

## editor's note



**WHEN I LOOK OVER MY DAUGHTER'S SHOULDER AT HER SCHOOL WORK, I MARVEL AT ITS DIFFICULTY AND COMPLEXITY.** Her high school chemistry class is much more advanced than what I learned and her western civilization course is more similar to what I took in college than in high school (her language arts class is another story; Shakespeare is still Shakespeare).

There is so much information available to us—continuously—that the difficulty is not in finding something out but rather in interpreting it and in taking the time to go deeper than a cursory glance. I can look at the headlines and see how many people were killed in riots in Cairo, but I don't always take the time to find out why the riots are occurring and what the historical antecedents are.

Few of us, however, have jobs that depend on our digging deeper into current events. Which makes it even more surprising when you read articles in publications such as the *Wall Street Journal* that miss the big picture.

A recent example was the redecking of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge. This huge project had very unusual constraints that required an incredibly lightweight design, which also meant it was a very expensive design. Rather than balancing the cost/expense ratio between material and labor, this specific design minimized material and maximized the amount of required labor, which led to the project being fabricated in China. In the past two decades, less than a dozen of these types of bridges were built in the U.S. Because of the unusual and very expensive design, few U.S. contractors bid on this unusual project and the *Wall Street Journal* wrongly extrapolated that domestic fabricators lacked sufficient capacity for major projects and couldn't compete it economically.

Anyone who attended this year's NASCC: The Steel Conference in St. Louis saw the obvious error in that assumption. All you would have had to do was walk a few blocks down to the Mississippi River and check out the massive—and extremely economical—Stan Musial Veterans Memorial Bridge, scheduled to open early next year. Or head to Kentucky and check out the Eggner's Ferry Bridge, or to Washington, D.C., and look

at the new Woodrow Wilson Bridge, or go south to Charleston to visit the beautiful Ravenal Bridge. As Roger Ferch, president of AISC and executive director of the National Steel Bridge Alliance, unequivocally stated: "The domestic steel bridge industry has the capability to fabricate bridges to meet our nation's immediate needs as well as ample capacity to fabricate America's signature bridges."

The issue of domestic vs. foreign fabrication should not be framed as simply a dollars-and-cents argument. Especially for taxpayer-funded public projects, it's important to look at the benefits of using domestic workers as well as health and safety issues and environmental concerns.

While the income tax issue and the multiplier effect of U.S. workers purchasing from local stores, which then creates even more jobs, seems obvious, what is less often considered is employment conditions. Labor costs in the U.S. are not just about hourly wages. Domestic manufacturers are required to adhere to very stringent OSHA, EPA and other regulations. It always amazes me (and seems a bit hypocritical) that we don't demand suppliers located offshore meet these same standards. Likewise, environmental issues should be a greater consideration. While domestic manufacturers have substantially reduced energy usage and greenhouse gas emissions, the same is often not true of foreign competitors. Again, we should compare apples with apples and hold our foreign suppliers to the same standards we demand from our domestic companies.

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