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Infrastructure

Michael Sean Winters | Nov. 16, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

Yesterday, I arrived here in Kansas City, Missouri at the airport and fell to conversation with the driver of the van NCR had dispatched to retrieve me and some fellow NCR writers to bring us to the hotel. He explained to me that officials are planning on constructing a new airport terminal over the next seven years.

I remember when the current airport terminals were built in 1971. I grew up reading the Compton Encyclopedia and each year they sent a ?yearbook? that contained highlights of the year just concluded. And, that year, there was a photo of the new Kansas City airport, one of the first to employ a semi-circular design, with parking in the center at three adjacent terminals. 1971 was not that long ago. As I walked through the terminal yesterday, I did not see any obvious signs of disrepair or structural deficiencies, but I suppose there must be something wrong to justify building a whole new terminal.

Our hotel is located across the street from Union Station, built in 1914, eventually closed, almost demolished, but now renovated and functioning as an entertainment complex and, once again, a train terminal for Amtrak. There was a photo of this magnificent building in my childhood encyclopedia too, and it is even more impressive in person. Three years ago, when I was last here, our hotel was close by the Plaza, a 1950s shopping district designed in Moorish style with a copy of the Giralda tower in Seville at its center. The complex is still operating, still beautiful, still vibrant.

Here is my question: Over the next few years, the nation?s infrastructure will become a focus of public investment, but will we build structures like Union Station that are still standing and beautiful almost 100 years after their opening, and the Plaza, still going in its sixtieth year, or buildings like the airport that last only a few decades? Pennywise and pound foolish is one of my favorite admonitions, and I fear that having been ginned up in recent years about the worrisome federal deficit, decisions about infrastructure will, in fact, fail to think long-term.

One of the most frequent complaints from the recently failed campaign of Mitt Romney and Paul Ryan was that our nation?s spending was ?mortgaging? our nation?s future. Of course, one of the reasons I have little confidence in the political leadership of President Obama is that he did not use the occasion to shoot back: ?You know, Gov. Romney, for most people, a mortgage is an accomplishment, it represents a prior period of savings for a downpayment and a commitment to exercise responsibility for the next thirty years, it is an investment in their future, so when you speak of ?mortgaging our future? as if it were some grave sin, I think you don?t understand how the average middle class American views the matter.? Obama may not have said that during the campaign, but as he charts a pro-growth, progressive agenda for his second term, he would do well to look at ways infrastructure spending can be kept distinct from the rest of the federal budget, how it can exemplify federalism in action, uniting state and local government with the federal government, and, most importantly, how it can result in buildings like Union Station that will stand the test of time.

Of course, the most important infrastructure projects will not be Beaux Art masterpieces, but sewers and train tracks and other unglamorous, mostly unseen, projects. At a time when libertarians think government should do as little as possible, and some prominent Catholic conservatives seek to give them cover, it is good to remember

that it was public spending on sewers and public water projects that, more than any other thing, contributed to the lowering of child mortality rates, improved health for everyone, and the lengthening of life expectancy rates. Can I get a pro-life shout out for public works?

In addition, the need to reconstitute the nation?s infrastructure allows local communities to think deeply about how the projects they will fund can shape their communities in the future. Union Station was not built as an entertainment complex, but as a train station. Trains bring people together, they create a terminus at which commerce can flourish, and they reduce carbon emissions by getting people out of their cars. For every dollar spent on building a new highway, let two dollars, or five, be spent on public transportation. Bring back trolley cars. Build commuter rail tracks. Connect the airport with a high-speed train to downtown. These are the kind of projects that will slowly lead Americans to think about whether or not they need a second car, or a first, and developers will start to move away from the dispersed, suburban model toward a more concentrated approach to development. The environmental consequences of this approach to infrastructure spending are too obvious to delineate, but the social consequences are vital too. The atomization of our culture, its hyper-individualism, all need to be re-examined and modified whenever possible to bring citizens together in daily life, to get away from the days in which a person wakes up in his suburban cubicle of a house, walks into the cubicle of a garage, gets into his mobile cubicle called his car, then drives to his cubicle of an office. Isolation, cubicles, cars, these are the characteristics of an unhealthy culture.

A final word about Kansas City. It is a beautiful city. Last time, we stayed right close to the Nelson Baker museum with its magnificent Bloch building, luminous in the night, but equally haunting in its austere white façade during the daytime. The locals are proud of their new performing arts center, but, alas, why anyone would hire Moshe Safdie to design anything is beyond me, and the result is as unfortunate as his other buildings: It looks like a giant Slinkie, dumped into a vat of concrete, and set on its side. But, most of the city is charming and beautiful, the new and the old mixing easily together, the city?s fascination with fountains lending vitality and beauty to the public spaces, in short, a great city. And, of course, it hosts the best Catholic newspaper in the country!

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