A Conservative Proposal for Energy Independence: A National Defense Public Transportation Act

by Paul M. Weyrich and William S. Lind

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United States Representative, 3rd District of Oregon

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FOREWORD

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To address the growing security risks associated with imported oil, Paul Weyrich and William Lind have incorporated a conservative's appreciation for history in a sound proposal for a National Defense Public Transportation System. Their clear vision, incisive analysis, and sound policy recommendations build on our existing public transit infrastructure to provide the mobility and security that Americans deserve.

As somebody who was in our nation's Capital on September 11th, 2001, I can testify to the wisdom and the power of this idea. Without Amtrak and DC's Metro public transit system, our nation's Capital would have been paralyzed for days. Fortunately, transportation infrastructure investments were in place, permitting critical flow in and around the city.

Weyrich and Lind point out that while conservatives are not particularly enamored of government subsidies, they object even more to the differential treatment of solutions without any rational basis. Today, massive subsidies for the auto overwhelm modest -- and in some cases, nonexistent -- federal support for public transit and rail passenger service, tilting the playing field against transit and rail.

Their proposal is provocative. Some readers will disagree because it is too radical, others because it is not bold enough. But this essay will get the ball rolling, providing an excellent point of departure for a critical public-policy debate that has not yet been given the attention it deserves. Their concise summary of the federal government's role in developing our nation's infrastructure is an important part of our heritage that is seldom acknowledged, much less appreciated. Shining a spotlight on our growing dependence on petroleum from unstable regions of the world, the authors help to highlight a profound weakness in our national security and homeland defense. In the finest conservative tradition, they propose an incremental solution that can be implemented by regions on a voluntary basis. Most important, they call not for a grand scheme of vast new plans and high-tech programs, but rely instead on proven technology and existing transportation services -- a 'back to the future' approach that appeals to Americans' sense of heritage as well as their common sense.

This proposal, with its emphasis on reducing American dependence on oil, is a clarion call for the U.S. to stop financing both sides of the war on terror. I hope everyone who cares about the future security of their communities, our environmental health and economic growth will take the time to examine this principled and compelling essay and join in this critical national discussion.

Introduction

This is a study about infrastructure. It calls for developing some new infrastructure – or more accurately, restoring some old infrastructure --that would ensure the American people retain their mobility if a war or other crisis cuts off our supply of foreign oil. In the world we now live in, the probability that will sometime happen is high. As we write, young Americans are dying every day in Iraq. It is safe to say they would not be there if Iraq's main export were bananas.

As conservatives, we are not fond of government programs. However, as conservatives, we also respect precedents. Government, at all levels, has been involved in the development of America's infrastructure from our country's beginning. From the first Congress onward, the federal government funded improvements in harbors and for coastal navigation. The first federally funded public works project was construction of a lighthouse at Cape Henry, Virginia, authorized by Congress on August 7, 1789.

The first federally funded highway, the famed National Road, was approved by Congress in the March 29, 1806 "Act to Regulate the Laying Out and Making a Road from Cumberland, in the State of Maryland, to the State of Ohio."

One economist's study concludes that up to 1860, states spent about $300 million on transportation infrastructure, local governments about $125 million, and the federal government about $54 million.[1] In today's dollars, those would be many billions.

The technological shift from roads and canals to railroads saw substantial government involvement in creating a new rail infrastructure. Carter Goodrich, the dean of infrastructure studies, wrote in his seminal book, Government Promotion of American Canals and Railroads 1800-1890:

> For eleven states of the South, it has been estimated that public agencies contributed well over 55 percent of the cost of all railroad construction before 1861 and at least 75 percent of the amount made available in cash. Of the four trunk-line railroads that reached Lake Erie or the Ohio River by 1855, public sources had provided about half of the funds for the Pennsylvania, the Baltimore and Ohio, and the Erie…
>
> In the period after 1860, there is a marked change in the relative contributions of the different levels of government. The Era of National Subsidy, which was initiated with the Illinois Central (Railroad) act of 1850, reached its peak in the few years following the end of the Civil War. The companies that constructed the first transcontinental railroad received (federal) loans of nearly $65,000,000. In addition, land grants were authorized during the

years 1861-72 to a number of railroad companies, from which they ultimately obtained well over 100,000,000 acres. [2]

