Trump the Maintainer

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Figure One. Trump the Infrastructure Nationalist

Infrastructure Nationalism

On May 25, 2013 Donald J. Trump tweeted: “Nation’s infrastructure is collapsing, MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN!” Trump had repurposed the “Make America Great Again” catchphrase from Ronald Reagan’s 1980 campaign and started using it the day after Barack Obama’s re-election win in 2012, though this was (I think) his first or among the first times he deployed it in ALL CAPS. With these eight words: half disgusted, ashamed observation and half patriotic yawp, Trump staked his claim as America’s leading infrastructure nationalist.

I’ve watched Trump’s cable news interviews, read his speeches and debate transcripts—the more Trump talks the less powerful his messages become, the more he fumbles and grows uncertain. FDR had his radio chats, and Reagan had his televised press conferences. In the confines of 140 characters, Trump is a man who has found his ideal medium.
Over the next two years Trump reiterated his infrastructure nationalism again and again. He weaponized it to attack political rivals like John McCain or Andrew Cuomo, or to criticize President Obama’s foreign policy. He was always ready in times of disaster, skillfully (some might say cynically) connecting disasters of the moment, like Hurricane Sandy or the 2015 Philadelphia Amtrak derailment, to the political dysfunction of long-term deferred maintenance.

![Figure Two. Trump on Deferred Maintenance and Disaster](image)

Amtrak crash near Philadelphia, train derails -many hurt, some badly. Our country has horrible infrastructure problems. Pols can't solve!

The introduction of the “I am the one” language, especially as the GOP primary approached in 2015, was notable. Trump is the outsider, the expert, the doer, the builder. He’s more than talk. In these infrastructure tweets we have in fact the central argument of Trump’s Presidential campaign, resizable to fit the debate over immigration, trade policy, NATO, Iran, urban crime, veterans’ affairs, or any other issue. Of course there were other, darker themes in the Trump campaign. On the same day as his 2013 infrastructure tweet, he also tweeted: “It’s freezing outside, where the hell is ‘global warming’??” after spending most of his Twitter time that day engaged in a nasty war of words with television producer Danny Zuker. But in infrastructure, Trump found a way to channel the American everyman and everywoman—he hears America singing—and the varied carols lament that we’ve let the place run down to the ground while politicians like “crooked” Hillary Clinton squabble, workers struggle at home, and we waste money fighting wars in faraway lands.
Infrastructure is sublime, it brings out feelings of patriotism and nostalgia among the most grizzled realists. We all have clear memories of bridges and ports, highways and skyscrapers—the anticipation of airports, the thrill of automotive speed, the Lou Reed attitude of sidewalks and subways blazing all night. Trump stokes the emotional dynamism of infrastructure and maintenance, in ways that appeal and effect across divides of race, party, geography, and gender. In his praise of China or Dubai, Trump summons the collective American nostalgia for the postwar years—the ribbon-cutting-pride-years of a nation under construction (the years of his youth). Trump plays with each of these appeals, but more often than not he lands on two dominant emotions: disgust and shame. And when it comes to politics, those two emotions are powerful demons.

**RELIC**
It was often noted during the campaign that Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump only saw eye to eye on one issue, and that was infrastructure. She, too, is an infrastructure nationalist, not unlike Bernie Sanders, JFK, FDR, or Abraham Lincoln. Election season polls demonstrated strong public support for government infrastructure investment, 75% agreed it’s a priority. But, polls also reveal that the public is relatively uncertain about how exactly construction and maintenance commitments should be funded. Just before the election Trump released a trillion dollar infrastructure plan—drawing attention and excitement across the ideological spectrum (as it has again this week)—but to make sense of Trump’s trillion we have to know a bit more about his approach to the political economy of infrastructure and maintenance.
Trump is a RELIC, the world’s most famous member of the Real Estate, Lending, Insurance Complex. The Trump family name has been connected with real estate for decades, a particular type of postwar real estate development heavily dependent on public subsidies and tax breaks. Trump’s entry into the world of Manhattan real estate involved the acquisition of the old Commodore Hotel next to Grand Central Terminal. With a 40-year tax abatement in hand Trump acquired and refurbished the hotel, coated it in bronze glass, and transformed it into the Grand Hyatt, opening in 1980. By the early 1990s, heavily in debt from other investment gambits like Trump Airlines, Trump had stopped paying for maintenance at the hotel, leading to lawsuits with his business partners and eventual sale of his share in 1995. In 1986, Trump was given a franchise to rehab and run the derelict Central Park Wollman ice skating rink. Trump organized partners to do the reconstruction for him for free in exchange for publicity, and to this day earns more than 2/3 of the annual profits from the rink.
Over time Trump broadened his approach to focus more on the establishment of a lifestyle concept that could be attached to golf courses and high-rise developments from Scotland to Puerto Rico to Dubai. For Trump, today, all that is solid has melted into BRAND.
Ted Cruz complains about my views on eminent domain, but without it we wouldn't have roads, highways, airports, schools or even pipelines.

