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OP-ED COMMENTARY

Death by any other name

By Stephen C. Owings

It's a frightening statistic, one you probably won't want to hear. The number of people killed in highway crashes in this country each year – more than 42,000 – would fill more than 200 average-sized commercial airliners. The death rate on our highways is equal to more than 16 airliner crashes a month. Envision that for a moment and let it sink in: 16 airliner crashes a month.

And yet, why don't we as a nation place as much emphasis on traffic safety as we do on air safety? Surely, violent death one way is not more acceptable to us than violent death another way. With almost 6 million traffic crashes in America each year, some say an argument could be made that we are just becoming numb to it all. For instance, the next time you read in the newspaper or hear a radio or television broadcast about a fatal highway crash, take note that the story will usually lead with the facts about the hours-long traffic snarl and secondarily mention the fatalities. Quoted in the publication *HealthDay*, Dr. Linda Degutis, president of the American Public Health Association, said most people don't actually view highway deaths as preventable.

For policymakers, the first step in solving a significant national problem like this figuring out where the "leverage" is. In other words, we must identify ways to improve the situation as much as possible by changing as little as possible. U.S. Department of Transportation statistics reveal that heavy trucks (over 26,000 pounds) make up only one percent of all registered vehicles, and yet are involved in approximately 20 percent of all multi-vehicle fatal crashes. If we can do something to make these relatively few vehicles involved in so many fatal crashes safer, that is applying genuine leverage to this national dilemma, and we could start seeing results immediately.

Whole fleets of airliners have been grounded lately because of lax record - keeping concerning metal fatigue, which has killed no one. Yet we still don't have a national regulation requiring the setting of speed governors on heavy trucks (these speed limiting devices have been standard equipment on tractors in the U.S. since the early 1990's.) Such heavy trucks are involved in wrecks causing some 5,000 deaths and over 100,000 injuries annually.

Our own son, Cullum, was killed in 2002 when his car, stopped in an interstate traffic jam, was crushed from behind by a speeding tractor-trailer on cruise control. The next year, we founded Road Safe America, and after years of work in cooperation with some of the nation's leading trucking firms, numerous safety advocates and the American Trucking Association, we believe we are finally close to achieving our goal of having speed governors set at 68 mph or slower on the heaviest of trucks.

Can you imagine the national outcry for airline safety reform – and for heads to roll at the Federal Aviation Administration – if we were experiencing one fatal airline crash each month in which 200 people died? But consider this: More than twice that many die each month in the U.S. in crashes involving big trucks.

While the Congress, U.S. Department of Transportation and some in the Bush Administration have generally been supportive of Road Safe America's goal of saving lives on America's highways, we are concerned that the McCain, Clinton and Obama campaigns have been silent on this issue. Perhaps their failure to offer solutions to the leading cause of violent death in this nation is just an oversight, what with problems like immigration reform, global warming and gun control requiring so much of their attention.

Already, speed limiting governors are required to be set well below 68 mph on heavy trucks in the European Union, Japan, Australia and parts of Canada.

Pardon my impatience, please. But in the years we have been trying to have speed governor settings required on all big trucks to slow them down and save lives, more meaningful action could have been taken to reduce the cost, sorrow, death and suffering resulting from traffic crashes.

Please contact the presidential candidates and your representatives in Congress and ask them to demand that the Secretary of Transportation, Mary Peters, take action on this common -sense rule that will not only save countless lives and injuries, but will

also save billions of gallons of fuel, making the trucking industry and the environment healthier as well.

If airliners were going down, action would have been taken a long time ago.

(Owings and his wife, Susan, are co-founders of Road Safe America, based in Atlanta. For more information, please visit www.roadsafeamerica.org.)