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Tuesday, June 2, 2009 [12 Comments](#)

### **Randal O’Toole: Taking Liberties With the Facts**

by [Ryan Avent](#) on [June 2, 2009](#)

The Cato Institute's Randal O’Toole gets under the skin of many of those interested in building a more rational and green metropolitan geography, but in many ways he’s an ideal opponent. It would be difficult to concoct more transparently foolish arguments than his. The man is an engine of self-parody.





Is this spaghetti bowl turning a profit? Photo: [Infrastructurist](#)

A recent [post](#) at Cato's @ Liberty blog provides a nice example. In it, he quotes [George Will's](#) description of Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood as "Secretary of Behavior Modification" en route to calling LaHood a "central planner in waiting." This is one thing I've never understood about the libertarian love affair with highways; they seem utterly blind to the fact that it has required and continues to require massive government action to build and maintain the road network. The interstate highway system is perhaps the single largest government intervention in the economy in the 20th century. Reading O'Toole you'd think it was a wonder of the free market.

The source of his blindness on the issue seems to be due to his belief that roads pay for themselves, and that congestion exists only because governments shift gas tax revenue to pay for transit and other smart growth projects. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

In the first place, gas tax revenue comes nowhere near paying for roads. Federal gasoline tax [revenues](#) cover barely half of the annual [budget](#) of the Federal Highway Administration. Add in diesel tax revenues and you're still short. And that's just the federal budget picture.

Taking into account all gas tax revenues and road spending generates an even starker picture. The Texas Department of Transportation recently developed an asset value index, intended to gauge the cost-effectiveness of a road over the whole of its life cycle. They [discovered](#) that most roads don't come close to paying for themselves. In one typical road analysis, it was determined that a real gas tax rate of \$2.22 per gallon would be necessary, simply to break even. No stretch of road in the whole of the state covered its costs.

But that's not all we should consider. On top of the cost of the actual road, drivers [impose costs](#) on other motorists, pedestrians, and society as a whole. Carbon emissions from driving impose an annual cost of about \$20 billion on society. Costs from congestion total nearly \$80 billion per year in lost time and wasted fuel. And the annual cost of automobile crashes (which claim nearly 40,000 lives per year) is around \$220 billion. In the absence of driving alternatives, all of those numbers would be higher still.

But of course, O'Toole thinks that the reason we suffer from so much congestion is because we are diverting money to transit rather than building more roads. This is completely incorrect, and a basic failure to grasp economic analysis. Road space is scarce -- that is, not unlimited. It therefore has a positive value, which should be reflected in a market price. If it isn't -- if prices are fixed at zero (as is the case with most roads) -- then a shortage will result. This is well understood; if the president attempted to fix the price of any other good at a below market rate, libertarians would cry foul and immediately argue that shortages would result. Yet when free roads produce congestion, they conclude that the best solution is to spend taxpayer money on more roads.

O'Toole makes a great show of the fact that transit ridership is low, but the implication of this factoid is not what O'Toole would have you believe. For decades, roads have received massive government subsidies, and drivers have not been forced to pay the true cost of their driving. In the meantime, backdoor subsidies to driving have been rampant. An example -- most communities have rules establishing minimum parking requirements for new construction. Cheap and plentiful parking is a significant subsidy to driving, and such parking requirements make it difficult or impossible to build more compact and walkable streetscapes.

Transit use has lately been on the rise as congestion and fuel costs have exploded. Cities with transit systems have benefited enormously from the availability of a substitute to driving, and those without have suffered from their inelastic dependence on cars in an environment of increasing costs. The simple truth is that

government has intervened heavily to create the road network so beloved by libertarians, and the country continues to bear heavy costs as a result. Any clear-eyed examination of costs and benefits will indicate that the time to rebalance investments away from highways and toward transit is long overdue.

## 12 Comments

Last comment by [Larry Littlefield](#) [Leave a comment »](#)



1.

### [rufustyrfly](#)

Libertarians seem particularly incensed by eminent domain, so I wonder how many people have been displaced by highway construction compared to rail lines. I'm guessing it wouldn't even be close.

But maybe that doesn't count? Got to build a bypass, after all.

June 2, 2009 at 12:16 pm [Link # 1](#)



2.

