

Don't reward incompetence; stop subsidizing Amtrak

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An Amtrak train bound for New York May 12 derailed a few minutes after leaving Philadelphia, killing 8, injuring more than 200 of 243 passengers and crew.

The crash could have been prevented if more had been spent on infrastructure, journalists speculated before investigators from the National Transportation Safety Board reached the site.

The train was going more than twice the speed limit of 50 mph as it entered a sharp curve at Frankford Junction, NTSB investigators said. The train sped up as it entered the curve.

Amtrak employees are injured three times more often than employees of other railroads, “due to a lack of accountability at all levels,” Amtrak’s inspector general said in February. Amtrak “is not adequately addressing rising drug and alcohol use by employees in safety-sensitive positions,” the IG said in 2012.

If the engineer was (literally) asleep at the wheel, scheduling changes may be partly to blame.

“Forcing shorter breaks, day after day, between runs increases fatigue related risk,” the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen warned management in a letter in December.

Positive Train Control — which forces trains to slow if the operator ignores speed limits — was installed along that section of track, but wasn’t turned on, Amtrak said.

Amtrak loses \$6.50 each time it sells a \$9.50 hamburger, mismanaged high speed rail, said the Government Accountability Office.

“There is a total lack of responsibility, and no accountability among Amtrak management,” Noel Braymer, editor of Western Rail Passenger Review, wrote in 2007.

The FBI is investigating whether the train was attacked. “Projectiles” struck two other trains in the vicinity around the time of the crash.

You can't prevent negligence, incompetence, attacks by hooligans or terrorists by spending more on infrastructure.

Amtrak is getting \$1.4 billion this fiscal year. Republicans want to reduce that by \$200 million, but propose no cuts in the portion of its budget that funds safety. Amtrak got an additional \$1.3 billion for infrastructure in the 2009 stimulus bill.

Democrats imply "budget cuts" were to blame even though cuts not yet made couldn't possibly be responsible. Their ghoulish demagoguery diverts attention from the misplaced priorities and (in)competence of Amtrak's management.

Whenever a government agency fails us, the way to fix it is to give more money to the bureaucrats who screwed up, Democrats say. That rewards bad management.

Amtrak accounts for just one-tenth of 1 percent of passenger miles traveled. Few of its 44 routes over 21,000 miles of track have more than a handful of riders.

All 51 passengers aboard the Hiawatha from Chicago to Milwaukee were evacuated successfully after the locomotive caught fire May 14. All could have been transported on one bus, noted Randal O'Toole of the CATO Institute.

Amtrak loses \$7 for each passenger on the Hiawatha — a pittance compared to the bath Amtrak takes on long distance routes, which account for 15 percent of passengers, 80 percent of losses.

Amtrak maintains wildly unprofitable routes to curry favor with politicians. Shutting them down would free up funds to improve service and safety on routes with enough passengers to justify them.

The most heavily trafficked route — the 500 miles between Boston and Washington D.C. — would make money if Amtrak were managed as well as private railroads. Most of Amtrak's customers live in the Northeast, earn more than the taxpayers who subsidize their rides.

Our national debt exceeds China's gross domestic product. Catastrophe looms if we don't trim it. No government program deserves the axe more than Amtrak subsidies. But that's not the most important reason for ending them.

East of the Mississippi and north of the Ohio, high speed trains like those in Europe make sense. We won't get them as long as the government runs Amtrak.

The only way to make Amtrak better is to stop subsidizing it. That would force Amtrak to trim bloated management (Amtrak has more managers than engineers or conductors, Mr. Braymer noted), crack down on waste and fraud, respond better to consumer complaints.

As long as the government owns it, Amtrak will serve itself first, politicians second, its customers poorly.

