In the face of reality, the transportation industry has a long history of regulatory capture: an agency created to benefit the industry it is intended to supervise. Unfortunately, the transportation industry has a long history of regulators failing to enforce existing rules.

The following night, John Stewart satirized the same lack of courage by replaying remarks of Presidents Nixon through Obama—all of whom promised to wean our nation from its insatiable thirst for oil (http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/wed-june-16-2010/an-energy-independent-future).

The numbers are well-known. The U.S. represents 4 percent of the world’s population. We have 2 percent of the world’s petroleum reserves, and we use 20 percent of the world’s oil.

That’s important to the transportation industry because, according to the U.S. Department of Energy, the industry consumes 71 percent of petroleum. Despite this concentration of energy demand, the administration has put forth nothing that resembles a coherent transportation plan.

The existing SAFETEA-LU legislation has featured piecemeal extensions, beyond which funding sources remain unclear. The president’s exhortation, “The one approach I will not accept is inaction,” clearly does not extend to surface transportation reauthorization.

The declaration might help us examine some of the self-evident challenges facing our nation and how they affect our industry. Keep in mind the Gulf disaster is but one.

- The problem is complex.
  The response to the Deepwater Horizon disaster has been criticized for a lack of organization, urgency and clear lines of authority among federal, state and local authorities. The same is true of transportation policy.

- The government is powerless in the face of reality.
  Despite Washington’s best intentions, it cannot stop the oil leak. Transportation faces a similar problem. The administration recently said it favors long-haul rail and water movement. Unfortunately, it can’t change the fact that at least 80 percent of freight movement cannot be accommodated by these modes because of network geography and (short) length of haul.

- Our economy depends on change.
  President Obama has spoken about the need to develop a green economy in the United States to generate new, 21st century jobs. The economic recession has put a political priority on jobs. No doubt that was why the president has called for doubling exports in five years. Few people are willing to point out that exports today go unfilled because of the inability to provide cost-effective and reliable transportation.

- “Bridges to nowhere” are still out there.
  Optimal spending of scarce transportation resources has often been stymied by politics as usual. In the aftermath of the Gulf oil spill, we have “berms for nothing.” Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal criticized the review process that delayed building a series of low-lying islands from dredged sand. Apparently, the lack of any scientific support for the project—and a concern the resources might be better spent on a solution lasting more than three months—was ignored.

- Regulatory capture anyone?
  The Mineral Management Services, the federal agency that manages the nation’s natural gas, oil and other mineral resources on the outer continental shelf, has become the poster child for regulatory capture: an agency created to protect the public acts instead to benefit the industry it is intended to supervise. Unfortunately, the transportation industry has a long history of regulators failing to enforce existing rules.

- Cut-and-paste consulting?
  Much attention has been drawn to the fact that all five major oil companies had the same response plan—complete with the same dead experts and plans to save the walruses. Such results exist, as well, in transportation. Market studies and port plans are just a few examples of “original work” resold repeatedly. The desire for insightful analysis frequently falls prey to desire for a good price.

The Gulf oil spill catastrophe will have a major impact on large swaths of our nation’s population, environment and economy for years to come. It requires action.

As well, transportation policy merits attention. Its impact is as pervasive as—if not more than—the oil spill. Unfortunately, there is no Web cam to capture a real-time image of transportation shortcomings spewing forth. Nevertheless, the problems are self-evident and require action for our nation to achieve transportation independence.