

Tired of the Same Old Congressional Antics!

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Has there ever been another quasi-public entity (aside from public broadcasting, perhaps) that has amassed greater public support, and made greater strides in self-sufficiency than Amtrak, yet is repeatedly bashed by a few budget hawks? This is a movie we have seen over and over. It's very depressing because it is so mindless. It is hard to tell whether such punitive funding proposals (to cut little Amtrak 31%, yet only two or three percentage-points off of the high-dollar modes) arise out of ignorance, or from an ideological anti-Amtrak vendetta. In either case, it is surely misguided. Rail will undoubtedly have to take its lumps, with some other items, in the next budget, but why cripple a proven winner? I refer to the best value of all, *rail transportation* in total.

What the proponents of cutting Amtrak by roughly one-third seem not to understand is that the National Rail Passenger System, is not a system at all without the much-maligned long-distance trains about which such proponents obviously know little. Kill the highly-popular long-distance Amtrak trains (which serve hundreds of otherwise underserved intermediate points) and the residual costs get reallocated to major terminal facilities, and other overhead accounts, at locations such as Penn Station, Washington, Chicago and LA. You cannot save enough by eliminating long-distance trains to avoid an INCREASE in cost to commuter rail operators utilizing such facilities. Nor can similar adverse cost-penalty impacts be avoided with regard to state-sponsored regional trains, such as those for which Virginia will soon assume responsibility. Then there are the freight rail carriers. Does anyone believe that CSX, NS and the Buckingham Branch, for example, would fair as well in publicly-funded infrastructure grants absent the operation of passenger trains over their lines? Finally, a drastically-reduced Railroad Retirement worker population will ultimately have a negative impact on private rail earnings.

This writer devoted much of his time in the years 1966-1970 to RF&P's efforts to drastically rationalize rail passenger operations. We eliminated sleeping car lines, dining cars, combined trains, held locomotives in the stations rather than sending them to servicing facilities, did likewise for coaches and sleepers, declined to use the equipment washing facility at Washington Union Station, etc. Every move resulted in higher unit cost for that which was left, thereby reinforcing the drive to rid ourselves entirely of this expensive burden. Like every other passenger-carrying railroad, we ran up a very large "ICC Form A" passenger deficit. However, when the day came for the Amtrak take over, only one-half of that deficit was recognized, thereby acknowledging the fact that it was inflated by unavoidable costs. We did what we had to do, because the status-quo was intolerable to the *private* railroad companies. Amtrak is quite a different matter.

If the budget cutters in Washington want to scuttle a renaissance in rail passenger and freight transportation, let them simply muster the courage to kill Amtrak outright -- all of it -- and let the chips fall where they may. It won't happen, because at the end of the day, it does not make sense. Why then do we have to endure another replay of the same tired old movie?

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