



Thomas Lucente: High-speed rail: a fast track to the poorhouse

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2010-01-29 20:13:13



It must be a sickness. Perhaps the superb doctors at the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Md., can give President Barack Obama something to cure his delusional state.

Thursday, a day after a State of the Union address in which St. Barack made silly promises such as a spending freeze that might save \$250 billion if maintained for 10 years, he handed out \$8 billion for a high-speed rail project that will be a further drain on our already fragile economy.

Better yet, his administration is comparing this latest ill-considered raid on the public treasury to President Dwight D. Eisenhower's interstate highway project.

What hubris!

The two projects are incomparable. As Randal O'Toole, a senior fellow with the Cato Institute wrote last year, high-speed rail is not the new interstate highway system.

O'Toole pointed out five differences: 1) Before Congress approved the Interstate Highway System, it had a good idea how much it would cost; 2) Highway users paid for interstate highways, whereas high-speed rail will be almost entirely subsidized by general taxpayers who will rarely use it; 3) Interstate highways connect all 48 contiguous states and major metropolitan areas and the high-speed rail plan consists of six unconnected networks that reach only 33 states and fewer than two-thirds of the nation's 100 largest urban areas; 4) The average American traveled 4,000 miles on interstates in 2007 while high-speed rail proponents optimistically estimate that the average American would ride the high-speed rail system fewer than 60 miles per year; and 5) Interstate highways improved social welfare by increasing highway safety while high-speed rail would actually increase energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions.

However, none of that really matters to liberals who have ignorantly jumped on the high-speed-rail bandwagon.

Granted, \$8 billion in the Obama era of epic spending does not seem like much. However, that is merely the seed money to get the project off the ground. The final price tag will likely near \$100 billion, and that doesn't include the continual annual subsidies to keep the rail system running because anyone who has actually thought about the issue knows the system will not be able to generate enough funding to maintain itself without the subsidies.

Has this administration not learned anything from the failed Amtrak experience? Do supporters really believe Amtrak failed simply because the trains were not traveling fast enough?

Ludicrous.

I enjoy a train ride as much as the next person does. There is something, dare I say it, romantic about the idea

of traveling by train.

However, here in the real world, high-speed rail is a romantic pipe dream only supported by big-government liberals who do not have the slightest understanding of how an economy operates.

If high-speed rail were such an attractive and desired option, the private sector would have already provided it.

The fact that no company has created a high-speed rail system is a testament to the lack of need for such an animal.

Additionally, while we all will share in its cost, only the wealthy elite will benefit. For example, Amtrak charges a minimum of \$99 for its high-speed Acela from New York to Washington, but only \$72 for its conventional train. For \$99, you could take a plane from New York to Washington. For about \$20, you can take a bus (including free Wi-Fi).

Who is going to shell out \$100 when you only have to spend \$20?

The European and Japanese train systems are often held up as examples to be emulated. However, that is another illusion.

“Japanese and French high-speed trains are attractive to tourists, but they’re not heavily used by local residents,” O’Toole wrote. “Residents of Japan and France on average ride their bullet trains less than 400 miles a year.”

The president, governors and mayors who are chasing after this elusive transportation system are no better than Don Quixote attacking windmills: they both seem silly to watchers but the participants are convinced they are doing something important.

If Obama is successful in guiding this project to fruition, the only thing that will be moving faster than those empty trains will be your money from your wallet to the government to pay for this epic boondoggle.

Lucente blogs at www.lucente.org and thinkfree.freedomblogging.com, and he can be heard on “Talk with Ron Williams” on WCIT-AM at 3:10 p.m. Thursdays (listen at 940wcit.com).

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