

Reclaiming the Proud American Tradition of Thinking Big

BY FORMER GOV. EDWARD G. RENDELL



hen I was 8 years old, my father, despite never being involved in politics, deeply believed in the Democratic Party, and he imbued me with that same belief. But

things were different in 1952 when we went out and handed out campaign fliers for Adlai Stevens. On election night, we didn't have a television and there were no exit polls, so my dad and I went to the neighborhood grocery store to hear the election returns. At the store, the radio blared that Gen. Dwight Eisenhower had just captured enough states to win the presidency.

On the way home I saw tears flowing from my father's eyes. That's the only time I saw that in our life together. The memory of his tears still make me yearn for the days when the Democratic Party

thought big and was much less shy about demanding that government do what is necessary to grow the economy and produce enough decent jobs so that every able-bodied American can find work.

As bad as that election loss was, President Eisenhower turned out to understand that in order for America to prosper, he needed to take bold action. His experience leading the troops in Europe during World War II made it clear to him that world-class infrastructure was essential to strong economic growth. Fortunately, in those days, being a Republican didn't mean being antigovernment. Today, Ike shares the prize with Abe Lincoln for taking the lead in paving the way for this nation to have the largest economy in the world—Lincoln by successfully campaigning for federal funds to construct the transcontinental railroad linking the nation's booming East

with its expanding West, and Eisenhower by building the national highway system.

It wasn't easy for President Eisenhower to persuade Congress to pass the Federal Highway Act in 1956. It was a slog, where the needs of the nation were subject to the needs of politics. But he was dogged and found a way to build a consensus to get something big done, something that would secure a brighter future for generations to come.

I was only 12 years old at the time that the Act passed. I was too young to really grasp what building a national highway system really meant, but not too young to be impressed with the general's grand vision, moxie, and persistence. Even in my solidly Democratic household, the National Highway Act was hailed.

For the next 35 years, the federal government led the charge to physically connect America's cities and towns with more than 47,000 miles of interstate highways and local roads—a stunning achievement envied around the world. The highway system built the modern economy by opening up new markets for entrepreneurs, facilitating interstate commerce, and creating pathways for millions of people, including the thousands of workers who built our national road system, into the middle class.

Much of the impact of this great national building campaign wasn't so obvious to me growing up in Manhattan. I took for granted the 660 miles of subway tracks that made it possible for me and my fellow New Yorkers of every class and race to travel the

boroughs of the Big Apple with ease. Later in life, after serving as Philadelphia's mayor and then as governor of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, my appreciation of President Eisenhower grew, and his powerful vision and political skills really hit home.

When I became mayor, Philadelphia's transit system was subpar and we lacked the funds to make it great. Despite my best efforts, with only 2 of 15 seats on the regional transit system board, Philadelphia's transit needs played second fiddle to the suburban demands for increased services. Our city roads, potholed and puckered, needed upgrading as well, but here again Philadelphia was outnumbered on the



Regional Planning Organization's board responsible for allocating federal highway system dollars across seven counties. This is not a blame game, but the cards are stacked against cities when it comes to tapping federal funds for the essential transportation improvements needed by cities—where most of the residents are people of color and families who are increasingly poor or struggling.

Finally, I became governor and I thought I could really level the playing field for cities and poor rural communities. For these communities I wanted to improve public education and rebuild their infrastructure. While I can proudly say that I accomplished much of what I set out to do, when it comes to infrastructure, many of our best proposals were left on the cutting-room floor. Not because the ideas weren't sound or too expensive. They were not adopted because too many elected officials were afraid to think big. And worse yet, I faced a growing cabal of elected leaders dead set against the government serving as a partner with the private sector to build the infrastructure necessary to grow the economy.

That's some bad Kool-Aid! It's especially bad for those seeking to expand economic opportunity for all.

In 1952 when President Eisenhower was elected, the Hearst Newspapers wrote:

The obsolescence of the nation's highways presents an appalling problem of waste, danger and

death. Next to the manufacture of the most modern implements of war as a guarantee of peace through strength, a network of modern roads is as necessary to defense as it is to our national economy and personal safety.

We have fallen far behind in this task—until today there is hardly a city of any size without almost hopeless congestion within its boundaries and stalled traffic blocking roads leading beyond these boundaries. A solution can and will be found through the joint planning of the Federal, state and local governments.

Much worse could be said about much of our infrastructure today. Without real leadership, by 2050, when our population will be nearly 100 million people larger, more urbanized, and majority people of color, our infrastructure will be completely obsolete and overburdened.

It's time to reclaim America's proud bipartisan tradition of thinking big. It's time to reaffirm that government is a useful lever for growth so all Americans can share the great promise of opportunity. It's time for our elected leaders on both sides of the aisle to lead in the tradition of President Eisenhower and put the interests of this great nation first above all and any other parochial interest. It's time to rebuild America. ■