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Off the Rails

Why do conservatives hate trains so much?

By David Weigel

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In the movie version of *Atlas Shrugged*, there is a scene in which Ayn Rand's libertarian heroes defy all odds, deploy some untold amount of private funding, and launch the fastest high-speed train in

history over rails of experimental metal. "The run of the John Galt Line is thrilling," [wrote the libertarian federal judge Alex Kozinski](#). "When it crossed the bridge made of Rearden Metal, I wanted to stand up and cheer."

That's in the fantasy world. In the real world, libertarians aren't cheering for high speed rail but rather trying to stop it from being built. They are succeeding. In Ohio, Gov. John Kasich campaigned against a high-speed rail line funded by the stimulus, got elected, and turned down the funding. In Wisconsin, Gov. Scott Walker did the same thing, only more so—his anti-train campaign even had [its own Web site](#). In Florida, the state Supreme Court has [just approved](#) Gov. Rick Scott's decision to reject \$2.4 billion of federal funds to build a Tampa-Orlando rail line; the state was being asked to contribute only \$280 million to finish it off. The funding was originally agreed to by Charlie Crist, one of the Tea Party's archenemies, so Scott's victory could hardly be any sweeter.

But it could hardly make less sense to liberals. What, exactly, do Republicans, conservatives, and libertarians have against trains? Seriously, what? Why did President George W. Bush try to zero out Amtrak funding in 2005? Why is the conservative Republican Study Committee suggesting that we do so now? Why does [George Will think](#) "the real reason for progressives' passion for trains is their goal of diminishing Americans' individualism in order to make them more amenable to collectivism"?

"You need to distinguish between Republicans and conservatives and libertarians when you look at this," says William Lind, the director of the [American Conservative Center for Public Transportation](#). "It's the libertarians who push this crap."

Libertarians, of course, have no problem with trains (see, e.g., *Atlas Shrugged*). They do have a problem with federal spending on transportation, as do many Republicans. *Atlas Shrugged* was published in 1957; Amtrak took over the rails in 1971. Since then, conservatives will sing the praises of private rail projects but criticize federally funded projects that don't meet the ideal. Rep. John Mica, R-Fla., for example, pushed a high-speed rail initiative through Congress in 2008. By 2010, [he was](#) denouncing "the Soviet-style Amtrak operation" that had "trumped true high-speed service" in Florida. In 2011, as the chairman of the House Transportation Committee, [he is interested in saving the Orlando-Tampa project](#) by building 21 miles between the airport and Disney World. This is about 21 miles farther than local Republicans want to go.



For more than a decade, Lind and a conservative movement icon, Paul Weyrich, collaborated on papers about why conservatives should support rail. Their 2001 paper, "[Twelve Anti-Transit Myths: A Conservative Critique](#)," actually tackled 34 "myths" about rail, including "rail transit is a federal conspiracy" and "trains are noisy." It ended with Lind and Weyrich declaring of their foes: "THESE PEOPLE DON'T KNOW WHAT THEY'RE TALKING ABOUT!" Weyrich died in 2008, effectively cutting the number of conservative rail prophets in half.

"Conservatives used to be in favor of a civilized way of doing things," says Lind. "Board a train and you don't have the TSA groping you. If you think our greatest vulnerability is a dependence on foreign oil, here's a way to get around that can run on coal or electrified rails."

But conservatives hear that spiel every day. They have a response that's part economics and part culture. The economics are simple: Trains cost too much. Randal O'Toole, a Cato Institute fellow who studies transportation and is constantly cited by rail skeptics, likes to compare the total federal subsidies-per-passenger of rail to subsidies-per-passenger on highways. Amtrak got \$2.2 billion in pure subsidies in 2010 and carried 28.7 million people, for around 13 cents per passenger, although some researchers estimate the annual cost at closer to 30 cents. Highways got \$42 billion in funds in fiscal year 2010 but far more people use them; the estimate puts cost at between 1 cent and 4 cents per driver.

