

The New York Times

April 5, 2007

Our Crumbling Foundation

By [BOB HERBERT](#)

Fifty-nine years ago this week — on April 3, 1948 — President Truman signed the legislation establishing the Marshall Plan, which contributed so much to the rebuilding of postwar Europe. Now, more than half a century later, the U.S. can't even rebuild New Orleans.

It doesn't seem able to build much of anything, really. According to the American Society of Civil Engineers, the U.S. infrastructure is in sad shape, and it would take more than a trillion and a half dollars over a five-year period to bring it back to a reasonably adequate condition.

If there's a less sexy story floating around, I can't find it. It certainly can't compete with the Sanjaya Malakar saga, or with the claim by Keith Richards that he snorted his dad's ashes with "a little bit of blow."

But, as we learned with New Orleans, there are consequences to neglecting the infrastructure. Just a little over a year ago, a dam in Hawaii gave way, unleashing a wave 70 feet high and 200 yards wide. It swept away virtually everything in its path, including cars, houses and trees. Seven people drowned.

On the day after Christmas in Portland, Ore., a sinkhole opened up like something from a science fiction movie and swallowed a 25-ton sewer-repair truck. Authorities blamed the sinkhole on the collapse of aging underground pipes.

Blackouts, school buildings in advanced states of disrepair, decrepit highway and railroad bridges — the American infrastructure is growing increasingly old and obsolete. In addition to being an invitation to tragedy, this is a problem that is putting Americans at a disadvantage in the ever more competitive global economy.

Felix Rohatyn, the investment banker who helped save New York City from bankruptcy in the 1970s, has been prominent among those trying to sound the infrastructure alarm. Along with former Senator Warren Rudman, he has been criticizing the government's unwillingness to invest adequately in public transportation systems, water projects, dams, schools, the electrical grid, and so on.

He recently told a House committee that Congress should begin a major effort to rebuild the American infrastructure "before it is too late."

"Since the beginning of the republic," he said, "transportation, infrastructure and education have played a central role in advancing the American economy, whether it was the canals in upstate New York, or the railroads that linked our heartland to our industrial centers; whether it was the opening of education to average Americans by land grant colleges and the G.I. bill, making education basic to American life; or whether it was the interstate highway system that ultimately connected all regions of the nation.

"This did not happen by chance, but was the result of major investments financed by the federal and state governments over the last century and a half. ... We need to make similar investments now."

Politics and ideology are the main reasons that government has turned away from public investment over the past several years. Zealots marching under the banner of small government have been remarkably effective in thwarting efforts to raise taxes or borrow substantial sums for the kind of public investment that has always been essential to a dynamic economy.

That this is counterproductive in a post-20th-century world should be as obvious as the sun rising in the morning. There is a reason why countries like China and India are racing like mad to develop their infrastructure and educational capacity.

"A modern economy needs a modern platform, and that's the infrastructure," Mr. Rohatyn said in an interview. "It has been shown that the productivity of an economy is related to the quality of its infrastructure. For example, if you don't have enough schools to teach your kids, or your kids are taught in schools that have holes in the ceilings, that are dilapidated, they're not going to be as educated and as competitive in a world economy as they need to be."

Mr. Rohatyn and Mr. Rudman are co-chairmen of the Commission on Public Infrastructure at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. They believe that failing to move quickly to address the nation's infrastructure needs — through the establishment of a national trust fund, for example, or a federal capital budget — could lead to long-term disaster.

But words like trust fund and long-term and infrastructure find it very difficult to elbow their way into the nation's consciousness. We may have to wait for another New Orleans before beginning to take this seriously.

David Brooks is on vacation.