

On the Right Track

The conservative case for mass transit

By William S. Lind

EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY famously wrote, "Yet there isn't a train I wouldn't take, no matter where it's going." If the Bush administration gets its way, there may soon be no trains for future Miss Millays to ride. The administration's proposed 2006 budget effectively kills Amtrak. In fact, the railroad may run out of cash before the end of fiscal 2005.

The recent brake problems of Amtrak's premier trains, the Acelas, which have taken them out of service until summer, are just the proverbial tip of the iceberg. At stake for the future are not only Amtrak's 25 million annual passengers but commuter agencies across the country. As the *Wall Street Journal* reported on March 16,

... whatever the specific outcome, one group likely to be affected is the 800,000-plus non-Amtrak passengers a day who rely on Amtrak to get to and from work.

Many passengers don't realize it, but commuter trains from California to Illinois to Pennsylvania depend on Amtrak tracks, facilities or personnel for all or part of their trips.

... "They talk about shutting Amtrak, but the hurt would be on the commuter side," says Dale Zehner, chief executive of Virginia Rail Express...

"So what?" some conservatives might say. "Why should we care about public transportation? We all have cars. We drive to work. Transit's for losers, and we're not losers."

Many people, not just conservatives, think of public transportation as a smoke-belching bus, filled with poor people, lumbering slowly through the inner city. That perception is out of date. If we look at those commuter trains, which often depend on Amtrak tracks, crews, and dispatching, we see that the people riding them are people like us, middle or upper-middle class professionals who have cars and could drive but find the train more efficient. Even a Mercedes isn't much fun when it's stuck in traffic, and unless you're a woman, you probably find it difficult to read a brief, type on your laptop, and drive all at the same time. (I know, I left out eating breakfast and putting your face on.)

Illinois's Metra commuter rail system, which is probably the best in the country, provides a good example. Metra serves a six-county area surrounding Chicago. Eleven percent of commuters in those six counties who have incomes over \$75,000 commute by train. So do 8.5 percent of those with incomes between \$50,000 and \$75,000. Each day, more than 60,000 people with incomes over \$35,000 ride commuter trains in the area that Metra serves. Many of those people are conservatives; most of the representatives they send to Congress are Republicans. There is a real conservative constituency for public transit, made up of conservatives who actually use transit.

The key to understanding this phenomenon—use of transit by people who have plenty of money, usually more than

one car and could drive (they are called "riders from choice")—is the difference between buses and rail transit. Few riders from choice will choose to ride a bus, but many will ride a train. Again, a couple of the counties Metra serves show the story. In DuPage County, more than 15 percent of commuters with incomes over \$75,000 take the train. In Lake County, the figure is 13 percent. In the same counties, less than one-tenth of one percent of people with incomes over \$75,000 ride the bus. In Lake County, the mean earnings of rail commuters are more than \$76,000; the figure for bus riders is less than \$14,000. In fact, the mean earnings of rail commuters are more than double those of people driving to work alone. (All figures are from 1990 census data.)

So why are many conservatives opposed to transit, especially rail transit? (One of the constant refrains of anti-transit conservatives, who are really mostly libertarians, is "Buses are better than trains.") The answer lies in three widespread perceptions, all of which are wrong. First, conservatives believe public transportation is a government creation. In a pure free market, virtually all public transit would vanish as subsidies, which go only to transit, not cars, are eliminated and people turn to an inherently superior mode of travel, the automobile. Second, no conservatives use public transportation. (We've already seen that is not true of commuter trains.) And finally, transit does not serve any important conservative goals.

Let us consider each of these in turn. Wisely, most conservatives believe in looking at history in order to understand the present. If we consider the history of the fight for market share between automobiles and public transit, we quickly learn that the current domination by the automobile is not a free-market outcome. Rather, it is the result of massive government intervention on the automobile's behalf.

As early as 1921, the first year for which data are available, government was pouring \$1.4 billion into highways. The cars on those highways were competing with public-transit systems, mostly electric railways, that were privately owned, received no government subsidies, and had to pay taxes. By 1940, the figure was \$2.7 billion. In the same year, the total operating costs of all transit systems except commuter rail were \$661 million—again, virtually all private money. After World War II, government intervention on behalf of highways soared. In 1950, it was \$4.6 billion. By 1960, the figure was \$11.5 billion. It was not until 1980 that government subsidies to transit could even be counted; in that year, they amounted to \$5.8 billion, but highways received \$39.7 billion. By 1990, government transit subsidies were up to \$14.5 billion, but the figure for highways was almost \$74 billion.

Nor is that all. Postwar building codes in effect required sprawl, which created suburbs that were difficult for rail transit to serve. Earlier suburbs had largely been created by electric railways, and were more compact.

The current imbalance between automobiles and transit is a classic product of government interference in the marketplace. Today, all modes of travel are subsidized, but cars are subsidized far more heavily than trains. Amtrak's whole annual federal subsidy, much of which also supports commuter trains, would not pay for more than a fraction

of a single major highway project such as Boston's leaky "Big Dig."

