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Book Review: Fate of the trains

By: Wes Vernon – April 18, 2013

Fittingly, the American passenger train was born on the Fourth of July. On that date in 1828, one of our Founding Fathers laid the granite cornerstone of the first chartered railroad in the United States - the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad. Charles Carroll, then 90 years old, would remark that perhaps this occasion even surpassed his signing of the Declaration of Independence 52 years earlier.

In the late 20th century, Anthony Pearl, a professor at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, British Columbia, would remark, "Nowhere else in the industrial world was the passenger train's importance so meteoric, and nowhere else in the post-industrial world [was it] followed by such a steep decline."

Those comments were uttered as the nation's Class 1 railroads were deteriorating, a circumstance largely blamed on their "money-losing passenger trains." Official Washington granted the carriers their urgent plea to get out of the passenger business so they could concentrate on their more lucrative freight-rail commerce. Amtrak, a corporation created and backed by the U.S. government (and later some state governments), would pick up the remnants of intercity passenger train operations. Part of the deal was the railroads would accommodate Amtrak passenger trains to operate (for a fee) on their tracks. Freight carriers said those fees don't cover their costs.

Now comes Frank N. Wilner with a meticulous examination of Amtrak's 42-year history from the inaugural run in 1971 until the present that explores plans and possible scenarios well into the 21st century. The author's credibility lies primarily in his experience with rail management (assistant vice president of the Association of American Railroads), rail labor (director of public relations for the United Transportation Union) and rail-related government (chief of staff at the Federal Surface Transportation Board).

He has done doctoral work in economics and holds a master's degree in industrial and labor relations. His "Amtrak: Past, Present, Future" depicts an Amtrak operating at a level just short of death's door and yet financed barely well enough to satisfy demands of the congressional constituency for train service, which in turn is buttressed by repeated polls showing the American public does want this nation to have the rail-passenger option, along with airways and highways.

It has been announced (post-publication of this book) that Amtrak ridership has reached an all-time high and is meeting 88 percent of its costs, mainly through ticket sales.

Mr. Wilner tells his readers, "If Amtrak were, in fact, an island of socialism, in a sea of private enterprise, the spiteful arguments against Amtrak subsidies would have credence. Yet massive [and much larger] past and present federal subsidies for competing modes of passenger transportation belie such allegations."

Mr. Wilner, let it be noted, is no socialist. He has written for the libertarian Cato Institute and the conservative Heritage Foundation, though other writers for those organizations have been critical of Amtrak.

The author touches on a "train wreck" just over the horizon. With both freight and passenger business experiencing rapid growth in recent years, how does the United States go about seeing to it that there is enough trackage to accommodate both? Of all the disputes and problems encountered in this book, the overcrowding issue is arguably the most important, or surely will be in the future.

A couple of years ago, the Federal Railroad Administration proposed a policy of requiring the freight trains to grant more certain priority access to passenger traffic on America's rail infrastructure. That led to some closed-door meetings for intense discussions pitting the plight of inconvenienced freight-rail customers, whose priority is receiving or delivering their goods on time, versus the inconveniences (missed weddings, funerals or business appointments, etc.) of delayed passengers. As of this writing, the impasse continues.

Paul Weyrich, the now-deceased founder of the conservative Free Congress Foundation and onetime Amtrak board member, cited Adam Smith and Alexander Hamilton who had rated "infrastructure" alongside "defense" as worthy of government support.

Amtrak President Joseph Boardman has some ambitious plans for the company, knowing that Congress will have the final say as to how much of the agenda becomes reality. He is ordering new equipment, proposing a large real-estate development around Union Station and aiming for super-high-speed 220 mph service on the Northeast Corridor (Washington-New York-Boston), a very busy stretch of track that Amtrak actually owns. The current 150 mph Acela service on that route is deemed inadequate for the future.

Therein lies Mr. Wilner's dilemma: While government indebtedness presents a "daunting" challenge for some high-end Amtrak goals, with an expected population increase of 70 million in 25 years (100 million in 40 years), highways and aviation alone won't cut it. So what to do?

"Amtrak: Past, Present, Future" makes the point that it's not "either/or," and that we will require all three modes of transportation. Charles Carroll may have envisioned a robust American passenger train operating in its third century of service.