering Clear of Highway Madness. Others are active in this field, as well.

\* Lastly, **try to put yourself in the other driver's shoes. There may be a good reason he is driving the way he is.** Maybe he is a doctor or a volunteer fireman on the way to an emergency. In most cases you haven't the faintest idea why he is behaving as is, so let it go; play it down; and stay cool. **It's his problem, not yours.**

While public information about the dangers of "road rage" and educational tips on how to deal with it are important, ultimately it will take strong law enforcement to reduce this problem. The federal judge in the Narkey Terry case in Virginia sent a strong message to aggressive drivers that their criminal behavior won't be tolerated by imposing a sentence far in excess of the sentencing guidelines for Terry's crime, and that's a great step in the right direction. Similarly, state police agencies in Maryland, New Jersey and Virginia have campaigns underway to crack down on aggressive drivers. Troopers are taking the problem seriously and are urging the public to help by reporting aggressive drivers by calling #77 on their cellular phones. State police officials report to us that these campaigns are generating lots of calls. (For more information contact Captain Greg Shipley, Maryland State Police, 410/653-4343.)

The #77 concept is a good one, especially if police dispatchers take the calls seriously and try to alert patrolling officers to especially notorious offenders. It avoids tying up 911 numbers, yet gives the public an immediate way to contact law enforcement authorities. We hope to see the #77 or similar approaches adopted nationwide and then actively promoted through road signs and Public Service Announcements, as has been done in Maryland. A tough law enforcement posture will be critical to the success of any anti-aggressive-driving campaign.

Those 24 states that don't already have some kind of "drive right, pass left" laws also need a wake-up call. The absence of such statutes is an open invitation not only to rude behavior but also to tragedy on the road.

I'd like to end where this testimony began, with one final discussion of the scope

of the aggressive driving problem. It was noted earlier that the violent incidents cited in the Mizell study are but a microcosm of the aggressive driving problem. But think about the problem behaviors described in the report and how really common they are. Think about how often you've encountered other aggressive drivers. Think about how often you've driven aggressively yourself.

Aggressive driving doesn't have to end in mayhem for it to be a legitimate public policy concern. The April, 1996 poll by AAA Potomac which helped prompt our study indicated that aggressive driving was the #1 traffic safety concern -- cited by 40% of the respondents. In a follow-on poll released in May of this year, aggressive driving was still the #1 concern -- this time of 44% of those polled. It's time to get serious about dealing with this growing traffic safety problem.

Thank you.

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