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The case for a large, federal public works program

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Chris Edwards of the Cato Institute says that federal infrastructure spending hurts more than it helps [[“A jobs plan we shouldn’t bank on,”](#) Outlook, Oct. 23]. Alexander Hamilton, Henry Clay, Dwight Eisenhower and other builders of America must be turning over in their graves.

Mr. Edwards cites problematic infrastructure projects of the Army Corps of Engineers, the Bureau of Reclamation and the Federal Aviation Administration. Fair enough. He does not mention successes, however, such as the federal highway system, the canals, the harbors, the much-loved Tennessee Valley Authority and western dams, the Internet, and the land grant colleges that over 200 years have created opportunities for millions of Americans.

Many of the most costly and “anti-free market” messes related to U.S. infrastructure are the result of uncoordinated and inconsistent state approaches to the electric grid, telecommunications and natural gas distribution. Mr. Edwards’s call for a bigger state role ignores this and the closely related fact that interest group domination at the state level is far greater than interest group power in Washington.

The United States needs a large, federal public works program to modernize our second-rate infrastructure, improve productivity and create jobs. A big infrastructure bank mobilizing private and public money seems to have the best chance. There is plenty of room for the public-private partnerships and incentives for better management in such a federal program, but Mr. Edwards’s critique of federal infrastructure investment is profoundly ideological and ahistorical.

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