

## TROUBLESHOOTING BRIDGES, POLITICS, AND MICROSOFT WINDOWS

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### *Some thoughts on "infrastructure"*

Today being only a few days from the tragic collapse of the Interstate 35-W Bridge in Minneapolis, Minnesota, the authorities have only begun any kind of an investigation into its cause(s). What they'll turn up is anyone's guess. One expert stated he would be astonished if the fall had nothing to do with construction in progress on the 42-year-old structure; others say fatigue cracks are at the root, and still others talk about water undercutting the bridge foundations.

One thing appears certain: engineers and scientists[1] will be probing the wreckage for months if not years to determine the actual cause of the failure. (Recall no such forensic effort followed the attacks of 9/11; for example, Mr. 9/11, Rudolph Giuliani had all the structural steel of the World Trade Center immediately carted away under armed guard and destroyed.)

But unlike the inescapable federal deceptions of 9/11, if we're lucky, state investigators of I35-W will produce two or three realistic causal chains describing why we lost the bridge. Then the public, the engineers, and the political folks can pick among the proposed explanations and make reasonable progress to reduce the risk of such a tragedy in the future.

The feds and probably some higher level pols at the state level have already tried to make hay out of I35-W, proposing increased funding of this or that. Both honest left and honest right seem focused on making sure the real infrastructure, i.e. bricks and mortar, will get more attention and that we'll adopt better methods to encourage personal responsibility in the public interest.

Considering the rarity of such cave-ins—I read there are 600,000 bridges in the American highway, and the most recent major bridge collapse occurred in 1967—the real infrastructure is doing reasonably well.

What about the political infrastructure?

Not so well. Let's just look at the body count. According to this interesting freelancer site, the number of people dying worldwide from all natural disasters is 3.5 million during the 20th century. During the same period the number of people killed by war or for other political reasons is more than 150 million!

I'd say those statistics indicate a serious public-health concern with the political infrastructure. We can see the US government's own recent contributions to the slaughter. A British source claims several hundred thousand Iraqis have been killed as a consequence of the American government's invasion of Iraq, which doesn't even consider the long-term toll of poisoning from depleted uranium munitions.

Indeed, many analysts are suggesting that funding for the war-machinery infrastructure is depriving funds from the real bricks-and-mortar infrastructure. Not a difficult observation when the Middle Eastern occupations have cost us upwards of \$500 billion and still counting. I read one article claiming that we could fix all 26% of the bridges judged structurally or functionally deficient for less than \$200 billion. Wouldn't that be a better application of funds—I mean, assuming we're not going to get the money back to ourselves from the coffers of Halliburton or Bechtel?

Finally, let's consider our information technology (IT) infrastructure. Of the three, it's probably the least life-endangering... unless you bleed to death while the emergency room technician waits for his PC to boot up.

I'm reasonably up to date with my Windows XP® Professional operating system running on an HP Pavilion dv8000 with 1 gigabyte of memory, a processing speed of nearly 2 gigahertz running an AMD Turion® 64-bit microprocessor, and a full 100 gigabytes of memory storage. Hence, my machine, at least if this were still the spring of 2006, is what a former colleague would refer to as a "screaming twin-turbo super wombat thunderpig."

Also my extreme geek friends all told me when I was having trouble with Windows Millennium Edition (ME) that the new Windows XP would solve all my problems and henceforth all my steps would be bathed in sunshine.

But you know, the machine still locks up on me, losing data, probably two or three times a month—only they don't call it the BSOD (blue screen of death) anymore—; last summer the hard drive inexplicably just *died*, causing me to lose two weeks of ideological production; and I feel like I'm watching paint dry when I fire it up or get a new application running.

Then last week while I was working on an important project for my favorite client *du jour*, Synchronesh Computing, all of a sudden I couldn't open Microsoft Publisher! (It's an indispensable program for what I do

on my Website, as well as being my favorite means for moving graphics from hither to yon.) It simply would not load. I tried everything, uninstalled and reinstalled the software, spent decades in multiple full shutdown and startup sequences, and reread Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking... three times*.

Finally, I paid the \$49 and got in touch with human support; Debby—I wonder how many Indians doing US customer service from Bombay are named Debby (or John)?—was my high point in this IT infrastructure-failure experience. The problem was difficult and she was pleasantly tenacious. "Somehow" my user record Brian had got uniquely corrupted in relation to the Publisher start sequence. Our two-and-a-half-hour solution, really a workaround, was to create a new user record.

Well, this Big Geek business is a longer story than I want to get into. As much as I admire a lot of what I know about Bill Gates today, and despite the fact I was feeling very spiritual in a *Power of Now* sort of way, I recorded the following thought in my diary:

**"Microsoft Windows is truly a monumental blotch on human consciousness."**

I do respect what Windows-based computers can do and acknowledge some Microsoft innovations particularly early in the development of the PC. I simply feel, after all these years, the good things pale to insignificance beside the constant productivity killers that should never exist in the world of modern, civilized computation. It's as if the emperor and his fleets of mindless drones have adopted the model of the Drug War:

"We all know we're going down the wrong path (piling mountains of proprietary spaghetti code on mountains of proprietary spaghetti code that has always teetered on the precipice of dissolution). Only one thing to do: put the pedal to the metal, make the monster bigger and faster, stay politically correct, and don't talk about anything fundamental."

Another sign of the times.

Also a Go to buy stock in Apple.

[1] At least I hope local engineers and scientists. I've read that the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) will have a role in the investigation. To the extent that the feds are involved we may expect massive corruption of objective fact gathering and analysis. Ref. the book *First Strike: TWA Flight 800 and the Attack on America*, by Jack Cashill and other more recent exposes of politically sensitive federal accident investigations. If it's federal it's Cartel, ergo, any truth is wholly unintended.

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