

I Can't Drive 55

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When you drive on just about any local roads or Interstates in the United States, you will see a speed limit sign. If you think about it, you can't drive more than a few miles in any direction anywhere and not come across a speed limit sign. They are actually so common that they almost become invisible to us. Think about it for a second—where is the closest speed limit sign to your house, one that you have probably passed hundreds or thousands of times? You may not even easily remember. But they are there. All around us.

The actual first speed limits go all the way back to the late 1800s in the UK where speed limits were set at a very savory 10 miles-per-hour on open roads, four mph in rural areas, and two mph in towns. But you need to keep in mind that this was not for automobiles. Top speeds were based on a horse being ridden furiously.

Moving forward about 100 years and into our recent history, many people today don't realize there was a time when the speed limit in the USA was actually reduced and mandated on a national level to 55 mph. All of this happened because, in October of 1973, there was an oil crisis caused by an oil embargo from the 12 OPEC members who reduced or eliminated oil shipments to the United States as a response to the role and support of Israel in the 1973 Yom Kippur War and the loss of the Arab coalition. So for the first time, gasoline prices spiked upward (they quadrupled over six months) and gasoline shortages were happening all over the country in the fall and winter of that year and going into early 1974.



In response to these developments, Congress enacted the National Maximum Speed Limit Law in January of 1974. The idea was that a 55 mph speed limit would conserve fuel for both the country and its drivers to cut back our dependency on foreign-supplied oil. Whether or not this is actually the case and what really happened is debatable, but many people argued that this did little to make a difference. Congress also created the Strategic Petroleum Reserve to supply 90 days of oil in case another crisis or embargo were ever to happen



again. Not stopping there, in 1974 and 1975, President Richard Nixon mandated a year-round Daylight Savings Time to try and help with reduced energy consumption. There were certainly a lot of changes that affected every person in the United States at the time.

The federal government told the individual states that it was completely voluntary to cooperate, but with one condition. If a state did not cooperate, all federal funding for Interstates in that state would be cut. So it was "voluntary" but with some major conditions. But despite this, any states that did not agree with the 55 mph speed limit simply posted the new signs and turned a blind eye by not enforcing the speed limit in return.

The 55 mph speed limit lasted for about 14 years, until 1988, when it was finally raised to 65 mph on a national level. Then in 1995 the law was totally repealed to put the speed limit restrictions back into the hands of each state with no federal intervention or interference.

Overall, you have to wonder about the effects of speed limits on highways at all—not just maximum but also minimum speeds. I think we can all agree that most people can drive in such a way that is prudent and wise for the conditions around us. But there are always those few who don't seem to understand what is too fast or too slow and, because of that, we will always have speed limits. It's just what comes with today's world, especially for the cars we drive that can easily double the posted speed limits on highways.

