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Transformational, in a bad way

President Obama apparently hasn't been keeping up with his reading list from the Cato Institute. Last Oct. 7, in the groundbreaking study "Rails Won't Save America," Randal O'Toole explained why expanded passenger-rail service would bring us no closer to curbing pollution, traffic congestion or anything else that ails the country. But he and Vice President Joe Biden went right ahead with their railway fantasy, announcing the other day "A new U.S push ... to transform travel in America ..."

The work of Mr. O'Toole and other rail skeptics at least warrants a rebuttal from those promoting multibillion-dollar passenger-train schemes. It's not heavy reading, covering just 13 pages, including a two-page list of sources. (His study is available at [www.cato.org/pub\\_display.php?pub\\_id=9703](http://www.cato.org/pub_display.php?pub_id=9703).) Yet Messrs. Obama and Biden are satisfied to peddle platitudes, such as this from the vice president: "Everyone knows railways are the best way to connect communities to each other. ... Investing in a high-speed rail system will lower our dependence on foreign oil and the bill for a tank of gas; loosen the congestion suffocating our highways and skyways; and significantly reduce the damage we do to our planet."

Among Mr. O'Toole's findings:

Europeans, who pay two to three times as much as Americans do for a gallon of gasoline, use their private cars for 79 percent of their travel, just six ticks below the U.S. average. The difference "can largely be explained by Europe's lower per-capita incomes."

Measured by pounds of carbon dioxide emitted per passenger-mile traveled, the worst offender is not the hated sport-utility vehicle, but the bus. The SUV is only a little worse than Amtrak. One of the best ways to reduce fuel consumption and emissions is urban traffic-signal coordination, but our chief executive and his second hardly would deign to promote so prosaic a solution.

"Urban rail transit investments rarely 'create' new growth, but more typically redistribute growth that would have taken place without the investment," Mr. O'Toole wrote, quoting a study by a prominent rail consulting firm.

An airliner can cover ground at nearly twice the maximum theoretical speed of trains that haven't been invented. So even if the 300-mph magnetic-levitation train could be made to work safely and reliably, Americans still would choose air travel for long trips.

What Messrs. Obama and Biden are talking about is cultural change. As countries go, we're rushed, individualistic and impatient with long lines. And we're deeply suspicious of schemes that have the taint of collusion between government and Big Labor. That's reason enough to derail the Obama-Biden vision for mass transit.