But there is another way to look at the numbers: Amtrak passengers pay more of the cost of their transportation than do drivers on the interstate. About 62 percent of Amtrak's operating expenses, according to the Department of Transportation, comes from fares. According to the Federal Highway Administration, [the percentage of highway spending paid](#) for by users—in the form of gas taxes and tolls—is headed below 50 percent.

But that's only part of the conservative gripe about building new rail lines. 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.

In Florida, Scott killed the Tampa-Orlando line in part because of the findings of a Reason Foundation analysis, [conducted by transportation consultant Wendell Cox](#). Based on the results of a study tracking transportation spending over 70 years, he estimated that Florida's line would go "between \$0.54 billion and \$2.7 billion" over budget, with taxpayers eating the costs. On Tuesday, Rep. Kevin McCarthy, the GOP's whip in the House, unloaded on the plans for high-speed rail in California, accusing planners of making up dreamy projections for ridership.

"Where they are building this? In the central valley. And they are saying 14 million people will ride?" said McCarthy. "In the central valley less than 750,000 people take a plane or train. They don't have enough money to build it now. They are trying to get the federal government to put so much in, but that doesn't finish the job. So we're going to have a train to nowhere."

The train advocate will say that the optimistic numbers are realistic. Amtrak ridership increases every year. Light rail and urban transportation projects, the ones most often derided as boondoggles, can overrun cost estimates, but they build ridership anyway—Seattle and Los Angeles are examples of that. And then there's the threat of increasing gas prices, which train boosters point to for proof that we're going to want these lines eventually.

The people who crunch the data—the people who are cited by everyone from Will to Walker—don't buy it.

"I've heard someone say, 'Well, Tampa-Orlando might not make sense today, but what about when gas goes to \$8?'" says Wendell Cox. "If everyone wanted to go on it, there wouldn't be enough room! If gas goes to \$8, it's still going to be more expensive to take the train than to drive. If gas prices double, I bet you'll see huge increases in fuel efficiency within two years."

Leaving aside the apparent contradiction—first rail doesn't make sense because no one would ride it, then it doesn't make sense because too many people would want to ride it—Cox's point is the conservatives' second play in their anti-rail argument: the cultural case against rail. Rail can't work because people don't want to ride it. Liberals want to fund rail because they want to change behavior.

"A lot of this has to do with Euro-envy," says Cox. "People like to talk about how much better Europe is. I don't see that their quality of life is better in Europe. The fact is that we live in a dispersed society, and there's no set of circumstances where people are going to leave cars and take rail transportation."

O'Toole also cited Euro-envy as a big motivation for train boosters. 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.

"The plan, again and again, seems to be: Get a cheap proposal, get people to buy in, then get to the point where you can't stop spending," says O'Toole. "The goal in Florida, for example, was to build high-speed rail really fast. People will ride it. People will say, 'Woohoo! I want this in my state!' And since the federal government will fund most of the cost we'll have demand for it in Texas, demand for it in Iowa, and so on. Nobody will think about cost until it's too late."

He's certainly right that rail advocates want rail to take off. If or when it does, the rail lines will be able to run more on fares than on subsidies. And conservatives are certainly right that if the rail advocates get their way, they're going to change personal behavior. But that's what most government policy aims to do. Taxes are cut or raised, subsidies offered or canceled, laws passed or repealed, in the hopes that it will change behavior.

And this brings us to the last time conservatives took a look at upping rail funding. Before and after 9/11, George Will [was talking up rail](#) as a way to take more people off planes and make America less vulnerable to terrorists. That argument has more or less vanished. Why? "It helped that somebody bombed a train in Spain," says O'Toole. "If you concentrate people in one vehicle, then the vehicle is vulnerable. You concentrate society, and it's vulnerable. So maybe it's not a good thing to concentrate people."

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