

This Is Why We Need to Spend \$4 Trillion

By David Brooks

I've spent the last few weeks in a controlled fury — and I'm not normally a fury kind of guy. Joe Biden, Nancy Pelosi and others are trying to pass arguably the most consequential legislative package in a generation, and what did I sense in my recent travels across five states? The same thing I sense in my social media feed and on the various media “most viewed” lists.

Indifference.

Have we given up on the idea that policy can change history? Have we lost faith in our ability to reverse, or even be alarmed by, national decline? More and more I hear people accepting the idea that America is not as energetic and youthful as it used to be.

I can practically hear the spirits of our ancestors crying out — the ones who had a core faith that this would forever be the greatest nation on the planet, the New Jerusalem, the last best hope of earth.

My ancestors were aspiring immigrants and understood where the beating heart of the nation resided: with the working class and the middle class, the ones depicted by Willa Cather, James Agee, Ralph Ellison, or in “The Honeymooners,” “The Best Years of Our Lives” and “On the Waterfront.” There was a time when the phrase “the common man” was a source of pride and a high compliment.

Over the past few decades there has been a redistribution of dignity — upward. From Reagan through Romney, the Republicans valorized entrepreneurs, C.E.O.s and Wall Street. The Democratic Party became dominated by the creative class, who attended competitive colleges, moved to affluent metro areas, married each other and ladled advantages onto their kids so they could leap even further ahead.

There was a bipartisan embrace of a culture of individualism, which opens up a lot of space for people with resources and social support, but means loneliness and abandonment for people without. Four years of college became the definition of the good life, which left roughly two-thirds of the country out.

And so came the crisis that Biden was elected to address — the poisonous combination of elite insularity and vicious populist resentment.

Read again Robert Kagan's foreboding Washington Post essay on how close we are to a democratic disaster. He's talking about a group of people so enraged by a lack of respect that they are willing to risk death by Covid if they get to stick a middle finger in the air against those who they think look down on them. They are willing to torch our institutions because they are so resentful against the people who run them.

The Democratic spending bills are economic packages that serve moral and cultural purposes. They should be measured by their cultural impact, not merely by some wonky analysis. In real, tangible ways, they would redistribute dignity back downward. They would support hundreds of thousands of jobs for home health care workers, child care workers, construction workers, metal workers, supply chain workers. They would ease the indignity millions of parents face having to raise their children in poverty.

Look at the list of states that, according to a recent analysis of White House estimates by CNBC, could be among those getting the most money per capita from the infrastructure bill. A lot of them are places where Trumpian resentment is burning hot: Alaska, Wyoming, Montana, North and South Dakota.

Biden had it exactly right when he told a La Crosse, Wis., audience, “The jobs that are going to be created here — largely, it’s going to be those for blue-collar workers, the majority of whom will not have to have a college degree to have those jobs.”

In normal times I’d argue that many of the programs in these packages may be ineffective. I’m a lot more worried about debt than progressives seem to be. But we’re a nation enduring a national rupture, and the most violent parts of it may still be yet to come.

These packages say to the struggling parents and the warehouse workers: I see you. Your work has dignity. You are paving your way. You are at the center of our national vision.

This is how you fortify a compelling moral identity, which is what all of us need if we’re going to be able to look in the mirror with self-respect. This is the cultural transformation that good policy can sometimes achieve. Statecraft is soulcraft.

These measures would not solve our problems, obviously. In many large Western nations, there are vast tectonic forces concentrating wealth in the affluent metro areas and leaving vast swaths of the countryside behind. We don’t yet know how to do the sort of regional development that reverses this trend.

But we can make it clear that we value people’s choices. For years there was almost an officially approved life: Get a B.A., move to those places where capital and jobs are congregating, even if it means leaving your community, roots and extended family.

Those were not desired or realistic options for millions of people. These packages, on the other hand, say: We support the choices you have made, in the places where you have chosen to live.

That fundamental respect is the key scarcity in America right now.