

*Doing things on the fast and cheap* can work for only so long —and it's time the U.S. cleans up its act.

**Quick and Dirty**

by Lyn Relph

“Quick and dirty” has been the American way for such a long time that in the 1960s, it inspired a satirical bumper sticker: *America-Use It Once and Throw It Away*. When our landfills were overflowing so severely that they polluted our groundwater and threatened to spread over our open spaces like kudzu vine, our culture really did resemble a throwaway. But it's beginning to look like the Quick and Dirty Era is coming to an end.

In former mill towns of New England, I've seen the proud factories of Victorian days standing deserted and neglected.

Terms like *eyesore* are inadequate to express the deep shame those piles of bricks summon up. Some of them have been caving in for more than 50 years. Town after town seem too poor in spirit to form a cleanup committee, knock down those piles of brick, get into the used brick business and wring the dollars they need out of those old ghosts. An evil spell has been cast over those valleys.

**Echoes of the Past**

Out in the high deserts of Nevada and eastern California, ghost towns like Bodie and Rhyolite tell stories of people who, when the seam played out, picked up and walked or rode off into the sunset, thousands at a time, leaving everything behind. Entire smelters, saloons and houses, courthouses, churches, boilers big as houses, miles of cable and ore cars, down to the bathtubs, commodes, furniture and hurricane lamps, everything still sits where it was left in 1890 or 1910, when the last residents died or

skulked away.

**New Orleans—Future Ghost Town?**

A century later, nor have hordes of crews descended on the Katrina-ravaged neighborhoods of New Orleans to clean up that mess, haul it away and detoxify it. How many summers will it be allowed to sit there and fester? Will it become a ghost town National Monument, a living museum like Bodie and Rhyolite? Will it take an outbreak of plague to finally prompt a serious cleanup effort?

**No Longer Mobile**

And everywhere in quick and dirty America, old dead cars dot the landscape. Every farm has a little yard full of them. Byways and back streets become car cemeteries; tires and wheels gone, windowless hulks sit on roadsides, in stream beds, at scenic turnouts, on mountaintops and beaches. A public fortune is spent every year managing the mess.

The 1960s also heard a public outcry at Detroit's practice of planned obsolescence, when they designed and made cars that died in three years. But the groan Americans sent up was only halfhearted: they were in love with their new cars, but then they threw them away, the jokesters noted, as soon as the ashtrays were filled. Fixing a car and keeping it running was read as a symptom of poverty: buying a new car every year symbolized success. But the outcry against planned obsolescence at least raised a question.

**Digital Detritus**

When we entered the space program and later the computer age, all their parts needed to be tiny and light, yet strong and powerful. Microchip makers had to build clean rooms after discovering that a single speck of dust could ruin a chip.

High-speed aircraft and NASA payloads also scrapped every extra inch or ounce. There was no room for slop, and however long it took to get predictable performance, that's how long it took.

But old habits have considerable inertia. NASA's booster rockets themselves became space trash; the moon mission left a heap of refuse behind; and our low earth orbit is now getting pressed for room because of all the old stuff and junk drifting around the earth.

Computers, too; processors and display screens and printers have become major obstacles to recycling plans. The junk is piling up, and still no one has developed a completely modular product where new modules snap into the place of outdated ones. But people are talking about it, and we can hope that such a trend gathers momentum.

Many old dams have been removed from spawning streams. There is talk of removing many more. New dam proposals go through a much longer, more detailed review process, and new dam designs must include mitigations for numerous negative environmental impacts. Cars are now built to last longer, for 10 or 11 years instead of the old three. These are promising changes.

**A Kinder, Gentler War?**

Even the war industry has begun to talk the talk. They claim they can make surgical strikes, causing minimal collateral damage, thanks to their high tech weapons systems. But their hearts, their spirits, their minds and their culture are still with quick and dirty, as we have seen to our shame in Iraq. Shock and Awe was a predictable old-fashioned disaster.

Now this new leadership is promising a more intelligent counterinsurgency campaign, and while it's late, it's never too late to finally wean ourselves off our addiction to the quick and dirty. If the commander-in-chief, generals and admirals can give it up, perhaps we can really begin to find our way to a cleaner, more peaceful future.

**Think Global, Act Local**

Iraq isn't the only place we have catching up to do. Right here in Redding at the Iron Mountain Superfund site, we have a huge reminder of the debt our wild and woolly forefathers left us. Progress is expensive and slow, but by all reports progress is slowly being made.

In addition to the cleanups required by messes of previous centuries, the cleanup jobs in Baghdad and New Orleans will take years. On many fronts, it's beginning to look like quick and dirty is a wasteful luxury we simply can't afford any more.

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