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Pete Buttigieg's 19th century technology: High-speed rail

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With trillions of dollars of government money on offer, after the passage of the Biden administration's so-called COVID-19 relief bill, there's an informal and unarticulated competition for the worst and least productive uses of funds.

Putting his entry in, even before the bill was passed, was incoming Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg. His proposal: make the United States a global leader in high-speed rail.

That's a solid contender for the prize for the worst use of government trillions — trillions, not just billions. True high-speed rail, averaging around 150 mph, requires dedicated track: you can't safely run trains at that speed if there's a freight train lolling around at 60 mph on the same track. California is supposedly spending \$100 billion to build what was sold to voters in 2008 as a \$33 billion high-speed rail line from Los Angeles to San Francisco. In real life, it looks likely to be completed only between Merced and Bakersfield. Judging from that experience, building — and, what's just about as expensive, maintaining — track across the continental U.S. would cost literally trillions.

And for what? As Cato Institute analyst Randal O'Toole writes, trying to be a world leader in high-speed rail is “like wanting to be the world leader in electric typewriters, rotary telephones, or steam locomotives.” Rail travel is 19th century, not 21st century, technology. Japan's Shinkansen high-speed rail went into service in 1964 — 57 years ago. It's the year longtime California Gov. Jerry Brown, a high-speed rail booster who left office in 2018 at age 80, graduated from Yale Law School. France's TGV, the only other high-speed rail that has at least one apparently profitable line, went into service in 1981. That's 40 years ago, when electric typewriters and rotary telephones had not been replaced by laptop computers and smartphones.

“I just don't know why people in other countries” — he mentioned Japan and Britain — “ought to have better train service or more investment in high-speed train service than Americans do,” Buttigieg told MSNBC's Joy Reid. If he wants to know why, he should take a look at a globe. Britain (which actually doesn't have high-speed rail) and Japan are island nations, much smaller than the U.S.

Tokyo and Osaka, Japan's two largest and very densely populated metropolitan areas, contain more than one-third of the nation's population. They are about 300 miles apart. So are Paris and Lyon, the two metropolitan areas that are the termini of France's profitable TGV line. Three hundred miles is high-speed rail's sweet spot — the distance at which a truly high-speed train is much faster than auto travel and about as fast as air travel.

And high-speed rail can attract enough passengers to operate profitably only between densely-packed metro areas about that far apart. The Los Angeles-San Francisco route doesn't quite qualify. The two metro areas' historic city centers are about 400 miles apart, and they are spread out amid the interstices between ocean, bay, and mountain. At that distance and with destinations widely spread out, high-speed rail can't compete against air travel on time or convenience. Metro Los Angeles has five commercial airports, and metro San Francisco has three, so that travelers can depart from and arrive at destinations with minimal door-to-door travel times.

To require business travelers to go to or arrive at a downtown train station makes no sense in Los Angeles, where less than 5% of metro area jobs are located in the historic downtown. As for cost-conscious travelers, high-speed rail can never compete successfully with private-enterprises buses.

That's true even in the Northeast Corridor between Washington, D.C., New York, and Boston, the one site in the continental U.S. appropriate for high-speed rail. You don't see backpackers on the Acela or other Amtrak trains; they take the much less expensive buses. As for business travelers, the Acela isn't truly high-speed rail anyway, given its highest average speed of only 80 miles per hour. The Acela has been competing with air travel in recent years because LaGuardia Airport has been such a mess. But the Port Authority is busy rebuilding LGA, and New York City's MTA may actually connect it with a subway.

Amtrak, after 50 years in government custody, has still not become a genuine high-speed rail service, as Buttigieg concedes. "Amtrak has done a heroic job with the constraints that had been placed on them," he told Reid. "Now we've got to take things to the next level." Does that mean having the federal government acquire land for a right-of-way and then construct a high-speed, dedicated track? That would mean riding roughshod over state and local governments in eight states and the District of Columbia. It would also mean spending trillions of dollars derived from taxpayers all across the country on a project whose benefits would be concentrated on affluent business travelers from in a geographic area with less than 20% of the nation's population.

Rail transit, whether city-to-city high-speed rail or fixed rail transit in individual cities or metro areas, has always been a favorite of liberal nanny-staters. Rail transit appeals to the same spirit which has led such officials to micromanage lockdowns (no garden seeds!) and to specify careful gradations of eligibility for vaccines (and to require throwing out doses rather than giving them to others before they expire).

Rail transit allows one centralized decision-maker to set rules that everyone else has to follow — or is supposed to follow: for Americans tend to want to do their own thing. The temptation to spend some of those trillions on supposedly high-speed rail is strong for President Biden, who commuted on Amtrak from Delaware to Washington for 36 years, and for Buttigieg, whose hometown of South Bend, Indiana, is about as inconveniently distant from a major airport (111 miles to O'Hare!) as any small American city that size. They should remember that "high-speed rail is yesterday's technology," as Randal O'Toole writes. "It's inflexible, so if travel patterns change, it is left in the dust. It takes years to plan and build, and no one really knows what transportation will be needed a year from now, much less a decade from now."

As someone who has ridden the Shinkansen and the TGV, I know it's nice for Japan and France. But despite many long years of navigating the Acela corridor, I know it's not really for us.