The second misperception, that no conservatives actually ride mass transit, we have already shown to be false by looking at the demographics of commuter-rail passengers. The same is true for light rail, which is the fastest-growing type of rail transit in the United States. St. Louis's MetroLink light-rail system has demographics similar to Chicago's commuter trains. According to a 1997 survey, only 27 percent of MetroLink's riders either did not drive or had no car available (for bus riders, the figure was 61 percent). Fifty-five percent of rail riders owned two or more cars. Sixty-two percent of rail passengers were white (only 32 percent of bus riders), and 32 percent had incomes over \$55,000, compared to only 8 percent of bus riders. Most of MetroLink's passengers were riders from choice; a 1995 survey found that 85 percent had

goals. One is economic development, especially redevelopment of urban areas. In one American city after another, new rail transit lines have brought massive new development. Why? Because rail transit represents high-quality transit, transit used by people with substantial disposable income, and because with its tracks and wires, it is a long-term promise of good transit service. Unlike a bus route, rail transit cannot get up and move overnight. Developers will only develop on the basis of an expectation of long-term return. Examples of the dramatic effects on development rail transit can bring are numerous. A recent one is Portland, Oregon, where a new streetcar line, a loop covering only a couple of miles, has already created over \$1 billion in new development. That development is the kind America's cities need most, redevelopment of the urban core rather than additional suburban sprawl.

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not previously used the bus. To the degree these demographics correlate with political outlook, it is safe to say that many, perhaps even a majority, of MetroLink's riders are conservatives.

Rail transit serves conservative commuters in another way. Because most commuters are traveling in rush hour, and most Americans drive to work alone, each rider from choice who takes rail transit represents almost one car removed from rush hour traffic. Those conservatives who still drive thus face less traffic congestion.

Finally, rail transit (but not buses) does serve some important conservative

Even this short survey illustrates a basic point too many Washington conservatives neglect: a strong case for rail transportation, urban and interurban, can be made in conservative terms. Sadly, in this case as in so many, officeholders and policy wonks alike are not really conservative. An America paved from sea to shining sea is fine with them. Come to think of it, I don't remember any trains in Brave New World. ■

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Entangling Allegiances

The greatest challenge to American sovereignty comes not from global institutions but from a population that isn't putting down roots.

By Nicholas von Hoffman

SUPREME COURT Justice Anthony Kennedy has been taking whacks from conservatives who dislike his use of foreign legal opinions in a recent Supreme Court decision. Their objections are in accord with long held conservative principle.

For almost a century, conservatives have been beating back infringements on national sovereignty, be they in the form of the League of Nations or the United Nations. Although a few major figures of the Right like William Howard Taft have had moments of weakness on the subject, the greater number have stationed themselves on the ramparts guarding against any lessening of national independence.

The degree of success they have enjoyed depends on your politics but, overall, you would have to say they have kept America fairly clear of entanglements veering too close to world government. The U.S. stands stoutly outside the International Criminal Court's jurisdiction. It has successfully resisted pressure to limit its use of landmines or submit to international regulation of that which comes out of American tailpipes and smokestacks. It has told the UN where it can go when it comes to making war. Nonetheless, America is not the self-contained, sovereign, independent national state that it once was. *De jure* national sovereignty seems more or less as it was 100 years ago, but *de facto* the nation's freedom of action is curtailed, limited, and increasingly influenced by people outside its borders and by people inside working for outside goals.

In the realm of business, finance, and economics, Congress has lost the power unilaterally to tax, subsidize, and regulate. A significant slice of national sovereignty went out the window with membership in the World Trade Organization. Large American companies, dependent as much on business abroad as at home, cannot merge, acquire, or do a host of other things without the approval of foreign governments, most notably the EU. In the early years of the new century, we are no longer powerful enough to conduct our affairs on a like-it-or-lump-it basis.

Another kind of largely unnoticed vitiation of national sovereignty is transpiring from the bottom. This is the dual-nationality politics of both immigrant and native-born Americans. It takes many forms, but it adds up to the demise of the once unsailable rule that a nation's internal affairs were its business and nobody else's and you may not play politics across somebody else's borders. But the importance of what happens in elections both abroad and at home has led many people to ignore the rule that it's hands off when the election is taking place far from where they live or have citizenship.

Nowadays, for example, Mexican politicians campaign in California among their erstwhile and not so erstwhile fellow citizens for votes and money. We see figures like the Mexican journalist-politician Jorge Ramos taking part in the American political process. Ramos, a legal immigrant, says that he has not applied for U.S. citizenship since he is

considering running for public office in Mexico, but until he makes up his mind he will politick on this side of the border for legislation that people on the other side of the border want. And speaking of borders, if the overwhelmed and undermanned American authorities are unable to control who comes and goes in the face of what verges on border nullification, we can speculate that in the course of time some kind of novel political process, not envisioned in the constitutions of either country, may govern the Southwest.

Dual-national politics is not confined to Mexicans. Israeli politicians have been campaigning in America for years. Those Jewish Americans who are committed to the nation of Israel move back and forth between the politics of both nations with such ease that a political scientist might conclude that there is already an overlap in the political systems of the two societies.

Then there is the gusto with which Iraqi-Americans voted in the recent elections in Iraq, another indication that the old laws prohibiting the exercise of citizenship in another country seem to be a dead letter.

Until the late 19th century, anything that smelled of foreign intervention in American politics got smacked down. It is said that Grover Cleveland lost the 1888 election when the moronic English minister to the United States, Lord Sackville-West, was tricked into publicly endorsing Cleveland. Upper-class