The 20th century brought the rise of the automobile, and with it massive government subsidy of highway infrastructure. As early as 1921, government at all levels was pouring $1.4 billion into highways. Fifty years ago, the federal government passed the National Defense Interstate Highway Act and began building the interstate highway system, at a cost that now exceeds 114 billion dollars. Among the effects of that Act was the near extinction of long-distance passenger trains, which were run by unsubsidized private railway companies that were expected to make profits. Amtrak's national system is today but a shadow of the passenger train network that served the country in the 1950s.

President Dwight D. Eisenhower's National Defense Interstate Highway Act was the culmination of almost 200 years of government involvement in the building of America's transportation infrastructure. But it was something else as well. The Act's title pointed directly to a connection between America's transportation system and national security. The Eisenhower Administration argued that America needed a network of superhighways in order to move troops quickly to ports for overseas deployment in event of a major war in Europe or Asia. Later, the interstates were also seen as vital to national defense if cities had to be evacuated in a nuclear war.

In this paper, we will argue that the logic behind the National Defense Interstate Highway Act applies today. There is still a direct, important connection between transportation and America's national security. However, the threat has changed. Fifty years ago, the threat was world war with the Soviet Union. Now, America faces a threat to her fuel supply, because of our dependence on foreign oil. In largely dismantling our public transportation systems, especially passenger rail service, and making ourselves almost wholly dependent on automobiles for our mobility, we have also made ourselves highly vulnerable to interruptions in oil imports. A war or other crisis in the Middle East can literally bring America to a stop -- as it did twice in the 1970s.

We contend that national security now requires us to lessen our dependence on foreign oil by creating a viable alternative to automobile dependence, a system that would allow Americans to remain mobile even if oil imports were suddenly restricted or cut off. We need a National Defense Public Transportation Act, an act to create a public transportation network that will allow Americans to go from any place in the country to any other place, without using a car.

Can it be done? Yes, it can, over time. The interstate highway system was not built in a day, either. It does not require any fancy technology, no fuel cells, no maglev, no perpetual motion machines. For the most part, it amounts to resurrecting what we had not too many decades ago, when it was easy (and enjoyable) to travel without a car.

For what the Pentagon would regard as pocket change, we can make America secure against the threat of immobility. Since we are talking about national defense here, perhaps we should start as the Pentagon does, by looking in more detail at the threat.

The Threat

In the fall of 2006, the Council on Foreign Relations issued a report, put together by an independent task force co-chaired by James R. Schlesinger, a former U.S. Secretary of Defense and the first Secretary of Energy, titled National Security Consequences of U.S. Oil Dependency. [3]

The report states at its outset,

> The lack of sustained attention to energy issues is undercutting U.S. foreign policy and U.S. national security. . . . Major energy consumers -- notably the United States, but other countries as well -- are finding that their growing dependence on imported energy increases their strategic vulnerability. . .
>
> The challenge over the next several decades is to manage the consequences of unavoidable dependence on oil and gas that is traded in world markets and to begin the transition to an economy that relies less on petroleum. [4]

U.S. dependence on imported oil is not just a Washington issue. It directly affects virtually every American through the price of gasoline, and potentially through the availability of gasoline as well. While the price of gas dropped late in 2006, for much of the year many Americans were paying $3 or more per gallon. That hit many family budgets hard, which in turn impacted the whole U.S. economy. Because of most Americans' dependence on the car, we are all vulnerable to any threat to America's oil supply.

