
Energy, Infrastructure And Economic Needs Provide Unique National Opportunity

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During the past two months of COVID-19 “lockdown”, the United States has watched 30 million jobs evaporate, incurred an additional \$2 trillion dollars of debt, seen our national debt exceed the GDP, and still not fixed our infrastructure.

In fighting the coronavirus, the availability of cheap, consistent, and abundant energy has allowed us to fight this scourge, but the energy infrastructure overall remains antiquated and its improvement has been stymied by political infighting.

With no guaranty that the virus is being defeated or will not return even harder in the fall and winter, and with perhaps the most pressing needs in our lifetimes to fix our national infrastructure, create jobs, and pay as we do so, an historic opportunity has arisen to do all of that, should we muster the political will to actually do what common sense tells us should be done.

The basic plan would be to massively put people to work to modernize our infrastructure. Call it the “New” New Deal if you want, but there is no part of American infrastructure that remains world class. Large parts of it are approaching quite the opposite. Our roads are full of potholes, our airports are third world-ish, our bridges are downright dangerous, our train system is an embarrassment, and our water and power grids often date back a century or more. Simple concepts like burying our power lines to prevent future power failures (not to mention avoiding or minimizing disastrous fires in places like California) have not been done as in other countries because we have lacked the political will, or dare we say the vision, to do so. With the virus still stalking us and so many people depending on things like the internet and ventilators for information, communication, and sheer survival, those blackouts take on a higher degree of significance, if not danger.

Perhaps most importantly, and controversially, our energy infrastructure remains incomplete and in many respects is even self-defeating. New domestic sources of energy from shale gas in Northeastern Pennsylvania – which in a different day and age would be seen as a God send to the country – cannot even get to places that desperately need them like the New York City area and New England because they are being blocked by environmental politics. As a result, should the pandemic stay with us and even rebound during the winter – of which all medical experts say is possible, if not probable – we literally may not have the energy needed to fight it, and not just in terms of human resolve and willpower. As we have seen with the willingness of everyone to don PPE’s made of fossil fuels and to switch to store-supplied plastic bags to avoid spreading the disease at our groceries, environmental idealism tends to wane when facing the prospect of immediate

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infection, or even possible death. There is no reason to believe the country's attitude would be any different when it comes to heating our homes and meeting electrical needs generally.

What can be done most immediately to help combat the pandemic? To start, the pipelines need to be built to move the gas and oil from domestic sources to markets where the energy is desperately needed. There will be no better time to do it than now, when we are looking at the most massive unemployment since the Great Depression.

To accomplish this, we will need both to sell the plan politically and to pay for it. Fortunately, there may be a path to do both, but it will still be hard. While the phrase "Never fail to take advantage of a crisis" has taken on exceedingly negative connotations recently, the second part of that comment, "for it allows you to think and act differently than you could have before" rings even more true at the present time.

Each political party – and especially the non-affiliated, including the "No New Taxers" and the environmental community – will have to accept the reality that some of their cherished positions must take a back seat to the overall public well-being and safety. In the midst of a true pandemic, anyone refusing to compromise on essential needs for the greater good risks more than eroding political support given the realities of what is at stake. True life and death issues have a way of doing that. Still, it will be a huge hurdle for all of the factions to get together and be willing to compromise on long held positions.

Assuming we can get that far, next we will need to find a way to pay for all of the construction, refurbishing and renovations needed to our infrastructure. Fortunately, there is precedent on this. The Eisenhower Interstate Highway System was paid for largely by the selloff of federal land. While people on the East Coast do not appreciate it, the United States government still owns immense land holdings in the West. Large portions could be sold while barely making a dent in the total amount of land held by the Federal government – and with only minimal impact on the environment if we are careful about how to go about this. Taxes certainly would have to be raised, but we have a large opportunity here to minimize the impacts on our citizens. A substantial tax on imported oil and gas could be imposed. In the aftermath of the recent oil price war between Russia and Saudi Arabia, the price remains so low that billions of dollars could be raised without the American public really feeling it. A tax on foreign imports would, in effect, make the United States self-sufficient, or close to it, in terms of our most immediate energy needs.

As for the environmental debate, billions of dollars can and should be pledged to study and implement renewable programs as well. The political compromises necessary to pull something like this off could not be sustained unless an entire clean energy infrastructure upgrade is planned and carried out in a manner to allow massive renewable energy projects to blossom nationwide even while the pandemic crisis is winding down. Redesigning and improving the electrical grid, including finding ways to allow for massive storage of energy that would be created by well-planned and sensibly implemented solar, wind, and other green energy technologies is not only critical to make this work from a climate impact perspective, but also makes good sense. Economically we cannot rely forever on what are conceitedly finite supplies of fossil fuels, and we never should stop looking for ways to clean our environment.

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The key players who have heretofore prevented the energy infrastructure build-out, like New York Governor Andrew Cuomo (with his no compromise insistence that no new pipelines will ever touch his State, no matter how much the gas that they would convey is currently needed in New York and New England), are not in position to play politics at this time.

It can and should be made clear to Mr. Cuomo, and others like him, that if the pandemic hits hard again in the fall and winter, as all of the experts are saying that it probably will, and if the need for natural gas spikes again in New York and New England, as is almost certain to be the case, there will be scant chance of any serious Federal economic help coming Mr. Cuomo's way to alleviate what will be perceived as a self-created burden. New York already had a multi-billion-dollar budget gap to be filled, and that is only getting worse as the pandemic continues to drain resources in truly record fashion. Asking the American taxpayers to come to the rescue further over one Governor's politically motivated energy policies that are not consistent with the country's current needs will be a definite non-starter.

In December 1862, with the Civil War raging, President Abraham Lincoln said, "As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew. We must dis-enthral ourselves, and then we will save our country." Those words have perhaps never had more meaning since Lincoln spoke them than right now. Let's hope we can all get together and act on them in a sensible and cooperative manner. The future of the country and our people literally may depend on this.