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OP-ED COLUMNIST

Amusing, but Not Funny

By [BOB HERBERT](#)

Sara Rimer of The Times wrote an article last week that gave us a startling glimpse of just how mindless and self-destructive the U.S. is becoming.

Consider the lead paragraph:

“The United States is failing to develop the math skills of both girls and boys, especially among those who could excel at the highest levels, a new study asserts, and girls who do succeed in the field are almost all immigrants or the daughters of immigrants from countries where mathematics is more highly valued.”

The idea that the U.S. won't even properly develop the skills of young people who could perform at the highest intellectual levels is breathtaking — breathtakingly stupid, that is.

The authors of the study, published in Notices of the American Mathematical Society, concluded that American culture does not value talent in math very highly. I suppose we're busy with other things, like text-messaging while jay-walking. The math thing is seen as something for Asians and nerds.

Meanwhile, the country is going down the tubes. Felix Rohatyn, who helped lead New York City out of the dark days of the 1970s fiscal crisis, had an article in a recent issue of The New York Review of Books (with co-author Everett Ehrlich) lamenting the sad state of the U.S. infrastructure. Most Americans are oblivious on this issue. We're like a family that won't even think about fixing a sagging, leaky roof until it collapses on our heads.

New Orleans was nearly wiped from the map in the Hurricane Katrina nightmare, and 13 people were killed when a bridge in Minneapolis broke apart during rush hour, hurling helpless motorists 60 feet into the Mississippi River. Neither of those disasters was enough of a warning for us to think seriously about infrastructure maintenance, repair and construction.

Could these types of disasters happen again? They're going to happen again. Mr. Rohatyn reminds us that nearly 30 percent of the nation's bridges are “structurally deficient or functionally obsolete.”

We haven't even got sense enough to keep an eye on the water we drink. Citing a report from the American Society of Civil Engineers, Mr. Rohatyn and Mr. Ehrlich write: “Current funding for safe drinking water, amounts to ‘less than 10 percent of the total national requirement.’ ”

A country that refuses to properly educate its young people or to maintain its physical plant is one that has clearly lost its way. Add in the myriad problems associated with unnecessary warfare and a clueless central

government that wastes taxpayer dollars by the trillions, and you've got a society in danger of becoming completely unhinged.

This is about more than the election of a president in a few weeks. The American people have to decide what kind of country they want.

Do they want one in which the top 1 percent hauled in more than 21 percent of all personal income in 2005? Do they want a country in which, as my former colleague at The Times, David Cay Johnston, has noted: the tax system "now levies the poor, the middle class and even the upper middle class to subsidize the rich"?

Do they want a country in which their democratic freedoms are eroded by a deliberate exploitation of their fear of terrorism, and their earning power is diminished by a crippling dependence on foreign oil?

These are exactly the kinds of issues that could be thoroughly explored, argued about, even obsessed over in a presidential campaign. Americans could drag their eyeballs away from their flat-screen TVs and give serious thoughts to important matters if they wanted to. Instead, we get silliness.

The news media, especially the talking heads on television, are addicted to the horse race, focusing around the clock on wildly proliferating polling data that tell us basically nothing. No one knows who is going to win this election. So why not spend a little quality time on where the next generation of jobs might be coming from, and why it's critically important to ease the burden of health insurance coverage being shouldered by strapped families and businesses alike?

An article in Monday's Times spotlighted some of the serious problems that have emerged in the No Child Left Behind law. Among the law's unintended consequences, as Sam Dillon reported, has been its tendency to "punish" states that "have high academic standards and rigorous tests, which have contributed to an increasing pileup of failed schools."

Say what?

Surely this is a good issue for discussion and analysis in the presidential campaign. Let the candidates have at it in their final debate. Let the pundits weigh in. And why not interview a few teachers, principals and thoughtful citizens?

Don't hold your breath. Neil Postman warned us years ago about amusing ourselves to death.

The end is near.

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