While Americans make up only 4.6% of the world's population, we use 25% of the world's oil. About 60% of the oil we use comes from imports. [5] We use 68% of our total oil supply for transportation, and most of that goes into automobiles. [6] Transportation is heavily dependent upon oil, over 96% of all transportation energy is from oil fuels. [7]

As economist Robert Samuelson writes,

> The problem is not even imports. It is that most imports come from countries that are potentially insecure, unstable or hostile. More than 700 billion barrels of reserves, slightly more than half [of the world total of about 1.3 trillion barrels], lie in the Persian Gulf; 80 billion are in Venezuela, 76 billion in the former Soviet Union, 39 billion in Libya. New exploration in these countries is difficult; supply interruptions are an ever-present threat. [8]

In view of these facts, it should not surprise us that the Council on Foreign Relations report, which is focused on national security, says that

> The Task Force is unanimous in recommending the adoption of incentives to slow and eventually reverse the growth in consumption of petroleum products, especially transportation fuels such as motor gasoline. [9]

While gas at $3 per gallon came as a shock to many Americans, we may soon look back on that price as low. The CFR Task Force found that

> Though there will be ups and downs over time, the real price of oil will probably continue to increase. The reason is that for the past one hundred years or so, the United States and other industrialized countries have consumed large amounts of oil, depleting the most readily available "conventional" oil reserves. . . .
>
> So while the world will not soon "run out of oil," these new supplies are almost surely going to be more difficult and expensive to produce than in the past. Production from existing fields is declining, on average, about 5 percent per year (roughly 4.3 million barrels per day), and thus even sustaining current levels of consumption requires an enormous effort. [10]

In fact, many experts think the world will soon hit "peak oil." "Peak oil" is the point where, no matter what we do, world oil production declines. At the same time, world demand is universally predicted to increase. The U.S. Energy Department forecasts that, if current policies are maintained, U.S. oil demand will grow by 34% by the year 2030. [11] What does a combination of falling oil production and rising world demand mean? Higher prices, possibly a lot higher. How many Americans will be able to afford to drive when gas costs $10 per gallon or $20 per gallon?

Still, this is not the worst of the threat. The worst danger we face is American gas stations not having any gas to sell. That could happen at any time, with little or no warning.

Older Americans still remember when it happened, not once but twice, in 1973 and 1979. Cars were lined up for half-a-mile or more and motorists waited for hours to fill their gas tanks from the few stations that had gas. Many gas stations simply had no fuel to sell.

In both cases, the primary cause was events in the Middle East. If anything, the Middle East has since become more unstable. The war in Iraq has already diminished Iraqi oil exports. A war with Iran could quickly put us back where we were in 1973 and 1979, lining up for gas. The CFR's Task Force said in its report,

> The depletion of conventional sources, especially those close to the major markets in the United States, Western Europe, and Asia, means that the production and transport of oil will become even more dependent on an infrastructure that is already vulnerable. In particular, oil supply is expected to continue to concentrate in the Persian Gulf, which holds the world's largest geologically attractive reserves, and is a region that has been unstable and includes countries that have periodically used their oil exports for political purposes unfriendly to the United States.
>
> A large fraction of the world's traded oil already passes through a handful of strategic choke points, such as the Straits of Hormuz. The infrastructure for delivering oil has several potential weak links, including major oil processing facilities that are vital yet vulnerable to attack and difficult to repair. [12]

To sum up the threat, it is likely that the future will bring both higher prices for gasoline, perhaps several times what Americans pay now, and periodic interruptions to the supply of gas, where motorists cannot buy it at any price. Either or both would severely restrict Americans' mobility, because America has become heavily dependent on automobiles.

So dangerous is our dependency on foreign oil that the CFR report recommends the government even now consider gas rationing, in the form of tradeable gas vouchers, as a means of controlling oil consumption. [13] The last time Americans faced gas rationing, during World War II, we still had a vast network of passenger trains and other public transportation, including electric streetcars. Today, that network is but a shadow of what it was.

