

# Upfront

As I write this on the morning of October 1, Georgia Power's outage map reports that 2,891 Skidaway Island customers remain without power. I presume that this includes a mix of households, businesses, and other buildings. But, if 2,500 "customers" are households and we assume approximately two people per household, about 5,000 of you remain in the dark. Our office hasn't come back online. If the estimates provided on the outage map are accurate, 1,090 customers' service will be restored sometime today or this evening, and the remainder by late tomorrow night. Internet access remains a problem in the area, as my coffee shop in Sandfly is still offline (but open for business, thankfully).

You might not remember this since the storm has taken the front space in our minds; but, on September 23, we suffered extensive cell and internet service disruption in the region. A Verizon spokesperson explained at the time: "A third party vendor has experienced two fiber cuts, which has (sic) caused a disruption in service for some customers in the Savannah area. Our engineers are engaged and working with our vendor to quickly restore service."

Area communications channels went dark the day before Donald Trump visited Savannah. Bad timing.

There is ongoing and extensive public discourse about American "infrastructure" improvement needs. It's a very complex challenge to our shared prospects. According to the Congressional Budget Office (CBO), infrastructure (admittedly, a broad categorization) spending as a component of annual federal outlays peaked just below 6 percent near the end of the 1960s and has declined steadily to roughly 2.5 percent today. The Biden administration extols the impact of the "bipartisan" Infrastructure, Investment, and Jobs Act (IIJA) (HR 3684) that was enacted with a stroke of the presidential pen in November of 2021. "New" infrastructure federal funding included in the legislation totaled (at the time) around \$520 billion. The Inflation Reduction Act of 2022 added another \$150 billion for "infrastructure," with most of it targeted towards transportation and clean energy initiatives designed to mitigate carbon emissions.

Lest you think there is some partisan slant to my writing, I am using hard data from the CBO, the Congressional Record, and the White House archives. This analysis is purely mathematical. The IIJA broke its infrastructure allocations into 11 buckets. Roads and bridges received \$110 billion of the total earmarks, or 21 percent. The "power grid" got \$65 billion and "broadband internet" got \$65 billion. Together, these two buckets are the only among the 11 that deal with current energy and communications capacity. Given the absolute essentialism of energy and communication (and water) as elements of a functioning society, I worry about our collective investment strategy.

There is imbedded incentive misalignment in federal investment. Congressmen have an easier time shining the spotlight on their own largesse when they appropriate a bridge or a building and put a bunch of people in orange shirts along a roadway to watch cars pass through traffic-cone diversion lanes than they do by keeping the lights on, which is the unsexy, unseen, and taken-for-granted "normal" state of being. Special interest groups have far-reaching influence on how we spend our collective money, and their incentives are often no better aligned with public benefit than those of the legislature. Moreover, the structure of America's utilities industry is an anomaly not easily explained. For example, I own a little Southern Company stock. Southern is the parent of Georgia Power. This is a shareholder-owned (public) company, but it is subject to strict regulation by a public utilities commission. Basically, a utility as it exists in the U.S. today is in the business of sourcing and selling power, while innovation is...well...limited, by limited profit incentives (because of public oversight). Other power providers are publicly owned (government-run). Such enterprises also lack the innovation engine provided by profit incentive and their resources are limited by public budgetary constraints. The third category of power providers – cooperative ownership structures, or customer-owned companies – are typically too small to make significant investments. In short, we aren't set up to improve at the pace of other industries.

When power goes out and/or we lose internet connectivity, we are significantly inconvenienced, quickly frustrated, and mutually unproductive. There are many, many people impacted by Helene who are considerably worse off than we because of the storm. Such is the case with most bad things: One often takes solace (?) in the notion that his fate is less dire than that of others. It's a combination of compassion, empathy, and self-interest that leads us to such conciliatory conclusions. I don't want my essay to imply that I am unsympathetic to those who have lost loved ones and property and hope. It's a horrible thing.

But we have a serious problem that extends beyond the carnage. We spend a tremendous amount on big weaponry, manpower, and technological resources to enable our warriors to directly (or stealthily) confront enemies who would do us harm. But two snips to fiber cables renders a region suddenly out of touch with the rest of the world? How about the astonishing disconnect between the evolution of machines so that they can "think" for themselves and move about in ways that are more agile than humans, but we continue to carry the lifeblood that brings these machines "to life" (energy) on relatively fragile wires strung between upright, unsteady sticks? Our enemies need not be particularly well-resourced to throw society into chaos. A few shovels, some ladders, and wire cutters are a lot cheaper and easier to come by than a nuclear weapons program.

I don't have the answers to this calculus at my immediate disposal. But I'd feel a little safer and steadier if I believed that someone in a position of public power had the wherewithal, integrity, and tenacity to begin to comprehend and remediate our most intractable challenges. Unfortunately, like Quixote with his windmills (old-school clean energy), I'm not sure we completely understand what we are up against.

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