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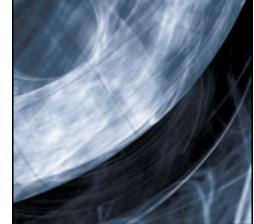
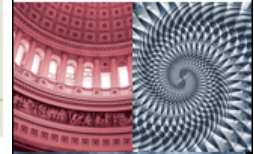


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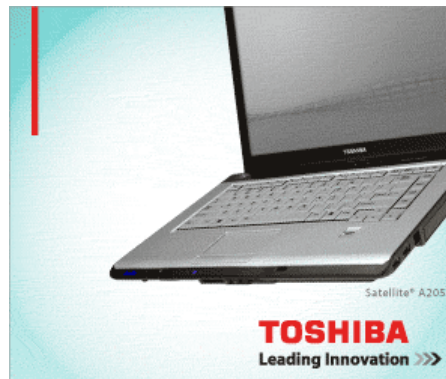
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## POTOMAC CHRONICLE DONALD F. KETTL

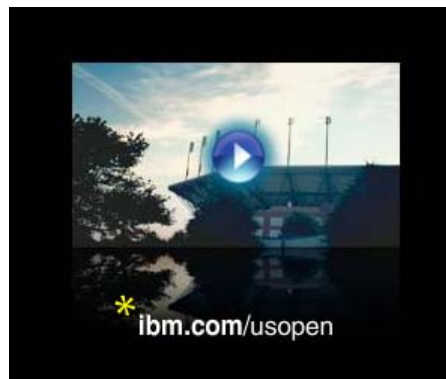
### Build, Crumble and Build More

Why don't we fix old roads and bridges? Because it's more fun to make new ones.

When reporters asked President Bush about how to pay for bridge repairs across the country, he couldn't resist taking a jab at congressional pork. Both Republicans and Democrats on the House Transportation Committee had suggested increasing the federal gas tax. But Bush charged that would lead to even more wasteful earmarking, as "each member on that committee gets to set his or her own priority first." The federal government shouldn't raise taxes, Bush said, until Congress got its own priorities straight. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid shot back that Democrats had "worked to fund our nation's most critical priorities" but that Bush had neglected those needs. Reid said Bush had no place lecturing Congress about priorities.



Wherever the fault may lie, there's little dispute that the country has a problem. The U.S. Department of Transportation counts 72,264 bridges as "structurally deficient," meaning they are in the same category as the one that collapsed into the Mississippi River in Minneapolis this summer.



Three years ago, this magazine's report card on government performance pointed to deferred maintenance of roads and bridges as one of the biggest challenges facing the states. Minnesota's respectable grade of B in the infrastructure category, and its significant number of bridge repairs over the past 15 years, make the national situation look even more dire. At least half the states are in worse shape on infrastructure than Minnesota.

We've long known this crisis was creeping up on us. We haven't addressed it. The best we've been able to do is measure it. The federal Department of Transportation has its own report cards on bridges going back decades. Some states, such as Pennsylvania, possess superb information about the condition of their infrastructure — but they still have billions of dollars in maintenance backlogs.

Some states actually underfund maintenance by as much as half. Why? That's not too hard a question to answer. State legislators love building new roads far more than repairing old ones. As one Wisconsin transportation official put it a few years ago, "Our agency believes in maintaining first and then building new. But that's not shared in the capitol." Meanwhile, members of Congress continue to earmark money for their favorite projects, such as Alaska's infamous "bridge to nowhere."

These twin political pressures add up to a neat explanation of the crisis, but it's a shade too neat. Much of the problem also comes from the way we've paid for repairs. The money in the federal highway trust fund is supposed to be available for maintenance work, but many states have taken advantage of loopholes to sidestep "fix it first" guidelines. Because so much of the fund has gone into new projects, the trust fund is going broke, and the Congressional Budget Office estimates it will be drained dry in 2009. The federal gas tax, which provides the bulk of highway money, hasn't been raised since 1993. So Congress not only has to help states fund essential bridge repairs, fix deteriorating highways across the country, and deal with the demand for new construction — it needs a way to put the highway trust fund back into the black.

We've been sliding into this problem since the 1950s, when the interstate highway system was created. The program offered an irresistible discount — states could not resist the federal government's offer to pay 90 percent of the cost of new roads, financed through a flat-rate tax on each gallon of gas, instead of a tax based on the cost per gallon. So the fund couldn't fill back up as gas prices rose.

The result? Over the past generation, we've created an unquenchable appetite for building new roads while we've drained the federal fund meant to repair them. We've created a terrific information system that tells us in exquisite detail just how deep a hole we've dug for ourselves.

The I-35 bridge was 40 years old when it fell into the Mississippi. We know we need to fix thousands of other deteriorating bridges around the country. But figuring out how to pay the bill and, more fundamentally, how to restrain our taste for new steel and concrete, will require setting new political rules before more bridges come falling down.

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