As conservatives, we know that many of the solutions to today's problems can be found in the past. The CFR Task Force's report points in the same direction. It states,

> Many experts note that a shift from cars to mass transit could have a major effect in reducing oil consumption, in addition to other benefits. Where such actions substitute electricity for oil, such as in subways and other electrified trains, these policies may enhance energy security as well. [14]

A recent study, Public Transportation and Petroleum Savings in the U.S.: Reducing Dependency on Oil, puts some numbers behind the CFR Task Force's words. It found that current public transportation usage reduces U.S. gasoline consumption by 1.4 billion gallons each year. In concrete terms, that means:

- 108 million fewer cars filling up -- almost 300,000 every day.
- 34 fewer supertankers leaving the Middle East – one every 11 days.
- Over 140,000 fewer tanker truck deliveries to service stations per year.
- A savings of 3.9 million gallons of gasoline per day. [15]

The study further found that “In terms of total barrels of crude oil, this (1.4 billion gallons of gasoline annually) would be the equivalent of 33.5 million barrels of crude oil.” [16] Like the CFR study, it pointed to the particular importance of electric railways in reducing the demand for oil:

> Vehicles that use electric power, including most rail services and some buses, use much less petroleum than similar trips would take using private automobiles. Only 3 percent of electricity is currently produced using petroleum products. [17]

There you have it. If we are going to keep America secure and keep Americans mobile in times of crises overseas, we need a stronger public transportation infrastructure. Today, half of the American people have no public transportation of any sort available to them. How can public transportation help make America more secure if people don't have any? That is why we need a National Defense Public Transportation Act.

How exactly would such an act work to protect our country and its citizens' mobility? To begin to answer that question, let's take a little trip of our own, into the future.

A Sentimental Journey

Mrs. Eulalia Hapsburg-Jones of Flat Possum, East Virginia, wanted to see her sister Ophelia one more time before they were both too old to travel. Ophelia lived in Timber City, Oregon, all the way across the country. That day many years ago when Pappy's still exploded and killed Ophelia's pet porcupine, she'd sworn to live as far from East Virginia as she could, and she'd done just that.

Eulalia had tried to visit Ophelia a couple years ago. The closest place she could fly from was Pittsburgh, unless she wanted to pay an air fare that was more than her house was worth. She'd gotten her ticket months in advance, to get an affordable fare, and planned to drive all the way from Flat Possum to Pittsburgh in her primer-painted Pinto. But another one of those furrin' wars, in a place called Karjackistan or something, had cut off the gasoline, and when the time came she couldn't drive anywhere. Worse, when she called the airline to re-schedule, not only did they want a big "change fee," the price of the ticket went up too, by so much she couldn't go at all. She ended up using that plane ticket to light a Marsh Wheeling Stogie.

Then one day she got talking with her neighbor, Virgil. Virgil told her that if she telephoned, the county would send a van for her, to take her into Moorefield. There was a new bus that ran from Moorefield to Cumberland, Maryland, where she could get a train west. It seemed Hardy County was now participating in a "National Defense Public Transportation Program" which created these new bus services that connected people to trains. With the supply of gas so uncertain, it made sure you could get around without a car.

So Eulalia started cranking her telephone. First, she made sure she could get a paratransit van, run by the county, to pick her up at her house. Then she told central she wanted to talk to Amtrak, and confirmed that she could pick up the Capitol Limited at Cumberland, connecting at Chicago to the Empire Builder for Portland. But she was afraid she would end up with another ticket she couldn't use. What if I get sick or something and have to change my reservation, she asked? That was not a problem, Amtrak told her. The same National Defense Public Transportation Program that gave her the new bus service had insisted Amtrak charge the old way, on a straight price-per-mile basis. So the fare was the same regardless of when she bought her ticket.

Eulalia decided to do it, and she did. On the appointed day, a county paratransit van picked her up right at her house and took her to Lost City, the nearest town. Virgil didn't have it quite right, it seemed, but then he wasn't quite right himself. At Lost City, there was a bus that did take her to Moorefield. It was timed to connect to another bus at Moorefield, one that took her up through Romney and Keyser to Cumberland and the train. It was a nice bus, as nice as buses get, anyway, like the old Greyhounds that had served her town years ago.

