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U.S. Champions of High-Speed Trains Find Adoring Fans—7,000 Miles Away

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He has met the emperor and welcomed President Biden to his home, but Rahm Emanuel said an equally thrilling moment as ambassador to Japan came when he was offered a ride in the conductor's cabin of a bullet train.

His eyes opened wide. The train races toward Tokyo at more than 150 miles an hour. "Yeah, I want to! If you'll let me," Mr. Emanuel, 63, recalled saying.

The company let him. He got to talk shop with the conductor, who explained that in Japan, arriving a minute early was frowned upon just as much as arriving a minute late. "If you're scheduled at 4:01 and you arrive at 4:00, it's in the file," Mr. Emanuel said.

American history is littered with high-speed rail plans to nowhere, and politicians who tout their love of trains—including Mr. Emanuel's onetime boss, former President Barack Obama—usually wind up talking about something else.

The U.S. lags behind Europe and Asia in high-speed rail. Conservatives have criticized it as expensive and of limited appeal, while supporters say providing more high-speed lines would allow competition with highways and airlines for travel between cities up to several hundred miles apart. The speedy-rail proposals have also been dogged by issues around property rights and local land-use controls.

There are like-minded fans. They're just some 7,000 miles from Washington, D.C., where two U.S. ambassadors are laying on their adoration for Big Rail and enjoying adoration from the locals in return. Long past his Sisyphean struggles to rustle up money for repairing Chicago's decrepit tracks, as mayor of that city, Mr. Emanuel basks in his reputation as a *tetsu-ota*, Japanese slang for "train geek." The ambassador to China, Nicholas Burns, has also jumped on the train wagon.

"Love the really plush seats! Hankyu. Hankyu very much," tweeted Mr. Emanuel about the Hankyu line in the Osaka region, drawing 62,400 likes. It was one of about two dozen such tweets, some of which have garnered millions of impressions.

“Rapid, reliable, relaxing and, drum roll—remarkable,” raved Mr. Emanuel about the train connecting Haneda Airport with Tokyo’s downtown.

Mr. Emanuel, who previously served as chief of staff to Mr. Obama and then as mayor of Chicago, recalled how he had to scarp for funds to get upgrades to the Chicago train system—a contrast with China and Japan, which are spending tens of billions of dollars to upgrade already-substantial high-speed networks. “I stole money everywhere. I mean, it was legal, but I got money out of every possible part of the Department of Transportation and the state of Illinois,” he said.

Back in America, he might get brickbats from those who prefer cars and planes, but Mr. Emanuel said in his new home, there is only political upside to advertising his love of trains, which has motivated him to make the most of it. “The Japanese public is proud of their system,” he said. “And I’m a user of it, and I’m an admirer of it. It goes a long way.”

At a recent event marking the 150th anniversary of train service in Japan, he worked the crowd like a mayor, chatting up station attendants and greeting babies. “There’s nothing like a Japanese train,” he told a gaggle of local journalists, prompting a reporter for one of the nation’s top dailies to purr back, “The Japanese people have a very good impression of you.”

On Dec. 17, trains helped him bond with Chief Cabinet Secretary Hirokazu Matsuno, the prime minister’s right-hand man, who invited Mr. Emanuel to ride a scenic local line in his parliamentary district. Mr. Matsuno scored photo ops with his constituents and a tweet from his distinguished guest: “If you love trains, this is a must.”

The gushing from Messrs. Burns and Emanuel about high-speed rail has some hearing a *cri de coeur* for similar services in the U.S.—the longtime “golden dream of the Democrats,” said David Boaz, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank.

Mr. Obama’s vision of a national bullet-train network didn’t get far. A California high-speed train approved in 2008 is still far from completed. Mr. Emanuel himself, while Chicago’s mayor, teamed up with Elon Musk on a proposal for a high-speed Hyperloop-like link between downtown and O’Hare that eventually fizzled out.

Asked whether the Tokyo-Osaka bullet train could be a lesson for the New York-Washington route, Mr. Emanuel said, “You should ask Amtrak Joe”—President Biden, who used to commute on Amtrak between Washington and his home in Delaware. He added, “There’s no doubt there’s something for Americans to learn from Japan. Make it essential, and make it reliable.”

Mr. Boaz is skeptical it will happen. “The U.S. will have hovercrafts before they have high-speed trains,” he said.

When Mr. Burns visited China as a private citizen in 2019, he marveled at how his teacup barely moved on the tray in front of him on a train traveling 200 miles an hour. In August, as ambassador, Mr. Burns tweeted, “China’s high speed rail is truly impressive and a great way to see the beautiful farmland, mountains and villages.”

His post was embraced by American and Chinese users alike, a rarity in times of high tensions between the U.S. and China. Many Chinese social-media users approvingly picked up on the fact that Mr. Burns sat in second class on two trips this summer.

Some, though, such as former U.S. ambassador to Germany Richard Grenell, a nominee of former President Donald Trump, complained Mr. Burns's outreach felt like gratuitous ingratiation to Beijing. Mr. Burns said in an interview he was tough-minded and called out the Chinese party and state whenever necessary, but he also believed it was in the interest of the U.S. to connect with the Chinese people directly.

When Mr. Emanuel arrived in Tokyo in January, one of his first priorities was to board a train.

Getting clearance from officials turned out to be a challenge, said Mr. Emanuel, whose forceful personality and profanity-laced language have been famous in Democratic circles since his days as a Clinton administration aide.

"I had my first ambassadorial full Rahm. I said, 'Guys, I'm gonna get on the train, and if you're really worried about security, you'll figure it out.' "

Pressed to elaborate on what a "full Rahm" consisted of, he said it was actually "a very small Rahm. I just said, 'Here's how this is going to work.' I said, 'I'm not really going to argue about this.' I said, 'If I can take the train twice a week in Chicago, and if I can take as chief of staff up to New York and back,' I said, 'I'm going to do it here.' "

Mr. Emanuel said his favorite story involved a flight he took on All Nippon Airways, when the pilot sent him a note about which trains to take into the city. "On a plane!" Mr. Emanuel said. "He was saying, 'I know you love trains—here are two new train lines I recommend.' What is going on? I'm getting recommendations from a pilot about trains!"

His ultimate dream is a luxury line for tourists called the Royal Express, which features gold-plated bathrooms, live violin performances and white-tablecloth dining. Mr. Emanuel said he plans to ride it when he can find the time.

On Mr. Burns's train wishlist is a 1,428-mile journey from Beijing to Guangzhou in the south. It takes at least eight hours, but he is undeterred. "I've done Washington to Boston on train," he said—a trip that covers less than a third of the distance but takes nearly seven hours, at a minimum.