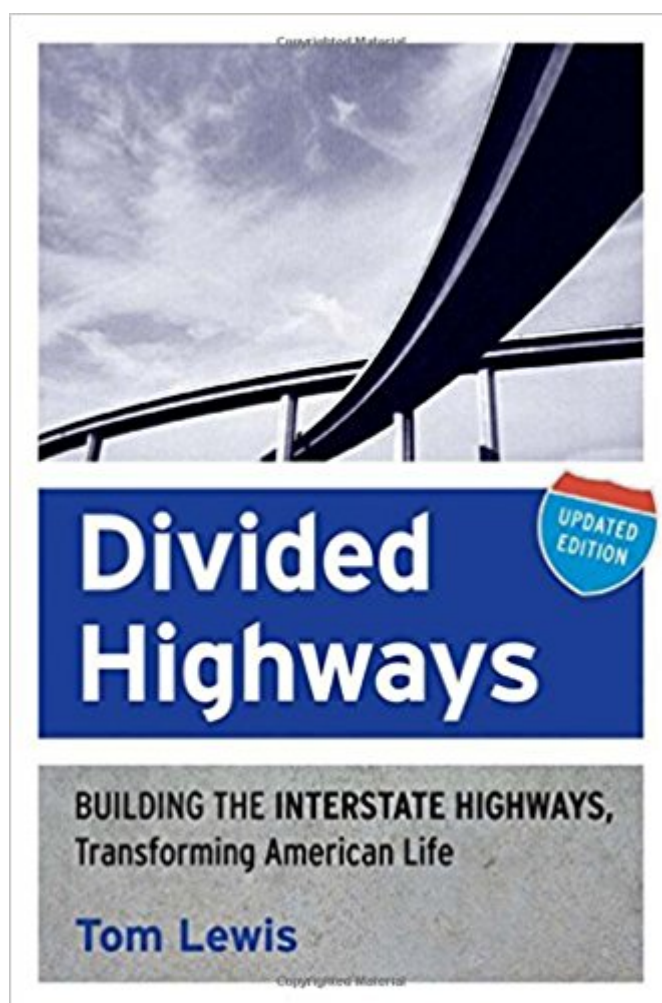


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# Divided Highways: Building The Interstate Highways, Transforming American Life



## Synopsis

In *Divided Highways*, Tom Lewis offers an encompassing account of highway development in the United States. In the early twentieth century Congress created the Bureau of Public Roads to improve roads and the lives of rural Americans. The Bureau was the forerunner of the Interstate Highway System of 1956, which promoted a technocratic approach to modern road building sometimes at the expense of individual lives, regional characteristics, and the landscape. With thoughtful analysis and engaging prose Lewis charts the development of the Interstate system, including the demographic and economic pressures that influenced its planning and construction and the disputes that pitted individuals and local communities against engineers and federal administrators. This is a story of America's hopes for its future life and the realities of its present condition. It is an engaging history of the people and policies that profoundly transformed the American landscape and the daily lives of Americans. In this updated edition of *Divided Highways*, Lewis brings his story of the Interstate system up to date, concluding with Boston's troubled and yet triumphant Big Dig project, the growing antipathy for big federal infrastructure projects, and the uncertain economics of highway projects both present and future.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Anyone who has ever driven on a U.S. interstate highway or eaten at an exit-ramp McDonald's will come away from this book with a better understanding of what makes modern America what it is." —Chicago Tribune "A fascinating work . . . with a subject central to contemporary life but to

which few, if any, have devoted so much thoughtful analysis and good humor." •Minneapolis Star-Tribune "Divided Highways is the best and most important book yet published about how asphalt and concrete have changed the United States. Quite simply, the Interstate Highway System is the longest and largest engineered structure in the history of the world, and it has enormously influenced every aspect of American life. Tom Lewis is an engaging prose stylist with a gift for the telling anecdote and appropriate example." •Kenneth T. Jackson, Harvard Design Magazine "Lewis provides a comprehensive and balanced examination of America's century-long infatuation with the automobile and the insatiable demands for more and better road systems. He has written a sprightly and richly documented book on a vital subject." •Richard O. Davies, Journal of American History "This brightly written history of the U.S. federal highway program is like the annual report of a successful company that has had grim second thoughts. The first half recounts progress made, while the second suggests that the good news is not quite what it seems." •Publishers Weekly "Lewis describes in a convincing, lively, and well-documented narrative the evolution of America's roadway system from one of the world's worst road networks to its best." •John Pucher, Journal of the American Planning Association "Tom Lewis is a very talented and engaging writer, and the tale he tells—the vision for the Interstates, Congressional battles, construction, and the impact of new highways on American life—is important to understanding the shape of the contemporary American landscape." •David Schuyler, Arthur and Katherine Shadik Professor of the Humanities and American Studies at Franklin & Marshall College, author of Sanctified Landscape: Writers, Artists, and the Hudson River Valley, 1820–1909