From Cumberland the Capitol Limited and the Empire Builder provided a wonderful trip all the way to Portland. Like most people, she'd always enjoyed riding the train, looking out the big windows, eating in the dining car. She wasn't sure why trains had almost disappeared, but that same National Defense Public Transportation Act was bringing them back. She was glad about that. Maybe she could still travel after all, as old as she was.

Ophelia met Eulalia at the big, downtown Portland railroad station. She didn't have a car anymore; she said the price of gas was too high, when you could get it. But the Portland Streetcar came right to the train station, and they could get a trolley on the Timber City line. That turned out to be a beautiful ride, too, along the bluffs of the Willamette River. From the end of the streetcar line, it was a short walk to Ophelia's goat farm. You could take the girl out of East Virginia, it seemed, but you could never take East Virginia out of the girl.

A National Defense Public Transportation Act

By the time Mrs. Hapsburg-Jones took her sentimental journey, the National Defense Public Transportation Act we are proposing had done its work. It had created a network of public transportation that enabled anyone in any part of the country to get to any other place in the country, without a car.

The public transportation network was still skeletal. Services were not frequent. But they were there. They were coordinated, buses with trains. And, they had given America "virtual" energy independence. When wars and crises overseas drove the price of gas through the roof or cut it off entirely, no one was stranded. People might find it less convenient to get around, but they could still go places. Foreign countries could not bring America to a stop.

How would such a National Defense Public Transportation Act work? It would offer a set of subsidies, for both bus and rail transportation, to every county in America. A county could join the program or not, as it wished (as conservatives, we prefer such decisions be made by referendum). If it joined, it could get partial capital and operating subsidies for a skeletal network of public transportation that would serve every resident in the county. Federal funds for both capital and operating costs would have to be matched by local funds, public or private. The justification for some federal subsidy of operating costs is national defense: it is in the interest of the federal government that foreign oil producers not be able to hold America over a barrel, potentially forcing her into more wars for oil.

If a county joined, here is how the proposed National Defense Public Transportation Act would work.

- First, it would ensure that existing public transportation services are maintained. It makes no sense to let existing services disappear for want of funds, then shortly after have to re-create them, starting from scratch. The next TEA bill should provide funds to make sure existing services continue.

- Second, the Act would focus on its "transit phase." The transit phase would provide paratransit service to the entire county. The paratransit service could be supplemented by fixed-route bus service, streetcars or Light Rail, where population densities warrant. We would suggest the Act provide for automatic approval of any streetcar, Light Rail or electrified commuter rail project for any urbanized area with a population of 500,000 or more, and for high-density corridors in smaller areas. The reason, obviously, is that electric railways do not require oil for fuel.

- The paratransit and local fixed-route bus or rail service, if any, would feed into the county's hub, its principal town. In most cases, though not all, this will be the county seat.

- Publicly supported bus or rail service would connect the county's hub to intercity passenger trains. This bus or local rail service could be operated by the local transit authority or by private operators. In effect, it would re-create the Greyhound bus service and local trains many counties' principal towns had until recent decades. Because Amtrak service today is minimal in much of the country, the buses might serve a number of counties along one route, ending in a city or town served by Amtrak. The bus service, like most Amtrak routes, would be skeletal, one bus a day each way to connect with the trains. As demand grew, more buses would be added; some people will be taking the bus to nearby destinations rather than connecting with Amtrak trains.

- The Act's transit phase would conclude with a program designed to encourage the conversion of bus routes with sufficient ridership to electric streetcars or Light Rail. While buses use petroleum fuel more efficiently than private automobiles, they are not independent of foreign oil. Only electric streetcars and Light Rail offer full oil independence, which is the Act's long-term goal. In addition, many people do not like riding a bus but are willing to take a streetcar or Light Rail. Since the private automobile is the main consumer of imported oil, each trip that is taken on electrified railways instead is valuable in attaining the Act's goal. The conversion of bus routes to streetcar and Light Rail could be encouraged by offering 100% federal funding of the capital costs of conversion.

