



Vehicle Miles Traveled

By Daniel Baxter

Dwight Eisenhower was the father of the interstate highway system. A good father, he left a trust fund to provide care. The Highway Trust Fund was the battery that powered reconstruction. The gas tax was the “trickle charger” for the battery. The trickle is waning and the battery is dead. Implementing a satellite based Vehicle Miles Traveled tax may be the last hope for our beleaguered infrastructure. Unfortunately, our society is becoming desensitized to crumbling landmarks like Wall Street and GM, so shutting down a few interstate bridges will not likely draw much media attention.

After Pearl Harbor, the devastated U.S. Pacific fleet was rebuilt in only nine months. That was 1945. One thing I love about my generation is that we witnessed the marvels of our fathers and tend to believe that all things are possible if we put our minds and backs to it. If something falls or crumbles, we rebuild it. When I was a kid I loved to build sand castles at the beach. I would work for hours while the rest of my family swam and played. I soon learned that it would take a bigger kid only a few seconds to dance on my creation and run away laughing. The best revenge was to quietly and quickly rebuild.



When the World Trade Center towers fell in 2001, many thought of rebuilding. At a recent IBTTA dinner, I asked Kary Witt, IBTTA President and Manager of the Golden Gate Bridge “if anything happened to the bridge, could it be replaced?” There was a collective groan at the table because the premise was abhorrent. Gentleman always, he answered my boorish question. “I suppose so, Dan. In fact, of course it could be rebuilt. It would cost billions, but it could be rebuilt.” The American spirit spoke. As I listened to the conversation move on to better topics, I thought about the massive cable bundles and the powerful environmental lobby in California. I thought about the deep anchors in quake

shaken rock and the fractious political landscape in the landfall communities. I thought about the rich reddish color of the massive columns enshrouded in the fog, and the funding shortages that plague our once mighty coastal state below. I thought about the empty space where the World Trade Center once stood. As I looked around the table, I thought about the priceless assets these men and women cared for back at home, and how the decisions they make today are the bricks and mortar of our infrastructure legacy. These are stewards of irreplaceable national landmarks; the front line against rust, gravity, natural and man-made disaster. Not unlike the curator of the Louvre who protects and perpetuates art

treasures of the Masters, the members of IBTTA probably go about their business without fully feeling the massive weight of responsibility they collectively hold. The Golden Gate is a symbol of our great society. Unlike a priceless painting it also serves a daily economic and social function to thousands of people. Looming behind each Executive Director at the table that night were the images of thousands of miles of turnpikes, toll roads, tunnels and bridges with millions of tons of concrete and steel. These people stand guard under these monuments, hidden from the public by the shadows of complacency. Later that evening I asked Steve Snider, General Manager and CEO of the Halifax-Dartmouth Bridge Commission, and the incoming President of IBTTA what the theme of his tenure would be. “Sustainability and social responsibility,” he said.

Let’s calculate the true replacement value of the Golden Gate, stop a single vehicle mid span and say “this is your lucky day, you’ve been selected to be socially responsible for the true value of the structure that is separating you from a 222 foot drop into the bay.” Hand him the price tag. Of millions who have

gazed upon the Mona Lisa, only a few could afford to buy it.

In my opinion, pay-as-you-go Vehicle Miles Traveled taxing is a politically perilous step in the direction of social responsibility. Most politicians feel it is untenable. The few who support it see it replacing the gas tax. My feeling is “we need taxes and tolling to keep the cars rolling.” Repealing an existing tax when the fund it supports is bankrupt makes no sense, and eliminating the gas tax will not lessen the opposition to VMT. VMT should be based on an equitable distribution of costs to those who already pay the gas tax but impact the highway more than the tax can replenish namely large commercial vehicles. The Interstates may crumble in the next 25 years, and our society will simply adjust around the lack of mobility. In the next 10 years we will likely see a rural section of interstate highway between two major urban areas close due to lack of funding. Not until the local Walmart’s shelves are empty will we realize what happened. By then it will be too late. It can’t be rebuilt. It can be maintained. We need to support VMT.

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