Tom Lewis is Professor of English at Skidmore College. He is the author of *Empire of the Air: The Men Who Made Radio* and *The Hudson: A History*, as well as researcher, writer, or producer for documentary films including *Brooklyn Bridge*, *The Shakers*, and *Empire of the Air* (all directed by Ken Burns) and *Divided Highways* (directed by Larry Hott and Diane Garey).

As a frequent traveler of them, I've always been fascinated by the American interstate highway system and its history: the sheer magnitude of the accomplishment to build them in the first place and the fascinating stories that accompany their construction. So it was with great interest that I purchased *Divided Highways* and my expectations were rather high. But, for me, the book missed the mark somewhat. At times, I wondered about the theme of the book and tried to interpret the message it was sending. On one hand, a great amount of detail is given regarding the social/political ramifications of building the highways and changing consciousness of the 60s which

thereafter changed how the interstate system was designed and built. But, then, at the same time, the book recounted stories of the engineers and the earliest developers of the interstate highway idea, providing a neat little history of how the interstate system "came to be." Oftentimes, it appeared that the author was critical of the "system," but, at times was critical of those who opposed it. It wasn't that the stories recounted in the book weren't interesting (they were), it's just I missed the theme here. In the end, I gave the book 4 stars because while it was very interesting and engaging, it missed the mark with respect to my expectations...but not necessarily in a bad way. I would recommend the book to anyone looking to gain a better understanding of our highway system and the challenges it faced, and still faces today, but nonetheless look somewhere else if you are expecting a "tell all" history of the highway system.

For those of you with an interest in highways and America's road development, this is the book. Well written and includes many details about our interstate highway system and how it evolved.

I have become a real fan of historical efforts that deal with an individual event or series of events that strongly concentrate on one subject. This is one of those and frankly makes me think my appreciation of this sort of effort is right on. Lewis dissects and presents the whole story (and a bit more) of not only the national highway efforts of the 50s, 60s, and 70's but has gathered a whole slew of information about the builders of the system, the designers of the system and the politicians involved in it. Not only has he gathered the information but he has put into one good tale *Divided Highways: Building the Interstate Highways, Transforming American Life* the story of how our interstate system got to be the way it is. He writes exceptionally well, researchs fully and just adds a lot of good information to anyone who chooses to pick up this book. I highly recommend it to anyone who has not only a curiosity about the subject but might be interested in the topic as it fits into the total historical stream of the later 20th century. Enough of these books about these sort of topics and one need not take a survey course ever, just enjoy great reading and writing about any number of topics of a certain era. This is an A.

Too bad I only read one book every couple of weeks. Lewis's "Divided History" is somewhere in between a conventional history of the building of the interstate highway's in the United States and a journalistic account of the building of the interstate highway's in the United States. Either way you want to slice it- that's nearly three hundred pages on the building of interstate highway's in the United States. It's a boring book- not just because the subject matter itself, but also because Mr.

Lewis has apparently never been west of Denver. Aside from a brief two page write up on the 15 running through Vegas, you would think that the "Interstate Highway System" extends from the Northeast to the Midwest and stops. I pride myself on not needing a highway to get to or from work, but take perverse pride in living less than two hundred feet from Interstate 5. The interstate system and southern California material culture are inextricably intertwined, though the move to the "freeway" system in Southern California predated the national, federally funded "interstate" system by a couple of decades. Mostly, I learned from this book that once it got rolling, the Interstate highway project was as formidable a behemoth as the "new deal" ever produced. Ironically the interstate project (and by "interstate highway project" I am referring to the massive federal spending program that was literally entirely responsible for the construction of the interstates everywhere in the United States) was initiated not by Franklin Roosevelt, but by Dwight Eisenhower, who had a sick bed conversion to the cause whilst recuperating from a little light surgery. Along the way, the Interstate highway project gave sustenance to a generation of civil engineers and bureaucrats (or "technocrats" as Lewis enjoys calling them). There is little to commend this book to the everyday reader- unless that everyday reader is as infatuated with the interstate highway system

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