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High Speed to Insolvency

Why liberals love trains.



by [George F. Will \(/authors/george-f-will.html\)](/authors/george-f-will.html) February 27, 2011

Generations hence, when the river of time has worn this presidency's importance to a small, smooth pebble in the stream of history, people will still marvel that its defining trait was a mania for high-speed rail projects. This disorder illuminates the progressive mind.

Remarkably widespread derision has greeted the Obama administration's damn-the-arithmetic-full-speed-ahead proposal to spend \$53 billion more (after the \$8 billion in stimulus money and \$2.4 billion in enticements to 23 states) in the next six years pursuant to the president's loopy goal of giving "80 percent of Americans access to high-speed rail." "Access" and "high-speed" to be defined later.

Criticism of this optional and irrational spending—meaning: borrowing—during a deficit crisis has been withering. Only an administration blinkered by ideology would persist.

Florida's new Republican governor, Rick Scott, has joined Ohio's (John Kasich) and Wisconsin's (Scott Walker) in rejecting federal incentives—more than \$2 billion in Florida's case—to begin a high-speed rail project. Florida's 84-mile line, which would have run parallel to Interstate 4, would have connected Tampa and Orlando. One preposterous projection was that it would attract 3 million passengers a year—almost as many as ride Amtrak's Acela in the densely populated Boston–New York–Washington corridor.

The three governors want to spare their states from paying the much larger sums likely to be required for construction-cost overruns and operating subsidies when ridership projections prove to be delusional. Kasich and Walker, who were elected promising to stop the nonsense, asked Washington for permission to use the high-speed-rail money for more pressing transportation needs than a train running along Interstate 71 between Cleveland and Cincinnati, or a train parallel to Interstate 94 between Milwaukee and Madison. Washington, disdaining the decisions of Ohio and Wisconsin voters, replied that it will find states that will waste the money.

California will. Although prostrate from its own profligacy, it will sink tens of billions of its own taxpayers' money in the 616-mile San Francisco–to–San Diego line. Supposedly 39 million people will eagerly pay much more than an airfare in order to travel slower. Between 2008 and 2009, the projected cost increased from \$33 billion to \$42.6 billion.

Randal O'Toole of the Cato Institute notes that high-speed rail connects big-city downtowns, where only 7 percent of Americans work and 1 percent live. "The average intercity auto trip today uses less energy per passenger mile than the average Amtrak train." And high speed will not displace enough cars to measurably reduce congestion. *The Washington Post* says China's fast trains are priced beyond ordinary workers' budgets, and that France, like Japan, has only one profitable line.

So why is America's "win the future" administration so fixated on railroads, a technology that was the future two centuries ago? Because progressivism's aim is the modification of (other people's) behavior.

Forever seeking Archimedean levers for prying the world in directions they prefer, progressives say they embrace high-speed rail for many reasons—to improve the climate, increase competitiveness, enhance national security, reduce congestion, and rationalize land use. The length of the list of reasons, and the flimsiness of each, points to this conclusion: the real reason for progressives' passion for trains is their goal of diminishing Americans' individualism in order to make them more amenable to collectivism.

To progressives, the best thing about railroads is that people riding them are not in automobiles, which are subversive of the deference on which progressivism depends. Automobiles go hither and yon, wherever and whenever the driver desires, without timetables. Automobiles encourage people to think they—unsupervised, untutored, and unscripted—are masters of their fates. The automobile encourages people in delusions of adequacy, which make them resistant to government by experts who know what choices people should make.

Time was, the progressive cry was "Workers of the world unite!" or "Power to the people!" Now it is less resonant: "All aboard!"