

A vision of trains and windmills?

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Recently we awoke to a radio news broadcast of the words of Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell characterizing President Obama's proposed budget as being a misguided national "*vision built upon trains and windmills*". So what's wrong with trains and windmills? With oil currently flirting with \$100 a barrel; maybe nothing!

At best, trains and windmills constitute but a fraction of the overall transportation and energy infrastructure systems envisioned by their advocates. The opposition attempts to make rail and wind power larger-than-life issues. Maybe they believe their own rhetoric? Perhaps it is just political posturing? However, should rail and wind power prove successful, and there is a good chance they will, it would seriously upset the status quo, and that prospect is extremely unsettling to the "establishment". One of our favorite words is "*inertia*". We all know the term, but a simple layman's definition might be helpful: Objects at rest (including people and institutions) tend to remain at rest, while objects in motion tend to continue moving, and in the same direction. That well describes U.S. transportation and energy policies since mid-twentieth century. We just keep on doing what we've always done, with great reluctance to change.

Let's just deal with conventional, but improved, trains -- even before considering the futuristic Obama vision of a high speed network connecting 80% of the U. S. population. Solid evidence confirms that people will opt for the train, in good numbers, when reasonably convenient, reliable, highway and aviation-competitive passenger trains are available to them in corridors of 100-400 miles, and often beyond. A spokesman for the airline industry, commenting on the Obama passenger rail vision, opined that it would discourage people from flying. Of course it would. In fact that is being demonstrated in Virginia year after year as the state's modest Amtrak network of service gradually expands. Richmond recently saw the introduction of "*One Dollar*" bus service from Main Street Station to D.C., yet the extremely limited, slow, expensive, and delay-prone, Amtrak service to and from Main Street Station saw an increase of 13% in train ridership there in January, despite the new competition.

Across the U. S. there has developed a huge business complex, economically dependent upon our vast system of publicly-sponsored highway and aviation infrastructure. These opportunistic private businesses, tethered to road and air, naturally feel threatened by anything new or different that might detract in any way from their present position of power and political influence. While critics "rail" at Obama, few seem to be aware of the large public subsidies required to make such air and road systems work. Nor is it clear that rail development would cost more or less. We ought to know.

The President's vision would gradually augment what we have while providing faster, more energy-efficient mobility, enhanced productivity, marginally reducing our dependence upon foreign oil (think of our 5th Fleet in the Persian Gulf), and a safer, cleaner environment. Let's find out. Let's at least go the first round.

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