



## Who Will Get Blamed for Wasted Infrastructure Spending?

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President Joe Biden knows better than anyone how much money can be lost when Washington embarks on a historic effort to build and repair U.S. infrastructure. This may be why he has constructed a new bureaucratic infrastructure enabling his political heirs to dodge accountability for today's spending. This column generally avoids making political predictions but is confident in guaranteeing that another president will soon be promising another costly fix for roads and bridges.

The White House says this week's new infrastructure law will provide "the biggest investments in roads, bridges, and rail in generations" and it all has a very familiar ring.

Upon signing the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act on February 17, 2009, President Barack Obama said that "we're putting Americans to work doing the work that America needs done, in critical areas... that have been neglected for too long; work that will bring real and lasting change for generations to come." President Obama added:

Because we know we can't build our economic future on the transportation and information networks of the past, we are remaking the American landscape with the largest new investment in our nation's infrastructure since Eisenhower built an interstate highway system in the 1950s.

Because of this investment, nearly 400,000 men and women will go to work rebuilding our crumbling roads and bridges, repairing our faulty dams and levees, bringing critical broadband connections to businesses and homes in nearly every community in America, upgrading mass transit, building high-speed rail lines that will improve travel and commerce throughout our nation.

But even then it seems Mr. Obama had a feeling that the \$800 billion might not be spent wisely. A few days after enactment Mr. Obama told the National Governors Association, "I'm announcing today that I'm asking my Vice President, Joe Biden, to oversee our administration's

implementation efforts. Beginning this week, Joe will meet regularly with key members of my Cabinet to make sure our efforts are not just swift, but also efficient and effective.”

Mr. Biden also seemed to understand that waste, fraud and abuse represented a challenge. “We’re putting together a team -- an oversight team -- that is going to be not just me but I have a whole staff that’s been created under me to follow the money, to make sure it creates jobs and begins to lay the groundwork for a 21st century economy,” said Vice President Biden in a CBS interview. He added that the money would support, among other things, “new infrastructure systems around the country.”

Mr. Biden pleaded with local politicians not to spend the money on “stupid things” but he pleaded in vain. An Alaskan village called Ouzinkie, population 167, received a \$15 million airport while some major hubs received nothing. Only about 10% of the law’s spending, or \$80 billion, was devoted to infrastructure—and very little went to critical work. Funding “shovel-ready” projects promised by Mr. Obama meant that money didn’t go to the bridges most in need of repair but to jobs that could quickly clear the thicket of regulatory permitting. Repaving roads was a typical activity; less than 12% of the infrastructure spending went for work on bridges. A promised green-jobs boom never materialized.

Mindful of the Obama-era failures, current Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg suggested that this time will be different when he was asked how quickly Americans would see the results of this week’s law:

Remember, this isn’t 2009; this is an era where it’s about making sure we hit every shovel-ready program to — for that immediate short-term boost for the economy. It’s short term, but it’s long term. That’s why the President talks about looking back on this moment from the 2050s.

No doubt everyone on Team Biden will be thrilled if an accounting of the new infrastructure spending doesn’t occur until the 2050s. Perhaps Mr. Buttigieg will be the happiest, because he not only will determine many of the outlays but has made it clear that various political considerations will take precedence in allocating the taxpayer funds. Hope Yen, Tom Beaumont and Josh Boak report for the Associated Press:

Pete Buttigieg, the transportation secretary who holds the purse strings to much of President Joe Biden’s \$1 trillion infrastructure package, was holding forth with reporters on its impact — the promise of more electric cars, intercity train routes, bigger airports — when a pointed question came.

How would he go about building racial equity into infrastructure?

The 39-year-old former mayor of South Bend, Indiana, and 2020 Democratic presidential candidate laid out his argument that highway design can reflect racism, noting that at least \$1 billion in the bill will help reconnect cities and neighborhoods that had been racially segregated or divided by road projects.

As Mr. Buttigieg considers his political possibilities, the AP notes the incentives at work:

Racial equity is an issue where Democratic priorities and Buttigieg's future align. One of his greatest shortcomings as a White House candidate was his inability to win over Black voters. How he navigates that heading into the 2022 midterms will probably shape the fortunes of Biden's agenda and the Democratic Party, if not his own prospects.

Will the resulting spending create maximum value for taxpayers? The AP reports:

"I heard some stuff, some weird stuff from the secretary of transportation trying to make this about social issues," said Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis. "To me, a road's a road." Texas Sen. Ted Cruz tweeted sarcastically: "The roads are racist. We must get rid of roads."

Republican politicians aren't the only ones expressing concern. Philip K. Howard of the bipartisan Common Good organization warns in an email of the new infrastructure law:

The \$1.2 trillion package is about \$10,000 for every American household. Without implementation oversight, the money will gush out of Washington without any discipline over, for example, New York work rules that can make infrastructure projects five times as expensive as in other developed countries.

The Cato Institute's Randal O'Toole writes:

About half of the transportation dollars in the bill are dedicated to Amtrak and urban transit, modes of transportation that carry less than 1 percent of passenger travel and no freight. While the other half appears to be dedicated to highways, much of that will be spent on projects that will reduce, not maintain or increase, roadway capacities.

All of this is based on a presumption that automobiles are evil and the primary goal of government should be to wean Americans off the automobile and get them into various forms of government-owned mass transportation. Even if you believe that automobiles are a major contributor to global climate change, many states and cities have made enormous efforts to get people to reduce their driving since 1970, and all of them have failed.

Mr. Buttigieg isn't the only one at risk of owning the next failure. Edward-Isaac Dovere and Jasmine Wright report for CNN that after congressional passage of the infrastructure bill, President Biden singled out Kamala Harris and said, "A lot of this has to do with this lady right here, the vice president."

By the time the next round of infrastructure waste, fraud and abuse is manifest, Mr. Biden will probably be wandering the halls of his presidential library. But perhaps mindful of the likelihood his potential successors will need someone to blame, Mr. Biden has thoughtfully filled the position. On Sunday the White House announced:

Ahead of signing the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act tomorrow, President Biden is naming Mitch Landrieu as senior advisor responsible for coordinating for implementation of this historic bipartisan infrastructure law.

In this role, Landrieu will oversee the most significant and comprehensive investments in American infrastructure in generations...

Despite the assistance of Mr. Landrieu, Mr. Buttigieg and Ms. Harris may still struggle to avoid political accountability for the misspending to come. In that case, they can take comfort from the fact that despite the failure of the last great infrastructure program on its own terms, its principal overseer ended up becoming president.

Lord help us.