
FINANCE_{AND}COMMERCE

August 3, 2007

Making Political Gain Out of Tragedy

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Like everyone else, I was stunned at the collapse of the bridge over I-35W in Minneapolis. I also wondered how long it take for the tragedy to become fodder for political tongue-wagging. Unfortunately, I didn't have to wait long.

A colleague on a political blog I write for called it "Katrina North," saying "The people killed, maimed and traumatized by the horrendous bridge collapse yesterday evening are cannon fodder in the war that the rich are waging on the poor." She blamed tax cuts, the new Twins stadium, and "our megalomaniac [sic] president."

Granted, I'm with her in opposing the corporate welfare for the Twins stadium. This woman has been on the far, far left of the political spectrum for quite a while, so I've never seen her support a tax cut. Still, I was appalled by such opportunism and dare I say, schadenfreude? (Don't worry folks; at least she doesn't live in Minnesota.)

Speculation is now arising over whether MnDOT failed to identify the bridge as in need of structural repair. At the time that I'm writing this, I have no idea why or even if that was the case, and I suspect that we won't know for a while.

But the collapse does bring us to questions of allocating tax dollars and managing risk. Could public policy have averted this tragedy?

Let's start with the basic problem of economics, scarcity. Except for a few ascetics, we all have many more wants for material goods, services, and experiences than we can possibly fulfill.

The same holds true for a nation or a state. There are many, many demands on the public purse in today's world: schools, health care, environmental clean-up, public subsidies for day care, libraries, civil rights offices, public defenders.

We make choices on how to allocate the budget. It's a messy process, leaving nobody satisfied.

So I asked my interlocutor, which child received day care, which contaminated lot was cleaned up, which indigent person received medical treatment so that people could die in the Mississippi River? Do you really want to get into this way of thinking? Even

communist countries, in which government nominally owns everything, have to make choices.

No legislature has the resources, foresight, or wisdom of God. So it makes imperfect choices among competing demands, and policy is carried out by hundreds and thousands of bureaus and employees. We can't expect a totally rational government because, for a variety of reasons you'll find in organizational theory, there is no systematic rationality. So no transportation policy will be perfect.

That's enough for resources. Now to risk.

Bad things happens. Sometimes, very bad things happens. We call some of those things "accidents," because they are unplanned, unexpected, unpredicted, and random. We face risks all the time, individually and socially.

We can't control everything, so we accept some level of risk in each area of life and policy. If we want to reduce traffic fatalities to zero, we can. How? Set the speed limit to 5 m.p.h. But we don't. We accept the benefits that come from higher limits, and take the risk.

After a disaster, the temptation is to say "Never Again!," and take "whatever steps necessary" to prevent its occurrence. That's an attempt to eliminate risk.

But there's a problem with this completely understandable response. No action exists without consequences. A specific risk can be eliminated, but risk itself cannot be eliminated. Attempting to eliminate one risk will increase the probability or magnitude of other risks.

After 9/11, we made airline security tighter. That's good. But as a result, people started spending more time driving long distances, increasing the risk of highway deaths.

Even in the pure intellectual world of scientific research, we know that we can't control all risk. When researchers proclaim a finding with a 95 or 99 percent confidence level, they leave open a 5 percent or 1 percent possibility that they are wrong.

I predict—and for good reason, I seldom make predictions—that one legacy of the bridge collapse will be a massive bonding bill and a significant increase in the gasoline tax. It will be easy to demagogue the issue: Oppose the tax increase, and you favor dumping school children from decrepit bridges. I also wouldn't rule out a revisiting of last session's tax-increase orgy, to increase taxes across-the-board. After all, it's for the public good.

But risk-reducers, beware. Will the money actually go into road construction? Or will it, in the style of bonding bills, go to pork projects?

Will it go to roads and bridges, or will it be shuffled off to bright and shiny light rail lines that unlike bus service, are inflexible, neglecting the putative reason for the increased spending?

It will be difficult to understand why and how the bridge went down. It will be more difficult to make the proper policy response.