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Lowry: High-Speed Rail a Progressive Fantasy

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California progressives tried to build a European-style high-speed-rail network and alienated the French in the process.

A big New York Times piece on the rail project reports that the French, who wanted to work with California, decided the state was simply too dysfunctional and departed to help complete a high-speed line in Morocco instead.

The ongoing unraveling of California's rail plan is an object lesson in how infrastructure as eschatology is a bad idea. If transportation is conceived as a way to save the planet and fulfill a deep-seated, quasi-religious fixation rather than a means to move people around more efficiently, it is bound to fail. Throw on top California's politicized decision-making and regulatory and legal obstacles to building, and it's a formula for a boondoggle for the ages.

No matter how high California has estimated the cost of the project, it hasn't been high enough, even as almost nothing has been built. It started out at \$33 billion in 2008. Now it's \$113 billion, with no one knowing where the funding is going to come from.

Not that the California experience will diminish the progressive ardor for high-speed rail. As far as its enthusiasts are concerned, it is like socialism — never failed, just never truly tried.

President Barack Obama proposed an 8,600-mile high-speed-rail system, and Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg wants the United States to be the “global leader” in high-speed rail. Progressives think of bullet trains like windmills on rails, a symbol of enlightenment and modernity, a way to free ourselves from the selfish, small-minded tyranny of the automobile and adopt a sleeker, greener, more virtuous future.

Then the wheel meets the rail. In California, it might have sounded appealing to build a high-speed-rail link between Los Angeles and San Francisco — if you abstracted the project from all the topographical and other difficulties. For political reasons, a less direct, less economical route between the cities was selected. And the decision was made to start building between the two megalopolises, in the Central Valley, creating the possibility that California may end up with a bullet train to and from nowhere.

Of course, we already have cheap, high-speed transport between population centers. It is called air travel.

As Randal O'Toole of the Cato Institute points out, planes cruise at roughly 500 miles per hour. The Amtrak Acela, on the other hand, has a top speed of 150 miles per hour. Yes, airplanes need infrastructure, but not expensive, complex new infrastructure all along their routes.

O'Toole notes that Japan's high-speed trains seemed like the future in the 1960s, when air travel was more expensive than rail. Also, Japan's high-speed trains had a ready-made customer base in the substantial proportion of the country's population that already traveled by train.

In the United States today, in contrast, the average cost per mile of traveling by air is cheaper than traveling by rail, and a minuscule 0.1% of all passenger travel is via Amtrak.

If we built the Interstate Highway System, why can't we build a comparable high-speed network? As O'Toole observes, the highway system basically paid for itself and accounts for a substantial 20% of the country's passenger-miles and a roughly comparable proportion of freight ton-miles.

High-speed rail could never be a match. Even if you put aside the endemic cost overruns, the inevitable construction delays and the considerable maintenance costs, it can only carry passengers, not freight.

While progressives swoon over high-speed rail as the shiny future, some other genuinely futuristic technology is likely to emerge. If the age of self-driving cars ever arrives, people will be able to experience a car more like a personal train, except unlimited by rails.

California hasn't created a railroad to the future but a warning to the rest of the country to avoid its delusion and folly.