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Political pundit on the latest from Washington, D.C.



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Why rail fails in the U.S.A.

It may not make sense, but America doesn't buy into high-speed rail.

Thu, Mar 10 2011 at 3:09 PM EST

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ALL-ABOARD: Trains may make sense on paper when gas prices are high, but that doesn't mean it will happen in America. (Photo: Mark242)

There's an [interesting article on Slate.com](#) this week that attempts to get to the bottom of why Republicans hate trains so much.

The premise of the article is interesting. On the surface, trains seem so American. They're big, many carry coal and thanks to a friendly guy named Thomas, our kids love them. But, for conservatives, the love gets derailed somewhere between "Thomas the Train" and when those youngsters finally cast their first vote. The Slate article aims to answer why. Here are a few reasons.

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1. Private trains are good, public trains are bad

David Weigel, the author of the report, points out that there is a split in the Republican Party over trains and it generally is along the old public/private division. Weigel quotes William Lind, the director of the [American Conservative Center for Public Transportation](#) saying, "You need to distinguish between Republicans and conservatives and libertarians when you look at this ... It's the libertarians who push this crap." As it turns out there are several examples of members of the Republican Party over the years supporting legislation

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to help the private sector develop railways, but where they draw the line is when government gets involved.

Yes, there is some irony here, but to keep this post simple, all we have to do is [look at what is going on Florida](#), where former Gov. Charlie Crist is out and with him the plan to add a rail line connecting Disney World with other population centers. It is not as simple as left vs. right. It is more public vs. private and stimulus funds vs. no stimulus funds.

2. We are not Europe

If you pay attention to most train debates, there is a common association made that trains somehow equal European socialism. This seems unfair. After all, trains work after 5 p.m., are cleaned with high-pressure hot water and aren't paid to take 19 weeks of vacation each year. But, image is reality.

In his most recent State of the Union address, President Obama used examples of the ease with which Europeans travel from city to city to explain how absurd it is that America doesn't have a similar system. But the president should know better. It is absurd to get Americans to buy into a system that has been perfected somewhere. I mean it's not like we copied democracy from a European nation in the Mediterranean right?

The Slate article made the connection to the areas of the country where railway projects have gained traction at one time or another. The CATO Institute's [Randal O'Toole](#) was quoted in the article saying, "It was not a coincidence that the first sizable high-speed rail projects were set to connect Disneyland and Las Vegas, and to connect Tampa and Orlando: Disney is popular with European and American tourists." In this day and age, when Democrats and Republicans are as divided as ever, associations with Europe are not consensus builders. It may not be fair. It may not be right. But it's reality.

3. Money, money, money

America has no money, and trains have a history of running over budget. Forget that gas cost 50 cents a gallon when my dad graduated from college and that 40 years later, it costs \$4 a gallon. Forget that since the last time prices at the pump were this high, Americans have changed their habits to be better equipped for the current problem. Instead, remember this airtight conservative economic argument that Weigel articulates: "They have two fiscal problems. One: The new lines will run over budget, because they always run over budget. Two: Not enough people will ever, ever ride them to make the numbers work." As long as that argument can be made in a time when sound bites are the preferred ammunition of the 24-hour news cycle and where cutting the fiscal budget is as politically sexy as Gisele Bundchen is truly sexy, the train concept will never fly.

These may not be sound arguments or logical arguments or even sane arguments, but they are winning arguments. Politics is about winners and losers. Trains lose. Sound bites win. Logic is hard. Not thinking is easy. Welcome to America. All aboard!

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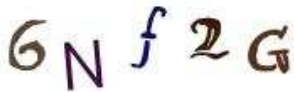
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