- The Act's next phase would focus on intercity rail. Here, the Act would first preserve existing rail passenger service, just as it preserves existing transit service. Gradually, as funds became available, it would increase and expand intercity rail service, both by adding more trains on existing routes and by adding new routes. As the intercity passenger train network expanded, the distance people would have to travel by bus to get a train would shrink. Assuming just reasonably fast trains -- not high-speed rail – this would in turn help make travel times competitive with travel times by automobile, which should be one of the Act's long-term objectives. The more people find travel by bus and rail a reasonable alternative to travel by car, the less we will depend on foreign oil.

- The Act would require that bus and rail fares be set on a cost-per-mile basis, rather than the "yield management" basis now used by Amtrak and the airlines. Yield management has the unintended consequence of making travel by public transportation either too expensive or too inflexible for many people, forcing them back into their cars. They can only obtain a reasonable fare by planning their travel dates rigidly weeks or months in

advance; often, their lives are not predictable enough to allow this. If someone needs to travel on short notice, fares are often so high that only businessmen on expense accounts can afford them. If we want the public transportation network the Act would establish to be useful to ordinary people, they must be able to make, change or cancel their travel plans on short notice, without a financial penalty. That in turn rules out yield management fares and suggests a return to the cost-per-mile fares the railroads used to employ.

- Under the Act, bus services would generally be provided on a regional level by county or city governments. New rail services provided by the Act could be requested and partially funded by states or groups of states, as is currently the case for a number of Amtrak routes. Additional passenger train routes and services could also be initiated by Amtrak or other carriers, or by Congress, to fulfill the Act's purposes.

- Services requested under the terms of the Act would have presumptive approval. They would not require approval by the Department of Transportation, the Federal Transit Administration or other executive departments. They would, of course, require Congressional appropriations.

- The Act's final phase would see the electrification of most American railroads' main lines. Government funding would be provided, perhaps in the form of interest-free loans, to enable railroads to free most of their traffic from dependence on oil fuel. Electricity can be generated by coal, by nuclear power, or by renewable power such as water or wind. Electrification of the railroads would give us one transportation mode, for both passengers and freight, that would be secure from any foreign interruption of fuel supplies. An oil crisis will affect trucks as well as automobiles, putting a great deal more freight on railroads that are in many cases already at capacity. Electrification, in addition to freeing railroads from oil fuel, also raises capacity and speeds. It is a necessary component of national energy security.

Here, then, is our conservative, long-term vision of the future of American public transportation. Just as we lost, bit by bit, the ability to travel from anywhere in the country to anywhere else in the country without a car, so we will recreate that ability bit by bit, over time.

For reasons of national security, we hope Congress will move to create a skeletal national public transportation network quickly. If (or when) interruptions to the country's oil supply become chronic, we can quickly put more flesh on the skeleton by adding more buses and trains. It is much easier to build up something that already exists than to create it from scratch in time of national

emergency. Even a thin, skeletal network, national in scope, would give us the "virtual" energy independence national security demands.

Questions and Answers

The essence of our proposed National Security Public Transportation Act is easy enough to understand. It would create a thin (initially) network of paratransit and fixed-route bus services, along with new electrified streetcar and Light Rail lines, serving virtually every destination in America, connected at multiple points to Amtrak's (and potentially other) inter-city passenger trains. Those inter-city passenger trains would provide the "long haul" part of the journey, while the buses and local electric trains performed the "collector/distributor" function. Both rail and bus services could be increased as necessary, in response to greater demand. Fares set on a cost-per-mile basis would keep tickets affordable to ordinary people. It would again become possible to travel from any point in America to any other point, without using a car.

However, it is natural for any new proposal to raise some questions. Here are some questions we think this proposal might raise, with some answers.

- What percentage of both capital and operating costs would the federal government provide?

  The federal government currently covers 80% of highway construction costs, but often only 50% of transit capital costs. This obviously tilts the game in favor of highways, despite the dependence of highway traffic on imported oil. We think transit should receive the same level of support for capital costs as highways, 80%. As to operating subsidies, we would suggest the federal government cover 50% of the operating costs of services created under the Act.

