WHAT IT WILL TAKE TO REBUILD AMERICA

BY DAVID VON DREHLE

plus
A BLUEPRINT FOR TODAY
MOONSHOTS FOR TOMORROW
AND A PLAN FOR GETTING IT RIGHT

ILLUSTRATION BY PETER GREENWOOD FOR TIME
When President Trump declared, in his first speech to Congress, “The time has come for a new program of national rebuilding,” the applause was long and loud. This pledge to spend what it takes to fix roads and bridges, rail and broadband, and airports—a staple of his campaign speeches—struck a chord with public opinion. The legacy of past generations that sustained the world’s largest economy is aging and needs repair. Some $34 million Americans still lack access to broadband. The electrical grid can’t keep up with advances in renewable energy. People understand this: a recent poll found that 79% of Americans want the President to increase spending on infrastructure, including 72% of people who say they don’t support Donald Trump.

His commitment was music to the ears of Wall Street and Main Street, and charmed labor as well as management. State and local officials from Hartford to Honolulu had scrambled in the weeks after Trump’s victory to compile wish lists of worthy projects, hoping to catch his eye. “America is suffering from a massive infrastructure deficit—clogged highways and dilapidated roads, bridges, airports, and tunnels,” Trump said in a statement to TIME. “We need members of both parties—partnersing with industry and workers—to join together to repair, rebuild and renew the infrastructure of the United States.”

So if everyone agrees, if the need is great and the will is there, if America’s very quality of life is at stake, as well as safety, jobs and economic competitiveness, one would think that this is where all of Washington has a chance to step up. An embolded President could prove whether his record as a development relevant. Republicans in Congress could practice governing: Democrats could deliver long-promised results. Everyone wins—unless Bismarck’s advice that “Politics is the art of the possible” no longer holds. After the failure by Trump and congressional Republicans to deliver on their pledge to repeal Obamacare, the questions were written across Washington in neon. Does the President actually have a plan, and can he persuade even his own people may argue with him to go along with it? Although Trump often spoke during the campaign of unlocking $1 trillion in infrastructure investments, the pledge may prove as hollow as his promised mastery of the health care muddle. Ten weeks after Trump’s inauguration, key House and Senate leaders say they are not in talks with the White House on a plan. And the reason is that there is no blueprint to discuss one. One of early March did White House economic adviser Gary Cohn convene a meeting to create a framework for spending a trillion dollars in economic activity,” the official said. “Trillions.”

Trump’s staff has identified a few priorities, like broadband and the electrical grid, that require significant federal investment. His $1 trillion plan will include, officials say, between $100 billion and $200 billion of actual taxpayer money for projects like these. But the bulk of Trump’s promise is contained in the theoretical tsunami of money in private hands supposedly waiting for regulatory reform. While nonpartisan experts agree that America’s permitting process is too cumbersome, Trump’s team is an outlier in thinking that faster approvals will have such a startling effect. You might ask: How much of this plan has to do with infrastructure, and how much is part of the war—as White House strategist Steve Bannon calls it—on the “administrative state”? Which in turn undercuts Trump’s invocation of bipartisan cooperation. It comes as he is gunning for deals with road builders, then climate-change policies, charging ahead with his controversial border wall and Twitter-bashing Hillary Clinton. It’s hard to build a $500 billion hand exists to buy the aisle when the middle finger is so prominent. The renegade Republicans who scotch a trillion-dollar infrastructure package by cutting spending, not increase it. And the tax reforms that might free up some money for infrastructure are inside a fortress guarded by fire-breathing special interests.

Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel is one of the local officials who has discussed projects with the Trump White House, including plans to alleviate congestion through one of the world’s busiest transit hubs. A Democrat, he has been known to strike bipartisan deals, but he doesn’t see much hope for this one. “I don’t think the federal government is going to step up, to be honest,” Emanuel says. “I’ve been honest with his Administration. You can’t get from here to there—there’s no fairy dust that’s going to figure this out. You’re going to have to invest in it.”

But with his approval rating in the Gallop poll stinking to an abysmal 35%, Trump may soon find he needs something broadly popular to anchor his policy pivot. Infrastructure is his best and most broadly popular to anchor his policy pivot. Infrastructure is his best and most

The problems are young. Economists around the world have leapfrogged us in building state-of-the-art works, while our infrastructure is showing its age. Trump frames the issue with his characteristic colorful hyperbole. “You come in from Dubai and Quito and you see these incredible—you come in from China, you see these incredible airports,” he says, “we’ve become a third-world country.”

As a younger nation, we built on a heroic scale, creating instantly recognizable monuments to dynamism and energy. Grand Central Terminal. The Chicago L. “The TWA terminal at Kennedy International Airport. The endless ribbon of interstate highways. The Golden Gate Bridge. Sadly, we’ve discovered that building such projects is more glorious than maintaining them, even as we’ve made new projects too difficult to build. Admireable goals, like environmental protection and worker safety, are mummied in red tape. All the while, more and more of our national income has been diverted into other pots: the safety net, the Social Security system, our health care, infrastructure and the costs of the world’s most dominant military.

