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# Policy at Its Worst

By **BOB HERBERT**

We can go to war in Iraq and Afghanistan, and threaten to blow Iran off the face of the planet. We can conduct a nonstop campaign of drone and helicopter attacks in Pakistan and run a network of secret prisons around the world. We are the mightiest nation mankind has ever seen.

But we can't seem to build a railroad tunnel to carry commuters between New Jersey and New York.

The United States is not just losing its capacity to do great things. It's losing its soul. It's speeding down an increasingly rubble-strewn path to a region where being second rate is good enough.

The railroad tunnel was the kind of infrastructure project that used to get done in the United States almost as a matter of routine. It was a big and expensive project, but the payoff would have been huge. It would have reduced congestion and pollution in the New York-New Jersey corridor. It would have generated economic activity and put thousands of people to work. It would have enabled twice as many passengers to ride the trains on that heavily traveled route between the two states.

The project had been in the works for 20 years, and ground had already been broken when the governor of New Jersey, [Chris Christie](#), rejected the project on Thursday, saying that his state could not afford its share of the costs. Extreme pressure is being exerted from federal officials and others to get Mr. Christie to change his mind, but, as of now, the project is a no-go.

This is a railroad tunnel we're talking about. We're not trying to go to the Moon. This is not the Manhattan Project. It's a railroad tunnel that's needed to take people back and forth to work and to ease the pressure on the existing tunnel, a wilting two-track facility that's about 100 years old. What is the matter with us?

The Chinese could build it. The Turks could build it. We can't build it.

One day after Governor Christie made his devastating announcement about the tunnel, the [U.S. Labor Department](#) released its latest unemployment statistics. They show that the nation remains locked in an employment crisis, unable to provide work for millions who want and need it. One of the major potential solutions to this crisis is all around us. America's infrastructure is indisputably in sorry shape, and upgrading it to meet the needs of the 21st century is far and away the best strategy for putting people back to work.

The railroad tunnel project, all set and ready to go, would have provided jobs for 6,000 construction workers, not to mention all the residual employment that accompanies such projects. What we'll get instead, if it is not built, is the increased pollution and worsening traffic jams that result when tens of thousands of commuters who would have preferred to take the train are redirected to their automobiles.

This is government policy at its pathetic worst. But it's not the first policy disaster of Mr. Christie's short tenure as governor. He blew a golden opportunity (along with \$400 million in federal funds) to participate in the Obama administration's Race to the Top competition to improve the nation's public school systems. New Jersey's bid came up needlessly and embarrassingly short because of a mistake in the application and the governor's refusal to sign off on an agreement that had been reached with the teachers' union.

This failure to take part in a nationwide initiative to bolster public education comes at a time when the United States, once the world's leader in the percentage of young people with college degrees, has fallen to a humiliating 12th place among 36 developed nations.

No one can accuse the governor of New Jersey of being a visionary. But his stumbling and bumbling and his inability to chart a clear path to a better future is, frankly, just the latest example of the dismal leadership that Americans have endured for many years. Where once we were the innovators, the pathfinders, the model for the rest of the world, now we just can't seem to get it done.

We can't put the population to work, or get the kids through college, or raise the living standards of the middle class and the poor. We can't rebuild the infrastructure or curb our destructive overreliance on fossil fuels.

There have been many times when the U.S. has stunned the world with the breadth and greatness of its achievements — the Marshall Plan, the G.I. Bill, the world's highest standard of living, the world's finest higher education system, the space program, and on and on.

Somewhere, somehow, things went haywire. The nation that built the Erie Canal and Hoover Dam and the transcontinental railroad can't even build a tunnel beneath the Hudson River from New Jersey to New York.