

MEMORANDUM

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Americans will be hearing the word “infrastructure” more and more as Congress as well as state legislatures and city councils wrestle throughout 2011 with the problem of crumbling public works. Infrastructure, writes William B. Dickinson in this communication, can be described “as the underlying foundation on which great civilizations are built.” The Roman Empire flourished for centuries on the framework of paved roads, cleverly designed aqueducts, and other engineering marvels.

“The United States itself grew to greatness,” Dickinson writes, “by building a national highway system, transcontinental railroads, massive dams generating electricity, and breathtaking bridges connecting people and commerce. But contemporary America has little taste for ‘public works’ when they compete with private wants. Our consumer society is built on the here and now.” Dickinson, a former Washington editor and journalism professor, cites a report from the American Society of Civil Engineers that it will cost \$2.2 trillion over a five-year period to raise the U.S. infrastructure grade from poor to acceptable.

Meantime, many nations look to the future by developing critical infrastructure. China plans to spend \$295 billion in the next decade to build a high-speed rail network, totaling 10,000 miles, that will connect its major cities. Contrast this with the decision by the newly elected governors of Ohio and Wisconsin to forgo \$1.2 billion in stimulus money for passenger-rail projects in their states. New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie recently stopped work on a new federally assisted commuter-train tunnel under the Hudson River into Manhattan, saying “I can’t put taxpayers on a never-ending hook.”

Dickinson warns that population growth in this country as well as around the world will put new strains on roads, airports, bridges, and water and sanitation systems. “Cities, where most of the world’s people now live, can’t prosper in this crowded future unless they are efficient,” he concludes. “Today, our crumbling infrastructure reflects the ascendancy of private desires over the common good.”

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