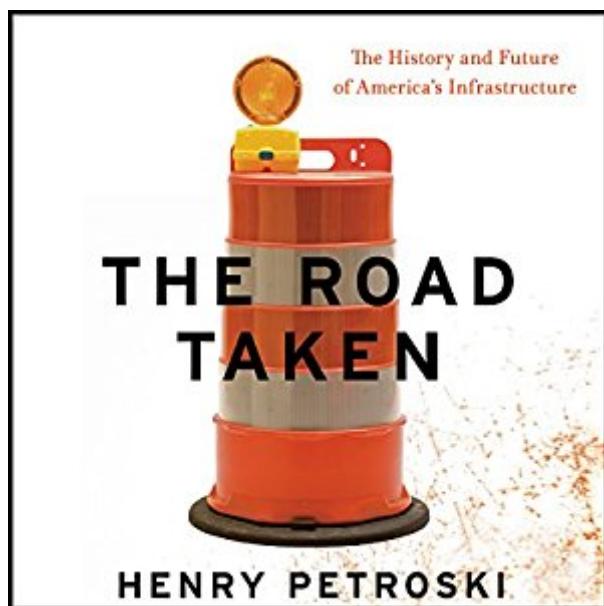


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# The Road Taken: The History And Future Of America's Infrastructure



## **Synopsis**

Physical infrastructure in the United States is crumbling. The American Society of Civil Engineers has, in its latest report, given American roads and bridges a grade of D and C+, respectively, and has described roughly 65,000 bridges in the United States as 'structurally deficient'. This crisis - and one need look no further than the I-35W bridge collapse in Minnesota to see that it is indeed a crisis - shows little sign of abating short of a massive change in attitude amongst politicians and the American public. In *The Road Taken*, acclaimed historian Henry Petroski explores our core infrastructure from historical and contemporary perspectives and explains how essential their maintenance is to America's economic health. Recounting the long history behind America's highway system, Petroski reveals the genesis of our interstate numbering system (even roads go east-west, odd go north-south); the inspiration behind the center line that has divided roads for decades; and the creation of such taken-for-granted objects as guardrails, stop signs, and traffic lights - all crucial parts of our national and local infrastructure. His history of the rebuilding of the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge reveals the complex and challenging interplay between government and industry inherent in the conception, funding, design, and building of major infrastructure projects while his forensic analysis of the street he lives on - its potholes, gutters, and curbs - will engage homeowners everywhere. A compelling work of history, *The Road Taken* is also an urgent clarion call aimed at American citizens, politicians, and anyone with a vested interest in our economic well-being. The road we take in the next decade toward rebuilding our aging infrastructure will in large part determine our future national prosperity.

## **Book Information**

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## Customer Reviews

I have just started the book but it is absolutely enthralling. Petroski has an incredible knowledge of the subject matter and somehow makes utilitarian objects such as roads and bridges seem fascinating. (My background in civil engineering may help form this opinion.) I think anyone will benefit from reading this book. The one take away so far is that America had better take heed of his message and we need to get up to speed on this very critical subject. I, for one, will not pass a bridge without thinking about what holds it up. I am seeing this as front page news here in DC with the recent foundation troubles exposed on a major commuter arterial bridge across the Potomac.

Compared to Petroski's other engineering discourses (e.g. "To Engineer is Human") this seemed a bit long and labored. Still some interesting details on roads and bridges, not so much on railroads and canals. The humor is there, but slightly overwhelmed by less interesting detail. There are suggestions this was a bit "written to order" by highway or transportation interests. Not sure of that, but it would explain much. Not a bad read, really, but not up to Petroski's standards IMHO.

Interesting book. I have read through a number of this author's books and usually find them very interesting. This topic of infrastructure is a bit more complicated it seems because it is a huge topic and prone to political diatribes (though that doesn't happen here) and minutiae. Here the book delves through the topic with as much an ability to discuss the topic in general terms. Historical aspects, the need for trying to maintain what is happening and why the nation should be more concerned about what should be done going forward. The need is immense, but of course there is huge disagreement over how to fund these projects and what takes priority. I found the book a bit disappointing perhaps because this is such an interesting topic and so important to the macro economy and this is something that I wanted a much more major treatment perhaps that is because Petroski makes the topic vital and interesting. Is this his best book? Not necessarily. But it is well worth reading and absorbing and this topic will continue to become a major topic. In many ways the country is surviving on seed corn and investments from years ago.

Dr. Petrowski writes very well, and this book is a compendium of stories about our civil engineering infrastructure. It deals, really, only with surface transportation, so deals with only a part of our infrastructure. It does not describe electricity or communications, both important elements of our

infrastructure. My biggest complaint is that there does not seem to be an over-arching theme to the book, aside from reminding the reader that good materials and good design result in lower costs in the long run. Still, it is a good read, with lots of tidbits about what was built when.

The book is a total disappointment. The title is somewhat misleading. Engineers that I have known are methodical and methodological in their approach to everything they do. I have always been impressed. Perhaps "civil engineering" is more of a gloss. The book lacks methodology for engineering and the claim to being history by a University Professor titled in both fields. Critically, it fails to teach anything about today's real problems in a crisis of infrastructural decline, and is mildly complacent about that crisis as a total system. Instead, it provides piecemeal approaches to selected projects (bridges, roadway construction) in the past and future, along with superficial policy issues and disputes that are already in the public domain from news reports. There are no deeper insights. There are no good references for historic or engineering in regard to infrastructure. In fact there are no good references on approaching political policy strategies. In the "Acknowledgements" (p.283); the author notes that his job was made easy by technical supports available to him from Duke University. He states quite complacently that it "...made doing research on matters of historical and current interest practically an armchair activity." That is a direct quote and I submit to you that the entire work reads like an extended magazine article dictated to a machine from an armchair recliner. It does not read like a serious research project from a major University, and it is frustratingly shallow in what it does handle.. There is nothing here that you can't find in greater comprehensive detail on the internet.

I bought the book because I've been looking for a good text on the breadth and significance of our infrastructure issues, and as an engineer I have long appreciated how Henry Petroski communicates our professional concerns to the public. Overall I found the book does a good job but drags in the middle. The book sets up the topic well, particularly in its exposition of the long-held and publicly communicated but largely ignored expressions of concern from the professional civil engineering community. As is always the case in Petroski's writings, where it touches on the technical it remains approachable for the non-technical reader. But in focusing to the degree it does on specific case studies, it doesn't effectively communicate that there are many cases just like them going on simultaneously. It might have helped if Petroski had retold the story of "The Hundred Year Old Shay" and added that our infrastructure can be seen similarly. It is there to be inferred, but it should have been made explicit. Still, the book can inform the public and its conversations on this

crucial topic. I would also recommend it for high school and college level introduction to engineering courses.

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