

Amtrak Agonistes

With the introduction of a newer, faster Eurostar, it's time to ask why America's train system is off the rails?

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Here's a cosmic question: How much is 30 minutes of a business traveler's time worth? Here's a concrete (well, concrete and steel) answer: about \$13.5 billion.

Sounds a little pricey, even for us self-important titans of industry. But British train interests have just thrown an additional \$13.5 billion into its side of the already popular Eurostar, which now zips between London and Paris in just two hours and 15 minutes. Launched with appropriate pomp and circumstance three weeks ago, the new, improved Eurostar is 30 minutes faster than Amtrak's Acela, which requires two hours and 45 minutes to ply a similar distance between New York and Washington.

Why do European business travelers have a 30-minute jump on us? Well, one reason is the amount we're willing to invest. The U.S. Senate is proposing to spend just \$11.4 billion to keep the entire nationwide Amtrak network running for the next six years. And even that level of funding is a political hot potato. When Trent Lott, the right-wing Mississippi Republican, is on the same side of a funding debate as Frank Lautenberg, the left-wing New Jersey Democrat, you know for sure that Amtrak is a party-bending, policy-warping, money-eating conundrum.

Another reason is plain old mismanagement. Despite everything you learned in school (remember that golden spike?) or saw in the movies, America has never known what to do with its passenger railroads. Nobody really wants to run them. Nobody really wants to fix them. Very few people want to take a clear-eyed look at whether we should even have a "national" passenger railroad. And it's pretty evident that nobody wants to pay for one. So Amtrak keeps clickity-clacking from one taxpayer-funded crisis to another.

Thirty-six years ago, the nation's privately owned freight railroads decided they no longer wanted to be in the passenger-moving business. The government hastily stepped in and created Amtrak, a move that has become the poster child for horse-by-committee thinking. Amtrak got the aging train cars and the responsibility for running passenger service, while the freight railroads retained control of most of the tracks and the infrastructure.

Underfunded and without an overarching vision, Amtrak has bumped along ever since. Ridership plummeted for decades as travelers defected to airlines for longer hauls or hopped into their cars for shorter journeys. Populations shifted, and Amtrak lacked the infrastructure necessary to follow riders into the Sunbelt and the Southwest. Service

declined dramatically as tatty railcars tottered along over tracks that were fine for freight but torturous for travelers.

The Reagan administration tried to eliminate federal funding for Amtrak, pointing out that per-passenger subsidies were so high on some routes that it would be cheaper to buy the riders plane tickets. The Clinton administration forced Amtrak management to claim it could eventually become financially self-sufficient. That led to a disastrous deferment of much-needed maintenance. Federal subsidies were the result of unwieldy pork-barrel compromises: Representatives would vote to fund Amtrak only if trains kept running through their districts, even if they rolled through once a week at four in the morning. Shortsighted railroad fanatics insisted Amtrak maintain a "national" system, no matter how skeletal, decrepit, and unnecessary.

As a result, Amtrak's often less-than-stellar management never focused on the real opportunities: high-speed, short-haul intercity service where trains are more practical than planes and intermodal operations that could connect city centers to their increasingly distant airports.

When the Bush administration tried to kill Amtrak a couple of years ago, Congress refused. And after years of doling out subsistence funding on an annual basis, the Senate finally passed the Lott-Lautenberg bill late in October. House passage is considered likely sometime next year. The Bush administration has sent out mixed messages on any potential veto.

But even six years of guaranteed, mid-level funding won't do much to inject intelligent life into Amtrak-not the way Congress is letting the money be spent. The Senate, for example, defeated a proposal by Oklahoma Republican Tom Coburn, who pointed out that Amtrak burns about \$80 million a year subsidizing the price of onboard food and beverages. Why, he asked, "should we be subsidizing someone's beer and Three Musketeers?" It also shot down an amendment by New Hampshire Republican John Sununu. He wanted Amtrak to cap per-passenger subsidies at \$200, which would have effectively shuttered long-haul routes that are the system's least-efficient and least-competitive operations. One oft-cited example: the Sunset Limited that runs from Los Angeles to Orlando and costs Amtrak more than \$500 a passenger.

The funding won't give Amtrak much leeway to capitalize on the renewed interest in rail transportation, either. Ridership is growing again, but almost exclusively in high-traffic corridors-such as between Boston and Washington-and expansion would require massive, European-style expenditures. It will also undoubtedly end the discussion about whether U.S. railroad service qualifies as energy efficient. (Trains are more efficient than planes, of course, but most longer Amtrak routes are so circuitous that the energy-saving benefits are lost.)

Worst of all, the funding will surely perpetuate the fantasy that America wants or needs a "national railroad" system that offers too many pokey, grungy \$200-a-ride trains that go

from coast to coast in three days but not enough high-speed connections between major population centers that are choking on road and airline congestion.

The Fine Print

The Eurostar network includes a new \$12 billion infrastructure improvement called High Speed 1. It's a dedicated track-and-tunnel system that allows Eurostar to hit maximum speeds from the British end of the English Channel tunnel to St. Pancras Station, its new terminus in London. Another \$1.5 billion was spent to renovate and restore St. Pancras, a stunning, Victorian-era train station that now sports a 300-yard-long champagne bar. The fastest way to get Eurostar tickets is via RailEurope, the train's North American agent.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/12/04/AR2007120400027.html>