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**November 17, 2009**

**Op-Ed Columnist**

## **What the Future May Hold**

By **BOB HERBERT**

What will the United States be like in 20 years when today's toddlers are in college or trying to land that first job or maybe thinking about starting a family?

The answer will depend to a great extent on decisions we make now about the American infrastructure.

This came to mind as I was reading about yet another closure of the problem-plagued San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge, which is more than 70 years old. In 20 years, will today's toddlers be traveling on bridges and roads that are in even worse shape than today's? Will they endure mammoth traffic jams that start earlier and end later? Will their water supplies be clean and safe? Will the promise of clean energy visionaries be realized, or will we still be fouling the environment with carbon filth to the benefit of traditional energy conglomerates and foreign regimes that in many cases wish us anything but good?

The answers to these and many other related questions will depend to a great extent on decisions we make now (even in the midst of very tough economic times) about the American infrastructure. We're trundling along in the infrastructure equivalent of a jalopy, with bridges rotting and falling down, while other nations, our competitors in the global economy, are building efficient, high-speed, high-performance infrastructure platforms to power their 21st-

century economies.

We used to be so much smarter about this stuff. A recent publication from the Metropolitan Policy Program at the Brookings Institution reminds us that:

“Since the beginning of our republic, transportation and infrastructure have played a central role in advancing the American economy — from the canals of upstate New York to the railroads that linked the heartland to industrial centers and finally the interstate highway system that ultimately connected all regions of the nation.

“In each of those periods, there was a sharp focus on how infrastructure investments could be used as catalysts for economic expansion and evolution.”

Policy makers all but gave up on that kind of thinking years ago. America’s infrastructure, once the finest in the world, has been neglected for decades, and it shows. Felix Rohatyn’s book on the subject, “Bold Endeavors,” opens with: “The nation is falling apart — literally.”

It’s almost as if we no longer understand the crucial links between infrastructure and the health of the American economy, the state of the environment and the viability of the nation as a whole. We’ve become stupid about this.

Consider transportation. As Brookings tells us, “Other nations around the globe have continued to act on the calculus that state-of-the-art transportation infrastructure — the connective tissue of a nation — is critical to moving goods, ideas and workers quickly and efficiently. In the United States, however, we seem to have forgotten.”

Much of the nation’s rail infrastructure is approaching the tail end of its useful life. If you’ve

flown anywhere recently, you know what a nightmare that can be.

To the extent that we have any infrastructure policy at all, it is badly disjointed, dysfunctional, often doing more harm than good as it serves the interests of politicians who are crazy for pork rather than the real needs of the American public.

Brookings' studies of American infrastructure policy have been extensive, and a conversation last week with one of its executives, Bruce Katz, offered a glimpse of the kind of economic environment today's toddlers could face in a couple of decades if we started getting things right now.

“We'll very likely have a low-carbon-based economy,” said Mr. Katz, “which will require enormous innovation with regard to energy and the infrastructure. We'll be much more export-oriented than we are today, less consumption-focused.” And as a nation, he said, we should have a better understanding of the importance of the metropolitan areas that are the major drivers of the U.S. economy, and how essential it is to give them the coordinated national support that they need on infrastructure and other forms of development.

You can't thrive as a nation while New Orleans is drowning, and Detroit is being beaten into oblivion decade after decade, and a bridge in Minneapolis is collapsing into the Mississippi River, and cities in upstate New York and the Rust Belt are rotting from lack of employment opportunities, and so on.

Imagine, instead, an America with rebuilt, healthy, dynamic metropolitan areas, and gleaming new port facilities, and networks of high-speed rail, an America with electric vehicles and a smart grid and energy generated by the power of the sun and wind and water and the ocean's waves. Imagine if the children of today's toddlers had access to world-class public schools all

**across the nation and a higher education system that is both first-rate and affordable.**

**Imagine if we set out seriously to do all this.**

**Imagine.**

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