

POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

credibility by becoming involved in speculative areas not subject to strict cost-benefit analysis and that emphasis on the "timeliness" of its studies will result in excessive haste and errors. Congressional critics, including House Appropriations Committee Chairman George Mahon (D-Tex.) fear that involvement in program evaluation will drag the GAO into political battles and impair its independence and judgement.

Since 1970, Congress has refused to grant the GAO new authority (e.g., subpoena power and access to the courts) and has created other institutions (Congressional Budget Office, Office of Technology Assessment) to provide independent information. Since many GAO proposals for legislative or administrative action are never followed up, Rourke concludes that "Congress would be wiser to act more vigorously on these recommendations than to assign the organization more tasks."

*Speed Kills,
but Time is Money*

"Assessing the National 55 m.p.h. Speed Limit" by Charles T. Clotfelter and John C. Hahn, in *Policy Sciences* (June 1978), Elsevier Scientific Publishing Co., Box 211, Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

In response to the October 1973 Arab oil embargo and higher oil prices, Congress established a 55-mile-per-hour nationwide speed limit on January 2, 1974. The law resulted in a dramatic decrease in average highway driving speeds and brought many protests, especially from independent truckers, who felt the economic impact of spending more time on the highway.

Reduced highway speeds entail certain penalties, say Clotfelter and Hahn, economists at the University of Maryland. They estimate the cost of added driving time, and of compliance and enforcement, at somewhere between \$2.89 and \$3.96 billion annually (based on 1974 figures). The value of the benefits in terms of gasoline saved (between 3.39 and 3.50 billion gallons in 1974) and reduced traffic fatalities, injuries, and property damage amount to between \$4.4 and \$5.2 billion. (Fatalities fell from 50,087 in 1973 to 46,049 in 1974, a decrease of 16.4 percent.)

Thus, by their "rough" calculations, the authors contend, the benefits clearly outweigh the economic costs. However, setting a national speed limit of 55 m.p.h. is not necessarily the best way to achieve fuel conservation and highway safety, and alternative policies might also "eliminate the present inequity of penalizing, in terms of time costs, drivers of efficient compacts and gas guzzlers alike."

Several alternative—or complementary—proposals have been made by the Carter administration and rejected by Congress. These include raising the tax on gasoline and taxing automobiles on the basis of their rated fuel consumption. Mandatory seat belt laws (as in Australia, France, and Canada) or mandatory air bags in new cars could help reduce highway fatalities. Such moves, the authors conclude, would entail economic burdens, but these might be well below the present costs imposed by the new speed limit.