

Dept. of Defense Use of RAIL

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Our local newspaper here in Richmond recently reported that the Army is considering use of passenger rail to move troops between Ft. Lee, east of Petersburg, and Ft. A.P. Hill, south of Fredericksburg. That is welcome news, considering the fact that the Dept. of Defense has seemingly been oblivious to Amtrak since its inception, with the possible exception of individual military personnel traveling in the Northeast Corridor.

The feasibility of the proposed, short-but-recurring, central Virginia rail move is questionable. Although it would involve large numbers of troops shuttling back and forth between the two bases, on a regular basis, it will likely not materialize when the Military determines how long it will take and how much it would cost. Abandonment of the fastest and most direct route northward from Petersburg, back in the mid-1980's, was unfortunate. For a pittance CSX, the owning railroad, jettisoned that piece of rail line which they did not then need, nor wish to keep, to accommodate a new I-95 off-ramp. That strategically-located Petersburg routing option would have been ideal for the Army move. Moreover, with that route in place, the planned 2013 Norfolk train service could have also served downtown Petersburg's station. Alas, that was then, and this is now!

Surprisingly, the Dept. of Defense, with its commanding presence in eastern Virginia, including the Navy in Hampton Roads, is not a significant user of rail freight service. Except for rare and infrequent special moves, this huge Virginia "industry" makes practically no use of rail. Change in mission at some locations may have been part of the explanation, e.g. Fort Belvoir in Northern Virginia, and Defense General Supply at Bellwood, south of Richmond. Even the rail tracks have been removed at Bellwood. Like the U.S. Postal Service, DOD weaned itself from rail beginning in the 1960's, putting most general cargo on the highway. If energy conservation and environmental considerations matter, as most of us believe they do, it would seem appropriate that DOD review its cargo transport options and take a renewed look at rail freight.

Whether the U.S. Government deserted rail, or vice versa, is a fair question. The bias of this writer is that the federal establishment, including DOD, did in fact desert the rails in the nation's rush to put everything possible on the Interstate Highway network, and in the air. The military is famous for airlifting that which could more economically be moved via surface transport. Even UPS and FedEx use surface as a more economical alternative to air when that works for them, and makes business sense.

Nevertheless, rail freight transportation must work effectively and economically. One can see evidence today that the large freight railroads do not even use rail for some of their own

cargo transport requirements. It is not unusual, when heading west on I-64 toward Charlottesville, to be *passed* at 70+ m.p.h. by a tractor-pulled “lowboy” with a CSX track tamper headed to Ohio or beyond, following overhaul in their Richmond roadway equipment shop. To convince others, it would seem that one ought to believe in, and use, one’s own services! Maybe DOD has it right after all? #####