Trump is criticized by opponents who characterize him as a profiteer on urban blight, a con-man, a beneficiary of hated government eminent domain takings. Trump’s response is that his critics don’t understand the intricacies of the RELIC—they are too weak for the rough and tumble (or the art if you prefer) of the deal. Or they hate the fact that the RELIC approach sits to the left of a hard-line privatization ideology, dependent as it is on a continually evolving mosaic of what are called broadly public-private partnerships.

The RELIC is in fact but one of many members of the public-private-partnership clan: it includes the design-engineering-construction community represented by ASCE and the construction lobbies, also disaster risk reduction advocates, and even global economic development experts. Hillary Clinton’s championing of a federal infrastructure bank model sits to the left of these approaches, in a zone we might call the infrastructure commons (or what detractors call state socialism). It is much more reliant on federal investment than Trump’s trillion dollar plan. His plan proposes a mass privatization of existing infrastructure assets and a stimulus to new construction through a scheme where government will facilitate the sale of land or existing infrastructures, and investors will take on long-term leases and recoup construction and maintenance expenses through charging fees and tolls over time. Experts are divided on the feasibility of the strategy as a workable one for rural places and inherently unprofitable infrastructures. Opponents cite the fact that Trump’s trillion seems to also
include a rollback of environmental and labor protections, and a defunding of agencies like Housing and Urban Development and the Department of Transportation.

Other critics are concerned that Trump, as a RELIC, doesn’t understand much about the world of infrastructure that undergirds the communications and computing economy, the Internet, or the health sector. Trump’s tweets on innovation are scanty (far-surpassed by his tweets about Haters and Losers) for example, and indicate a disdain for the newfangled and hopelessly complicated world of computers. Trump prefers the real estate turnaround, shovel ready projects, and photo-op ready construction workers.

We will never have great national security in the age of computers - too many brilliant nerds can break codes (the old days were better).

Walls and Mars Shots
Finally, it’s worth taking a moment to consider the likelihood of Trump facilitating a legacy project—a Transcontinental Railroad scale achievement—in his time as President. I have observed that in this realm of discussion, Trump engages another emotional mode, to add to disgust and shame, and that is fear. **He is indeed a fear expert.** Trump’s excitement over a Mars shot, for example, seems to grow from a paranoia that China has infiltrated NASA and the Russians have eclipsed America’s former greatness in space. In his response to the Ebola crisis and the Syrian refugee crisis, Trump re-imagines the airport not as a gateway for arrivals to America but a holding cell for the diseased and the radicalized.
Trump’s Great Mexico Border Wall is an infrastructure marvel to be sure—divorced from context it would stand as an almost unbelievable achievement, a technological marvel, an art work—a site that tourists would visit for centuries to come. But, there is a context, Trump’s wall is anchored in economic protectionism and racism—a flat rejection of his hero Ronald Reagan’s most famous intonation, “tear down this wall”!

But, perhaps, here too Trump isn’t straying too far from some hallowed American traditions. In this case: traditions of xenophobic Chinese deportations Japanese encampments. Or, perhaps more appropriately to Trump, we are talking about a cold war tradition of his upbringing, a time in which President Kennedy initiated a space race at least in part for fear of Soviet dominance, and a tolerance for the Berlin Wall as an unfortunate but necessary and even useful evil of realpolitik behind the Iron Curtain.

He has no respect for American exceptionalism. @BarackObama has outsourced our space program to the Russians
bit.ly/Ljhs8M

Figure Nine. Space paranoia
In sum, as an infrastructure nationalist, a RELIC, and a legacy-wall-builder, Trump the maintainer is the sum total of the America that enthusiastically made him. He is the epitome of postwar technological enthusiasm, he is the de-industrial opportunist, the globalizing brand-maker—the maintainer of a particular American paranoid style.

Whether Trump can deliver on his promised trillion-dollar national rebuild, or extend his thinking beyond the realm of the RELICS, or be dissuaded from reactionary wall-building remains to be seen—but we will all certainly be following along—one tweet at a time.