

[PRINT](#) [BACK TO SLATE](#)

Slate

PRESS BOX

Paved and Confused

What Krugman, Maddow, and the press corps don't understand about gravel roads.

By Jack Shafer

Posted Monday, Aug. 16, 2010, at 6:24 PM ET

[USA Today](#) was among the first to sound the alarm that the nation's paved roads were ripped up and turned to gravel in a Feb. 4 piece [headlined](#) "Tight Times Put Gravel on the Road." [Bloomberg BusinessWeek](#) got its piece of the story in April with "In North Dakota, a Rebirth of Gravel Roads," and the [Wall Street Journal](#) contributed "Roads to Ruin: Towns Rip Up the Pavement" on July 17.

Although none of these stories exaggerated the paved-to-gravel devolution of some of America's back roads, that's not the way two of the country's top media liberals read them. The *New York Times*'s [Paul Krugman](#), obviously riffing off the *Journal* coverage, labeled the downgrading of U.S. roads as a metaphorical harbinger of the nation's decline in his Aug. 8 column.

"America is now on the unlit, unpaved road to nowhere," wrote Krugman.

The next night, [Rachel Maddow](#) echoed Krugman on her MSNBC show, specifically citing the *Journal* story, calling gravelization a "wacky Luddite solution."

"We are literally unpaving the roads," Maddow exclaimed.

As long as she insists on being literal about it, Maddow must concede that the number of miles of road being unpaved is trivially low. By *USA Today*'s count, 100 miles in Michigan, three miles in Tuscarora State Forest, Pa., and 11 miles in Hancock County, Ind., were unpaved over the last two years. Add to that number the 10 miles of roads in Stutsman County, N.D., that the *BusinessWeek* story reported were scheduled for shredding and the 100 miles of unpaving performed in South Dakota last year reported in the *Wall Street Journal*, and you've got just 224 miles of demoted road.

If we continue converting paved road into gravel road at the rate reported in the three stories cited above, we'll eliminate all [2.7 million miles](#) of the nation's paved roads in about, oh, 24,000 years.

So why the pundit panic? Yes, it's true that some jurisdictions are having trouble keeping roads in good repair because gas-tax revenues, which pay for road construction and maintenance, have dropped, thanks to motorists [driving](#) more fuel-efficient vehicles and logging fewer miles. It's also true that voters are routinely voting against new taxes to build and maintain roads. And it's also true that road-maintenance costs are growing.

But the long-term road trend—unacknowledged in the stories—is that local, state, and federal governments have been on a paving binge for the last 50 years. According to federal government [statistics](#), the country had 1.23 million miles of paved road and 2.31 million miles of unpaved road in 1960. By 2008, that ratio had flipped—2.73 million miles of paved road versus 1.32 million miles of unpaved. In other words, in a half century the infrastructure gained *1.5 million miles* of paved road.

In only two reporting periods between 1960 and 2008 did the number of U.S. paved miles decline. In 1993, they dropped 25,000 from the previous year, and in 2004, they fell by 34,000. This unpaving failed to disturb pundits back then—or, I should say, I can't find any pundits bemoaning the loss of paved road back then in Nexis.

When a road gets unpaved, there's usually a good reason for it. The *Wall Street Journal* waits until the final paragraphs of its story to explain that Highway 10—the North Dakota road that's being unpaved and is the peg for its article—was made redundant in the 1950s by the construction of Interstate 94, which parallels it. Traffic on Highway 10 proceeded to fall and fall until the thoroughfare "became a lazy backcountry road dotted with abandoned farmsteads," the *Journal* reports.

Both the *Journal* and *BusinessWeek* reported that the road's owners—the citizens of Stutsman County, N.D.—don't want to pay to keep the road paved. They've rejected at least four tax measures in the past 22 years that would have helped preserve their section of Highway 10. In June, they voted down a fifth measure, the *Journal* reported. According to the [Associated Press](#), the measure was approved by rural precincts but not by city precincts.

If Stutsman County voters are content to surrender their sparsely driven roads to gravel, why are people like Krugman and Maddow making such a fuss? There's a [preservationist](#) instinct operating here that holds that anything that has been must always be. Also, from their media perches far away, Krugman and Maddow are interpreting the loss of a few miles of Stutsman County road as a sign of the collapse of civilization when all that's happening is that the country is performing triage on its roads, using its



road budget to give the most-used streets the best care.

A strong case can be made that North Dakota and maybe a few other states are now paying the price—or not paying the price, as it were—for having overbuilt their road systems. The most recent federal [numbers](#) show that North Dakota has 86,842 miles of road, compared with next-door-neighbor Montana's 73,202 miles. Montana is [similarly](#) rural, but it's twice the size of North Dakota and has a 50 percent greater population. If Montana can function with 13,000 fewer miles of road than North Dakota, then North Dakota can unpave or abandon several thousands of miles of road without disintegrating. Montanans even drive more [rural miles](#) (PDF) than North Dakotans. South Dakota, which has about 25 percent more people than North Dakota, gets by with just 83,744 miles of road!

Another argument for deleting some of North Dakota's paved roads: Its population has been [flat](#) since 1920, and its rural areas are steadily [depopulating](#). This means that its rural roads are used less and less every year. How many of its seldom-used paved roadways should have never been paved in the first place? I have anecdotal evidence of the state's roadway profligacy: When I drove its vast network of paved back roads during my summer vacation, it was an event to see another car more often than once an hour. When driving gravel roads, I never saw another car.

Besides, what's wrong with a gravel or dirt road? Sure, they kick up dust in the summer and get muddy in the spring and fall. But some folks find romance in the unpaved. Up in Vermont, locals have been known to fight like wild dogs at the suggestion that dirt and gravel lanes get the asphalt treatment, as this 1996 [New York Times](#) article shows.

"Paved roads are for cars, not people," Naomi Flanders told the *Times*. "Dirt roads are for people."

Obviously more than 223 miles of road have been unpaved in the past two years, but my point stands. If you've got access to better numbers, please send them to slate.pressbox@gmail.com. Monitor my [Twitter](#) for my compensation demands. (E-mail may be quoted by name in "The Fray," *Slate*'s readers' forum; in a future article; or elsewhere unless the writer stipulates otherwise. Permanent disclosure: *Slate* is owned by the Washington Post Co.)

Track my errors: This [hand-built RSS feed](#) will ring every time *Slate* runs a "Press Box" correction. For e-mail notification of errors in this specific column, type the word *unpaved* in the subject head of an e-mail message, and send it to slate.pressbox@gmail.com.

Like *Slate* on [Facebook](#). Follow us on [Twitter](#).

[Jack Shafer](#) is *Slate*'s editor at large. Follow him on [Twitter](#).

Article URL: <http://www.slate.com/id/2264109/>

Also In Slate

- [Does Any Candidate Have a Good Jobs Plan?](#)
- [Only You Can Save Edith Wharton's Home. And Willa Cather's. And Jackson Pollock's.](#)
- [Why Did Doctors Do Such a Lousy Job Predicting When the Lockerbie Bomber Would Die?](#)
- [How To Fix the Billionaires' "Giving Pledge"](#)
- [How Christian Reconstructionism Explains the Weirdness of Sharron Angle](#)
- [Do Nazis Have the Right To Put Up a Sign Next to the Holocaust Museum?](#)
- [No, America Is Not Turning Into Japan](#)
- [Slate Poll: How Many Hurricanes Will Hit the United States This Year?](#)

Copyright 2010 Washingtonpost.Newsweek Interactive Co. LLC