

\$29 and your voice back.

by Brock Yates (Car And Driver, August 1993. Used with permission.)

As an advocacy group, we motorists of America have exhibited political clout roughly akin to the Flat Earth Society and the Charles Manson Fan Club. Despite our colossal numbers, we silently ply the highways as the cops bilk us with speeding tickets, the insurance flimflammers plunder our wallets, the pols bury us in regulations and let the roads crumble into tank traps, and assorted knaves and mountebanks con us with everything from magic motor elixirs to new cars apparently given away free.

Aside from the American Automobile Association--which is generally preoccupied selling TripTiks, insurance plans, traveler's checks, and Caribbean vacations--plus a few lobbying groups funded by concrete manufacturers, road contractors, junk dealers, insurance cartels, and hustle-buck lawyers, the nation's capital is nearly devoid of anyone who even obliquely speaks for us. Even truckers and the motorcycle riders who hate helmets have been more effective--and considerably more strident--in advancing their causes, especially when their relatively minuscule numbers are considered.

Our only voice in the wilderness is Jim Baxter's National Motorists Association, which was initially formed in 1982 as the Citizens for Rational Traffic Laws to do battle with the idiotic double-nickel. With its name change in 1989, it expanded to espouse all aspects of sensible and responsible motoring. Still, the NMA's major thrust remains getting the speed-enforcement hacks off our backs. Considerable progress has been made, even within the eight ossified eastern states where 55 mph remains in universal effect. Thanks to unpaid, enthusiast activists like New Jersey's Steve Carrellas and New York's Andy Gregory and Casey Raskob III, the legislatures in both those states have generated strong new advocates for bumping the speed limit on such de facto 70-mph roadways as the New York Thruway and the New Jersey Turnpike--both of which now have 85th-percentile speeds of nearly 70 mph.

In April, the NMA organized its first national "civil-obedience day," wherein members took to various Interstates with turgid speed limits (example: L.A.'s vast freeway network, where 55--at least in the fevered brains of a few bureaucrats--is still imposed as law). The strategy was to chug along, maintaining Boy Scout concurrence with speed, vehicle intervals, signaling, etc., while announcing the mission to other motorists and the media. The conspirators hoped to demonstrate that compliance with the 55-mph speed limit is a patent absurdity in normal driving conditions.

Gregory organized a pair of drives along the New York State Thruway, east and west of the state capital at Albany. He and fellow NMA member Mike Grakowsky and about 60 other drivers took to the fabled old toll road on a busy Sunday. The media had been alerted, as had the state police, and the two little convoys took off, driving like perfect little safetyniks, while waving signs at passing motorists. The messages warned "Pass our car and break an unreal law!" or asked "Don't like 55? Help us repeal it!"

"The police were fine," said Gregory. "They ran along with us for a while, then left. But not before they nailed one really pissed-off guy who tried to pass us on the right shoulder. But overall, the public was pretty sympathetic. We got lots of high signs, thumbs-up, and horn honkings of support. Yeah, and a few third fingers, too."

Gregory's press coverage was about what one would expect. Some television stations treated the demonstration more as a novelty than a serious protest. A few editorials supported the overall intent to raise the speed limit, while some press fogies predictably supported the double-nickel. (Their tiresome cant: "If the limit is raised to 65, the public will drive 75," which is patent nonsense.) "Overall I think we made our point, but it was a hard, long ride, trying to drive that slowly," Gregory mused when it was

over.

His point was obvious to anyone who would listen. According to New York State Department of Transportation, in 1991-92, 94 percent of the driving public exceeded the speed limit on its rural Interstates, and the 85th-percentile speed was 69.3 mph! [*Update from NMA*: For the period of Sept 30, 1993 to Oct 1, 1994, 96% exceeded 55.]

One can only imagine the uproar among the political elite if such a percentage of the population chose not to pay taxes, formed nutty religious cults, smoked dope in public, or dumped their trash in the streets. In the case of motorists, perhaps the nation's ultimate silent majority, the pols are powerless as the people vote with their right feet.

That is not enough, says Baxter, who honchoed the civil-obedience demonstration. An activist by nature, with growing clout in the corridors of government, Baxter views the 55-mph protest as only the beginning. "We had 35 runs like those in New York and New Jersey across the country--five in California alone," he says. "Overall, we received positive media coverage. We tried to make the point in Washington that on the same day the Gay Rights protest was going on, there were other issues at home that were also important to the general public on a daily basis."

Baxter's next major thrust is the adoption of a national law he calls the "Fair Speed Limit Act," which would give states the right to adjust their limits up or down according to established 85th-percentile speeds. Arbitrary 55/65 limits would give way to speeds determined by the universal common sense of the driving public. (It is acknowledged that 85 percent of all drivers operate at a safe, rational speed regardless of the posted limits and the level of enforcement.) The bill, says Baxter, has some bipartisan support, but he doesn't foresee passage unless the current Democratic leadership can be convinced that speed limits shouldn't be relegated to the outer fringes of the federal agenda.

If it were not for the NMA and RADAR (Radio Association Defending Airwave Rights), an advocacy group formed by the radar-detector industry, serious drivers would have no representation whatsoever at the national level. Both groups stay atop the burgeoning stacks of anti-driving legislation that piles up in Washington and in the 50 statehouses each year. They are tough, no-nonsense organizations and deserve our support. An NMA membership is \$29 a year, which includes a spicy bimonthly newsletter. You can cut the deal over the phone: 800-882-2785.

What price freedom?

Taken from the [NMA Homepage](#).