Taxpayers, the Age of Maintenance is upon us

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The trench was 6 feet deep, 4 feet wide — “grave-sized,” my helper quipped. Freezing water sloshed to our knees on a winter Friday evening when the temperature, already below zero, was falling with the darkness.

Our municipal utilities crew was replacing a leaking valve serving a fire hydrant, preventing a street from being hydraulically undermined. In the confines of a residential neighborhood, our backhoe operator had only one option for dumping the sopping clay excavated from the trench: He piled it, as gently as possible, against the wall of a private garage. It was mounded to just below the roof eave, where it froze solid. The owner/taxpayer wasn’t home, but would presumably return from work any moment. I assumed that this person would be upset, perhaps furious — and vocal.

Around 6 p.m., a car drove up to the half-buried garage. Oh-oh, I thought, here it comes. I heard the door open and close. A pause, then the sound of footsteps — a male tread to my ear — approaching the edge of the ditch. By then I was soaked, plastered with frosty mud, working in the beam of a flashlight. The walls of the trench were sheathed with ice.

The footsteps stopped at the rim, and I fancied I could feel the garage owner’s gaze on my back. I braced for a tongue-lashing. Several seconds passed, then the man cleared his throat.

“Well,” he said. “Whatever they’re paying you, it ain’t enough.”

I laughed, but mentally amended his statement: “Whatever you’re paying me …” As a taxpayer, he was ultimately my paymaster.

Public employees work at the precise junction of the conflict between the necessity of taxation and the universal hatred of it. This ambivalence is a source for our current political gridlock: We the people covet the benefits of civilization, but we don’t like to pay for them.

Forty years ago, in the bipartisan era of the “Minnesota Miracle,” when the umbilical cord between taxes and quality of life was apparent to many, President Obama’s remark during the last election campaign, “you didn’t build this,” would have been understood in the context in which it was intended: Government, supported by taxation, built the roads, bridges, water supply systems, sewage treatment plants, schools, airports, etc., that make capitalism and business possible.

Since the resurgence of “supply-side, trickle-down” economics 35 years ago, both Republicans and many Democrats have accepted the premise that if you make the rich even richer, it will somehow, via a faith-based notion of The Invisible Hand — also make the poor rich. George Bush the First, while running in the 1980 primary against Ronald Reagan (who, as president, raised taxes), aptly called it “voodoo economics.”

A tenet of this class conflict is the dogma that all taxes are bad, and the defenders of “voodoo” often trumpet: “The power to tax is the power to destroy!” True, but it’s also the power to create: the interstate highway system, Social Security and Medicare, safe drinking water, orbiting satellites nurturing the Internet, parks and libraries, fire departments, police forces, courts of law, etc. Tax revenue — well spent — is a substantial factor in what makes the difference between the United States and Sudan, or between Minnesota and Mississippi.

Our perception of taxes and government is rooted in history. That subject hasn’t been Americans’ strong suit, and for a
time it didn’t matter. Our wealth and power trumped the need for historical awareness. We were subject to forces of history, of course, but the impact of the outside world on our magnificent continent seemed negligible. For a typical citizen, an ignorance of history was no serious handicap; American myths were sufficient to inform your vote, if you troubled to go to the polls.

But consider a synopsis of our past: Five centuries ago, Europeans stumbled upon the Western Hemisphere. North and South America were fabulously rich in water, timber, soil, minerals and wildlife, and the indigenous people were swiftly nullified by disease and conquest, leaving almost half the land mass of the planet “vacant.” As Europeans migrated from their increasingly crowded and resource-scarce countries and flocked to the New World, the use of fossil fuels also began. North America was fat with such fuel — coal, oil, natural gas — and the 200-year boom was launched.

In his prescient 1951 masterpiece, “The Great Frontier,” historian Walter Prescott Webb noted that in 1500, there were 26.7 people per square mile in Europe. In 1650, with migration underway, there were 4.8 people per square mile in Europe and the New World combined. Due to this low people-to-land ratio, many European governments, and later the American government, handed valuable land and resources to individuals and businesses for a pittance, or for free. (Think of the railroads in the United States, for example, and the Homestead Act.) With so much room and so much wealth, capitalism, individual freedom and democracy flourished, as they could not readily do in crowded Europe, and population exploded. By 1930, the North American frontier had been closed for 40 years, and the people-per-square-mile ratio in Europe and the New World was back up to 29.5.

Was it only coincidence, Webb asked, that right then the world was suffering the Great Depression?

The Great Frontier, with its one-time bounty of free land and relatively easy wealth, was gone. Webb declared that only access to another planet could provide the same subsidy, long-term. The fossil-fuel age — a blip in the span of human history — is also closing, and eventually that abundant energy, despite recent finds, will dwindle to zero.

It’s distressing to contemplate, but the two-century binge is ending. True laissez-faire capitalism, a way of organizing economic activity that only works well in an atmosphere of superabundance and unlimited growth, is an obsolete idea. With 300 million-plus Americans and 7 billion-plus humans altogether, and all natural resources in decline (the planetary system is finite, after all), we are on the threshold of new era.

I propose we call it The Age of Maintenance. There will be resistance. Kurt Vonnegut Jr. wrote: “Another flaw in the human character is that everybody wants to build and nobody wants to do maintenance.” In other words, there is a strong tendency toward waste. In fact, in laissez-faire capitalism, there is often an incentive to waste: It’s more profitable, for example — at least in the short term — to just dump toxic byproducts into a river or into the air, rather than neutralizing them or not producing them in the first place. The fossil-fuel effluent of greenhouse gases is a perfect case in point.

When you perform maintenance, you conserve what you have, and that’s the logical first step toward a sustainable economy and civilization. In a crucial passage in his book, Webb worried about the survival of democracy in the postfrontier world: “The physical situation was such that in the presence of the frontier, capitalism and democracy could exist side by side, but when we penetrate below the surface we see that in reality the frontier subsidized both of them in a way we might not like to admit. ... [D]uring all the time that democracy and capitalism were making their rapid progress the sovereign [government] was dispensing the frontier to the people and to the capitalists with a lavish hand and on a practically free basis.” Webb notes that these “proceedings were extraordinary and that the greatest dividend in the history of the world was being declared to people who had made no considerable investment.”

One problem with maintenance is that it generally doesn’t pay well — to either stockholders or individuals. When that citizen with frozen mud against his garage quipped that I wasn’t being paid enough, he was correct — at least for that task. Innovation, particularly that which leads to efficiency and conservation, is certainly worthy of reward, but maintenance has been shortchanged. President Theodore Roosevelt, icon of conservative Republicans (despite a flirtation with the progressives of his day), said, “Every man holds his property subject to the general right of the community to regulate its use to whatever degree the public welfare may require it.”

Today, the public welfare demands that we all do maintenance — that we save rather than waste, repair and improve rather than endlessly expand. Our reward may be the survival of democracy and capitalism. The Great Frontier, measured by
physical growth, is past. Unless we relocate to a virgin planet, we need to find profit (and perhaps glamour) in upkeep, and gratification in the livelihood of ditches.

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