

ZNet Commentary
America's Real Achilles Heel January 09, 2006
By John Feffer

These days you can get from Seoul to the southeastern tip of South Korea in less than three hours, thanks to a sleek new bullet train supported by public investment.

The South Korean government has made information technology a national priority as it works to become the global leader in broadband access. Government investment in research and development in such fields as biotech and nanotech has sharply increased.

South Korea is not satisfied with being the 11th largest economy in the world. It wants to be the major economic hub of Northeast Asia and compete head to head with China and Japan.

The Asian model of economic development, which seemed to collapse during the financial

crisis of nearly a decade ago, is alive and well. The South Koreans know an economic secret that laissez-faire enthusiasts just can't get into their heads. The government can and must play a major role in fostering economic development. Don't expect the

corporate world to shoulder these responsibilities, because short-term profit clouds their vision. Only public investment into infrastructure - trains, communication systems, research facilities, schools and universities - produces equitable and

sustainable growth.

The South Korean approach is far from perfect. There

is still too much unhealthy collusion between government and the business sector. And there has been great pressure on South Korea from the outside - the United States, the World Trade Organization

- to "open up" its economy. But what enabled the South Korean economy to rise from the level of Uganda in the early 1960s to its current global position makes as much economic sense today as it did then.

Now compare South Korea's approach to that of the United States.

I live in Washington, DC. Here, the subway escalators often don't work, so commuters have to walk up and down long flights of stairs. The public schools are overcrowded

and dangerous. Medical care for those without health insurance is either terrible or terribly expensive. In the poorer sections of the city, there are abandoned houses, crumbling streets, and too many guns. The rates of murder and infant mortality are

appallingly high. In many ways, the capital of the United States is a showcase city, with its world-class museums and monuments, impressive government buildings, extensive parks, and opulent neighborhoods like Georgetown. But the average tourist sees only

this small part of the city.

Like so many American cities, the overall condition of Washington, DC reveals a dirty secret about the United States. Despite its claim to being the world's only

superpower, America has an Achilles Heel: crumbling infrastructure. In 2005, declaring

that one third of American roads are in major disrepair and nearly one-third of all bridges are structurally deficient, the American Society of Civil Engineers gave U.S. infrastructure a failing "D" grade.

Compared to South Korea's high-speed trains, the U.S. passenger train system is falling apart and always on the brink of bankruptcy. No one uses the trains if they have to get somewhere on time.

Or look at education. South Korea, along with Japan and Finland, scored at the top

of the recent OECD rankings in reading, mathematical, and scientific literacy. U.S. students scored in the middle of the pack on these tests. Despite spending more on education than most countries in the world, the United States finds itself with

a polarized system of top-notch private schools that attract students from all over the world and underfunded public schools that serve the poor and recent immigrants. Education expert Jonathan Kozol declares that the America's school system is full

of "savage inequalities." In other words, it is not simply the quantity of investment that is important, but the quality and the equality of investment.

The United States has long prided itself on its technological advances: the personal

computer, the Internet, biotechnology. But even here,

Americans should be worried.

While countries like South Korea are investing huge sums into information technology so that all citizens can become netizens, the United States is falling behind in

both research and development and in distributing the benefits to the population.

Half of all government investment in R & D is monopolized by the Pentagon, and the civilian portion is forecast to decline by another 10 percent by 2009.

It is therefore no surprise that manufacturing has virtually disappeared from the U.S. economy, falling from 23 percent in the 1980s to only 12.7 percent today. Without public investment in transportation and communications and research, manufacturing

shrivels up.

Wealthy Americans can pretend that they don't live in this crumbling United States.

They don't use public transportation. They don't send their children to public schools.

They live in safe neighborhoods, alarm their cars and houses, and pay for top-notch

health care. Their jobs are not outsourced to China.

But even the wealthy can remain ignorant of the Achilles Heel of infrastructure

for just so long. As America's infrastructure continues to deteriorate so will

U.S.

standing in the world. Without proper education, the majority of American students

will be unable to support a world-class economy.

Without sufficient public investment

to support smart growth, businesses will continue to relocate overseas.

The experience of Hurricane Katrina is a cautionary example. Because the U.S. government cut funding needed to strengthen the levees in New Orleans, the city was overwhelmed with water. While the poor suffered disproportionately, the rich too were forced

to flee the city.

If the U.S. government continues to pour money into the war in Iraq and ignores the educational, social, and physical infrastructural needs of the country, it will face the equivalent of dozens of Hurricane Katrinas in the future. It's been over

twenty years since Americans looked at the Asian model of development for inspiration. It's definitely time for a second look.

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