

## **America's Infrastructure Challenge**

Nearing retirement as I am, I have been reflecting on our industry. And I've been feeling proud to be a part of it.

We are very fortunate to have pursued careers in a field where we can do well by doing good. We are doing good. We are designing and building roads and bridges, transit systems and airports, schools and hospitals and courthouses, office buildings and hotels, water and wastewater treatment systems, and electric generating stations to power our economy. You could say we are Masters of Infrastructure. We may not make as much money as Masters of the Universe do – those investment bankers that Tom Wolfe's wrote about in the Bonfire of the Vanities, but I think we create a lot more value.

We are also very lucky to have been born Americans who came of age in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. When historians look back on the second millennium, they may well call the 20<sup>th</sup> century, America's century. But whose century will be the 21<sup>st</sup>? How many of you think it will also be called America's century?

But we Americans are preparing for the 21<sup>st</sup> century : Story of Colleen's children.

A few days ago we had the occasion for celebrating having taken out Osama Ben Laden, and we needed something to celebrate. This moment in America seems to be a troubling and deeply disquieting time. Here we are, coming out of a recession, but there is no rejoicing.

From David Brooks column on 4/11/11

"... Americans have lost faith in the credibility of their political system, which is the one resource the entire regime is predicated upon. This loss of faith has contributed to a complex but dark national mood. The country is anxious, pessimistic, ashamed, helpless and defensive.

The share of Americans who say they trust government to do the right thing most of the time is scuttling along at historic lows. Approval of Congress and most other institutions has slid. Seventy percent of Americans think the country is on

the wrong track, [according to The New York Times/CBS News poll](#). Nearly two-thirds believe the nation is in decline, according to a variety of surveys.”

Ever fly out of the glistening new airports in Beijing or Bangkok back to LAX? Or fly out of Cairo’s beautiful international terminal, as I did 18 months ago, and arrive at JFK. In arriving back in the U.S., I have felt some uneasiness and have wondered just which country is the third world nation?

Tom Friedman apparently had a similar thought travelling though LAX. Column 3/09:

“I was traveling via Los Angeles International Airport — LAX — last week. Walking through its faded, cramped domestic terminal, I got the feeling of a place that once thought of itself as modern but has had one too many face-lifts and simply can’t hide the wrinkles anymore. In some ways, LAX is us. We are the United States of Deferred Maintenance. China is the People’s Republic of Deferred Gratification. They save, invest and build. We spend, borrow and patch.”

In this same column, Tom also cited a study conducted by the Info Tech & Innovation Foundation. In 2009 the Foundation did an evaluation of international competitiveness among 40 countries and regions based on quantitative data relating to:

- Human capital,
- Innovation capacity,
- Entrepreneurship,
- Information technology (IT) infrastructure,
- Economic policy,
- Economic performance

In current standings, U.S. ranked sixth among this group of 40 — not great, but not bad. Yet that same study also measured the rate of change over the last decade — in effect, how much countries had done to make themselves more innovative for the future. On this scale, the U.S. ranked dead last out of the same 40. Who do you suppose was ranked number one? (China)

As Masters of Infrastructure, how does that make us feel? We have an infrastructure challenge in this country. When we talk of the infrastructure challenge, we are not just talking about physical infrastructure but also intangible infrastructure, as well – most importantly, education.

It feels to me that we are at a crossroads. In Congress in the coming weeks, and in statehouses and city council chambers across this nation, we are being forced to make some fundamental choices – choices between raising more revenue and cutting spending and choices of where and how to cut spending. To some extent, these choices are being driven by the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression. Some would argue that making these tough decisions are long overdue. Many of these decisions will affect how we invest for the future, and not just how we invest public funds, but also how we strengthen the environment for private investment. These decisions, collectively, may well determine the trajectory of U.S. competitiveness in the global market in ways that affect, if not our children's future, then certainly our grandchildren's future.

Most of us recognize that we have an infrastructure challenge. Undoubtedly, we will disagree over the measures necessary to address it. But I'd like to submit for your consideration that, as Masters of Infrastructure, we have a special responsibility to make sure that we as a nation get it right. I submit that we have this responsibility both as citizens and as business leaders.

I would respectfully ask you to consider the following questions:

- Is my firm doing all that it should, both directly and through the industry associations in which we participate, to ensure that our voice is heard on Capitol Hill, in key statehouses, and in key city council chambers across our nation?
- All of our firms support charitable causes. Are we supporting those causes that are appropriate to our role as Masters of Infrastructure -- that are closely aligned with our firm's stated mission?
- And are we giving enough in time and money to those causes?

As Americans we are an innately optimistic people, with a “can-do” attitude. I’d like to believe that we will meet this infrastructure challenge the way we have arisen to the occasion so many times before. But one thing is for sure, the status quo is not the answer.