Editorial

Let's build for the future

Recent natural disasters that have struck the United States underline the urgent task of reconstructing our national infrastructure, and building in the redundancy that would alleviate human suffering when disasters strike.

The last word is certainly not yet in on the Los Angeles earthquake. There are questions about whether structural weaknesses could have been averted to further minimize damage. There is, for example, an interesting possible synergy with recent flooding, which affected the subsoil and perhaps magnified the effect of the earthquake. And there is reason to fear a far more devastating quake to come.

The state of our scientific knowledge does not allow us to predict an earthquake with any precision, and there is, in any case, a limit to specific preventive measures that can be taken. Yet we must deal with earthquakes, abnormal rainfall, fires, and the like, all of which have plagued California lately.

Questions have been raised about whether timely repairs or structural improvements had been made on the highway system. Some of the over 1,000 people now rendered homeless probably lived in homes which were structurally deficient.

There is, however, a more systematic problem to be faced, and that is the general underinvestment in every part of our infrastructure—the electrical grid, water supply, sewage treatment, transportation—not only in California, but throughout the United States.

The U.S. government in mid-January was forced to shut down operations in the nation's capital, and industry along the East Coast was asked to do likewise, in order to conserve electricity. People in Atlanta were warned not to take baths, because there was a grave danger that the water system could not withstand the stresses of the unusually cold weather. Thus even an unusual spell of cold weather created a strain on marginal East Coast infrastructure.

It is about time that people recognize that a "zero-sum" economy just does not work. We must build redundancy into our system. In a sense, the problem of dealing with national disasters is not dissimilar to that of civil defense. We must prepare alternate roadways in case a section of the highway system, or its access routes, is blown out. We must have extra supplies of food, coal, and oil to deal with possible emergency shortages.

Indeed, the same thinking which has led to the monstrous dislocation caused by the recent earthquake is now built into planning for the Clinton health system. But we should never put a cap on health care. We must plan so that we can deliver essential support services as they are needed.

Without doubt, the worst problem for the folks in Los Angeles right now, is the collapse of the integrated freeway and highway system, which has turned what was already a system plagued by horrendous traffic jams, into a veritable nightmare.

Viewed from the standpoint of proper policy for the future, there is one piece of good news amidst all the disaster coverage. The Los Angeles Metropolitan Transportation Authority reports that tunnels and stations of the transit system appeared to be unscathed, although the system remained idled by power loss. Unfortunately, even with power restored, Los Angeles is still only in process of constructing a viable mass transit system.

Now is the time to prioritize building mass transportation in Los Angeles that will also operate between major cities in the region. Proposals already exist to build a magnetically levitated train system between Los Angeles and Las Vegas. This should be done. Indeed, the industrial capabilities for the development of this newest rail technology are located within California's aerospace industry, which needs just such an economic stimulus.

Ultra high-speed travel has been generally rejected in the United States because, on first glance, it is much more expensive to run trains at speeds of 160 miles per hour and up. This is the same bankrupt thinking which has marginalized the infrastructure as a whole.

Accidental death is certainly tragic. But we can surely avoid the kind of so-called natural disasters which have befallen Americans in the recent period because of unnatural decisions not to build levees and dams, and not to provide sufficient electrical and other infrastructure capacities.