While America waits for the White House to deliver on its promise that will erupt when it lands in Congress, we should think harder about how much to spend and how to spend it. The best infrastructure investment is to begin to imagine. They are bold bets on tomorrow. Their essence isn’t found in an empty piggy bank, or in the imagination. They are bold bets on tomorrow. Their essence isn’t found in an empty piggy bank, or in the

Robert L. Bird Company

The route of the Post Road or King’s Highway first traveled to deliver mail from NYC to Boston. Eventually stretching from Boston to Charleston, S.C., it was used by George Washington and General Cornwallis in the Revolutionary War.

The U.S. Constitution is ratified, giving Congress the power to establish post offices and post roads, along with the authority to regulate interstate commerce and provide for common defense and welfare.

Congress authorizes the first federally funded road, the National Road. By 1818, mail coaches travel it between Maryland and Wheeling, W.Va., which is on the Ohio River, and by the 1830s it reaches Illinois.

New York City’s horse omnibuses begin service, one of the first mass-transit routes. In 1832 a different, 363 miles link western New York state with the Hudson River to Atlantic Ocean, allowing the movement of heavy loads at a tenth of the cost of going by road.

Chicago’s municipal sewer system was completed in 1840. It was made possible by congressional grants and land rights. Cross-country travel time is greatly reduced—for those who can afford it.

The transcontinental railroad is completed in Promontory, Utah. The railroad was a momentous undertaking that required a drilling and the construction of a town.

The telephone is invented.

Alexander Graham Bell’s first telephone transmission heralds the arrival of a technology that would be ubiquitous a century later, when 90% of U.S. households had a landline.

Lower Manhattan gets the nation’s first electricity company, from Thomas Edison’s lab. The six-jumbo dynamos served about 1 sq. mile, by 1896 alternating current had expanded the range of service.
shouldered undertakings of the past. The best ones must harness efficiency and brainpower, not just concrete and steel. Tomorrow’s version of the Tennessee Valley Authority, which brought light to darkness in the mid-twentieth century, could be powered by sunlight and batteries in the 21st. A cruise of lucrative contracts for infrastructure projects could demand a productivity renaissance in the construction industry. Perhaps the monuments of a new age of infrastructure will be the invisible ones that shape a nation’s ability to do more while consuming less. Which is every bit as mind-boggling.

After the iron rails of the Transcontinental Railroad were laid across trackless prairies and over the daunting Sierra Nevada, it seemed that nothing could stop the habitat of the Pacific Ocean. But now more than half of the treated product disperse in the Pacific Ocean. But now more than half of the treated product is faced with a need to upgrade existing infrastructure. But instead of doubling down on what they already had, they built something completely different.

Can Trump harness that spirit? Groundbreakings and ribbon cuttings have been staples of his existence for four decades. Can a man whose name is synonymous with gold and glitz become a champion of small and smart? America may not need many more interstate flyovers or massive dams. It does need a huge investment in embedded, but invisible, technology to prepare our highways and streets for driverless cars and trucks. Such innovations will allow more vehicles to run on existing roads, reducing the need for new pavement. A modernized air traffic control system would permit existing airports to handle more traffic without the need for more runways. One test will come when the President signs an executive order re-opening infrastructure. Trump’s campaign promises to revitalize coal mining may have won votes for some coal states, but polls show that residents in industrial areas of the country are more likely to support policies that increase efficiency. Trump’s promise to revitalize coal mining may have won votes for some coal states, but polls show that residents in industrial areas of the country are more likely to support policies that increase efficiency.

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**Roads and Bridges**

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<tr>
<th>CURRENT FUNDING</th>
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Department estimates, if the conversion to LED lightbulbs continues at its current pace, demand for electricity will be cut by an amount equal to 44 large power plants 10 years from now. Maybe you don’t think of lightbulbs as infrastructure, but they are.

Ducts and concrete and asphalt and wire may look mundane, but they have revolutionized the where and the how of human life. The world of freeways and jets has a radically different geography from the world of small towns and rural home-steads that it replaced. Electrified life has a culture different from the cultures of lives lit by oil lamps. In the real world, the energy story is suddenly about efficiency. U.S. demand for electricity has gone flat. Few saw it coming. But Energy Department statistics show that total sales of electricity from all sources, measured in gigawatt hours, have been up since 2007. Between 2007—the last year before the economic crash—and 2015, demand actually fell very slightly. In the mid-1990s, the sanitation district was faced with a need to upgrade existing infrastructure. But instead of doubling down on what they already had, they built something completely different.

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