

Bacon's Rebellion

Reinventing Virginia for the 21st Century

China's Very Fast Trains

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(second in a series)

SHANGHAI — As the soggy countryside zipped past, my eyes were fixed on the speedometer of the maglev train hurtling towards Shanghai Pudong International Airport. The instrument hanging over a passenger door shot up from 150 kilometer per hour, to 247 kph and finally to 300 kph or about 187 miles per hour.

The ultra-fast, eight-year-old line got us from the city limits to the airport in all of seven minutes. It can go even faster— 268 mph. And as we started to slow down during this exciting run, I thought back to Virginia and all the silly hullabaloo over getting creaky old Washington Metro to Dulles International Airport.

The thought was a bit of a downer. At Dulles, the official international airport of the capital of what is supposed to be the most influential country in the world, you can't even think about infrastructure improvements without a series of peanut vendor arguments from the right wing. They include whose ox gets gored to pay for Dulles rail and whether the Metropolitan Washington Airport Authority has (gasp!) a labor union official on its board of directors.

Here in China, they don't mess around with such nonsense. If they want to do something, they do it, or build it. It is a Communist country with plenty of industrial policy so they just fund it. Of course, they have the money to put into an ultra-modern rail system built by Germany's Siemens and that is admittedly a problem in the U.S. But the Chinese, unlike Americans, are looking ahead to what's needed and are not sticking their heads in the sands to worry about whether their grand schemes have the dogmatic *imprimatur* of the American Enterprise or Cato Institutes.

The Chinese think big. To get an idea just how big, consider my experience at the Beijing Capital International Airport. My wife and I checked into a hotel near the airport for an early morning flight and had some hours to kill in the center of the capital. Later that evening, we took the airport express train back to the airport and the hotel.

Mind you, the Beijing Airport is a truly monstrous destination. Conde Nast Traveler named it the world's best airport in 2009. But the three terminals are far from each other to accommodate the latest in airline size, notably the bulbous Airbus 380 that can hold 555 passengers.

We got onto the airport express train for the 25 minute trip to the airport. As we pulled into Terminal 3, the most recent addition, I told my wife, "We don't want this one, we want Terminal 2." So, we stayed on. I had expected a brief ride. Instead, the train gained speed for two minutes, five and then eight. My wife was glowering at me, imagining this to be yet another in a long series of screw ups during our nearly quarter century history together. "I hope we don't end up all the way back downtown and have to come out again," she exclaimed, her eyes narrowing. Imagine my relief when the announcer said, "Terminal 2 next."

Big, indeed. If these project and the litmus test for the future, then Americans are truly going to be left behind if they buy into the short-sighted, skinflint philosophies that have been popular ever since Barack Obama was inaugurated.