

View from the Bridge

The finest hour of my career took place at 5:30 p.m., November 9, 1965, in the middle of the George Washington Bridge. I was in school in New York City at the time, and I used to commute from New Jersey on a bicycle. I had calculated that, give or take a few minutes, the bicycle was about as fast as public transportation or the automobile, sometimes faster, and, unlike the car, was good for your health, did not pollute, and would outlast an automobile by many years, without much care. This was considered a peculiar stand in those innocent years of boundless energy reserves and open frontiers, but I persevered.

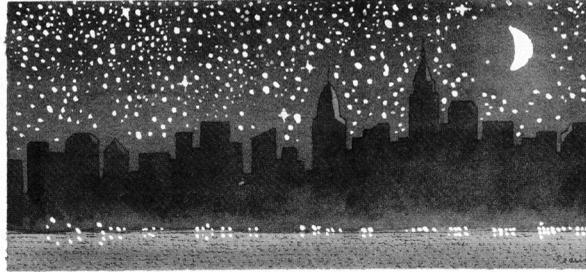
On the evening of November 9, emerging from a late class, I observed an unusual phenomenon for New York City, the orange half-moon rising between the darkened buildings of the college. It took me a while to realize that the reason I could see the moon was that the electricity was off. I thought something had gone wrong with the power on campus until I ventured into the streets—they too were dark. The city was strangely silent; I could hear the shuffle of footsteps on the sidewalk and the mumble of hushed conversation, and here and there candlelight glimmered in a few restaurant windows. At one point on the street, I came upon a long, silent line of downcast commuters emerging from the stalled subway.

Rumors began to spread: the power outage was citywide; it was the work of saboteurs, of communists. Someone said they heard that the whole East Coast was without electricity, but that was too outrageous to be believed.

I got on my bicycle and started home through the darkened streets. People were standing about in little groups, and I noticed that they were actually talking to one another. Cars and buses were jammed up and barely moving because the stoplights weren't working. I rode past street after street of stalled traffic and out onto the bridge. Below me I could see the black river, the great autumnal moon floating over the dark island of the city. Halfway over, it struck me that the New Jersey side of the river was dark as well. I got off my bicycle and looked north and south. As far as I could see there was only the primordial Hudson, with the dimmed heights of the Palisades to the west, open water of the harbor to the south, and, behind me, the

unreal city. I am sorry to have to report that I felt vindicated.

I've had other moments of satisfaction since that time. I am one of the perverse individuals who actually enjoyed the long gas lines during the so-called energy crisis of 1974 and '75.



In my opinion, things got better for a while back then. People started taking account of where energy came from, and, for a few months, maybe even a year, it looked as if this crisis-oriented society would finally start to formulate some sort of a sensible, energy-efficient transportation system.

It didn't happen of course. The 1980s make up in manifold for what still small voice of reason was uttered in the mid-1970s. But even so, now in the 1990s, there are glimmerings of hope. It did not take a massive blackout, nor an energy crisis, nor a war for oil supply, to convince thinking scientists that total reliance on oil and coal was an endgame. Efficient systems such as magnetic levitation trains, high-speed rail, electric vehicles, alternative fuels, flexible fuel vehicles, fuel cells, and any number of similar innovations have been available for two decades. But in the past, sound transportation planning in this country has come up against a massive, centralized power structure known as Detroit, which is opposed to anything but huge, consumptive, gasoline-powered, high-speed, inhumane vehicles that waste energy, pollute the air, annihilate wildlife and people, and have been single-handedly responsible for the destruction of urban centers, the creation of a vast, sprawling, indifferent suburbia, and the ruination of the American landscape.

Now Detroit is foundering, and, rather than blame the Japanese, it would perhaps be more constructive to fall back on the old American idea of self-reliance and design a sustainable and humane transportation system.

May/June 1992