### [Ian Bicking](#)

I came upon a post "Libertarians Against Sprawl" recently: <http://c4ss.org/content/597> -- so I guess there are \*some\* Libertarians that aren't blind to road subsidies.

June 2, 2009 at 12:46 pm [Link # 2](#)

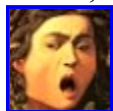


3.

### [Ian Bicking](#)

Oh, and a whole site on this stuff: <http://marketurbanism.com/>

June 2, 2009 at 12:48 pm [Link # 3](#)



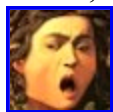
4.

### [Rhywun](#)

If you scratch a libertarian long enough you'll get them to admit that roads are greatly subsidized, but then they'll claim that "that's what everyone wants". The intellectually honest ones will advocate a system where all forms of transportation pay for themselves. As for the rest, when you question whether the government should be in the business of throwing money at every single thing that "everyone wants", or when you point out that highway funding is an enormous transfer of wealth from

the poor to the rich, you get shouted down. Cries of "elitism" and "liberals hate freedom!" are sure to follow.

June 2, 2009 at 12:51 pm [Link # 4](#)



5.

### [Rhywun](#)

@Ian

Interesting links. I've been looking for a rational libertarian POV on urban issues.

June 2, 2009 at 12:59 pm [Link # 5](#)



6.

### **Greg**

Glad to see a well reasoned takedown of O'Toole, who is so intellectually dishonest that it is disgraceful that he gets quoted in the mainstream media as often as he does.

June 2, 2009 at 1:22 pm [Link # 6](#)



7.

### **Brooklyn**

Libertarian opposition to transit/rail is ironic, since rail is the only national transport network to be actually built under private auspices, largely at the turn of the twentieth century.

Except for the oddball Vanderbilt -- thinking of the now (even more ironically) bike-path converted Long Island Motor Parkway, there are no roads out there now built by the free market.

June 2, 2009 at 1:43 pm [Link # 7](#)



8.

### **rex**

What O'Toole is doing for Libertarianism is the same thing that Sid Vicious did for anarchism.

June 2, 2009 at 1:52 pm [Link # 8](#)



9.

### [Mark Walker](#)

If Mr. O'Toole really believes transportation belongs in the private sector, he'll have no objection to the privatizing of all highways, roads, streets, and bridges. The new owners, in all their free market wisdom, would then decide what to charge drivers for the use of every foot of asphalt in the United States.

June 2, 2009 at 2:03 pm [Link # 9](#)



10.

### **Omri**

Simple exegesis from Libertarian Scripture would show that interstate highways are an abomination before the Lord.

But Reason is an underfunded magazine, and compromises have to be made sometimes.

June 2, 2009 at 2:04 pm [Link # 10](#)



11.

### [Doug](#)

It is funny, particularly considering how much of highway planning is specifically about behavior modification. Anyone who lived in Eastern Iowa in the early 90s will remember the controversy over rename I-280 through the quad cities as "I-80 South" for the purpose of channeling more commerce into the Illinois side of the river by tricking some drivers into a non-optimum route. I don't particularly like paternalism, but you're right, it's all too typical to point out one example in defense of another.

June 2, 2009 at 3:25 pm [Link # 11](#)



12.

### **Larry Littlefield**

You want liberty ride a bicycle. You are free from government transit, corporate vehicles and foreign oil.

Got to watch out for bad drivers however. The evildoers hate our freedom.

June 2, 2009 at 4:02 pm [Link # 12](#)

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“Glad to see a well reasoned takedown of O'Toole, who is so intellectually dishonest that it is disgraceful that he gets quoted in the mainstream media as often as he does.”

– *Greg* In response to "[Randal O'Toole: Taking Liberties With the Facts](#) "

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## • Eyes on the Street



Lafayette Street Bike Lane Disappearing Act

Careless taxi drivers during a shift-change. Someone also tried to cover up the 'No Stopping Anytime' sign with paint. The DOT needs to step up its game and put some serious signage down here and restripe the lane. The NYPD needs to start enforcing these two blocks.

From: [ratherbebiking](#) May 28, 2009

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[Students Paint the Pavement in Brooklyn](#)

Not only did these students beautify their school's street, they also identified it to motorists as a thoroughfare frequented by school-age pedestrians in a way that mere signage and conventional markings do not. There are hundreds of school zones across the city that could benefit from the same treatment.

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