- How will we pay for these new bus and rail services?

  We would propose two funding mechanisms:

  1) Put all transportation tax and "user fee" payments in one transportation trust fund, to be allocated among all modes. National security considerations should be a primary factor in deciding the allocations.

  2) Because both the Pentagon's and the Department of Homeland Security's budgets are driven to a significant degree by our dependence on foreign oil and our resulting involvement in the Middle East, we suggest that the National Defense Public Transportation Act receive annual funding equal to 5% of the combined DOD and DHS budgets. This funding, like DOD's and DHS's, would come from general revenues, as is appropriate for national security measures.

- Why not wait until we see whether an oil supply crisis really happens before creating a nationwide alternative to travel by private automobile?

  As we noted earlier, we can build up a skeletal national public transportation system much faster than we can create one from scratch. The American people will not be very happy if there is no gas at the gas stations and there is also no other way to get around.

- But what if there is no crisis?

  The skeletal system the Act would initially create is still useful. Many Americans would like to be able to travel without having to drive. As our population ages, that will be true for a growing number of people. Even if there is no crisis in the gasoline supply, rising gas prices are still probable, and we have already seen that increases in the price of gasoline lead more people to use public transportation where it is available. It is a reasonable government policy, consistent with governments' responsibility for infrastructure, to make it available more widely.

- If there is a nationwide shortage of gasoline, how will the buses and trains get the fuel they need?

  The Act should give public transportation priority because a gallon of fuel will carry far more people when applied to public transportation. In reality, buses and trains seldom compete directly with private automobiles for fuel, because trains and buses use diesel fuel while almost all cars in America run on gasoline.

- How many counties will want to participate in the programs established by the Act?

  We think quite a lot. At present, there is a long list of "suppressed" public transportation projects, projects localities want but cannot find funding for. For example, SAFETEA-LU authorizes over 400 fixed-guideway transit projects, but provides only $7.3 billion over five years for those projects, far too little to build more than a handful of them.

- What if some places do not want to participate?

  Nothing in the Act would require them to. Each county would make its own decision, preferably by referendum. Because counties and, in the case of some new rail services, states, must pay a portion of both the capital and operating costs, we do not expect the decision to participate to be made frivolously.

- How much will the whole system projected by the Act cost?

  Initially, not a great deal, certainly not more than the funding mechanisms we have proposed can support.

- Could bus companies such as Greyhound play a role in creating the new network?

  Yes. Many small cities and even small towns had regular long-distance bus service, often provided by Greyhound, until just a few decades ago. Since the proposed Act would restore such service, it is reasonable to think Greyhound and other bus companies would want to participate. As conservatives, we favor public-private partnerships, because competitive bidding from several bus companies would help hold subsidy costs down.

- Isn't it inconsistent with conservatism to approve of any subsidies?

  What conservatives generally favor, and what is needed if the free market is to function as it should, is a level playing field. Private automobile travel is subsidized massively at present. Had automobile travel not been so heavily subsidized for more than 80 years, a lot of our private, rail-based transportation system would have survived into the present.

- Why do you insist on mileage-based rail fares, when yield management would increase revenues and therefore reduce subsidies?

  Our primary goal is to make the new, nation-wide public transportation system the Act would create useable by average people. Yield management fares work against that, because they give people a Hobson’s choice: you can either get a ticket you can afford, by booking weeks or months in advance, or travel at short notice (or make changes in your travel plans) but only at unaffordable fares. Ordinary people, not just businessmen traveling on an expense account, should be able to make and change their travel plans right up to the day and time of travel. If the system created by the proposed Act does not allow that, it will not provide a real alternative to the automobile, because someone who is driving can change his plans at any time. We would rather see higher subsidies for a system that is widely used than lower subsidies for a system that goes largely unused.

- How extensive an expansion of Amtrak does the Act envision?

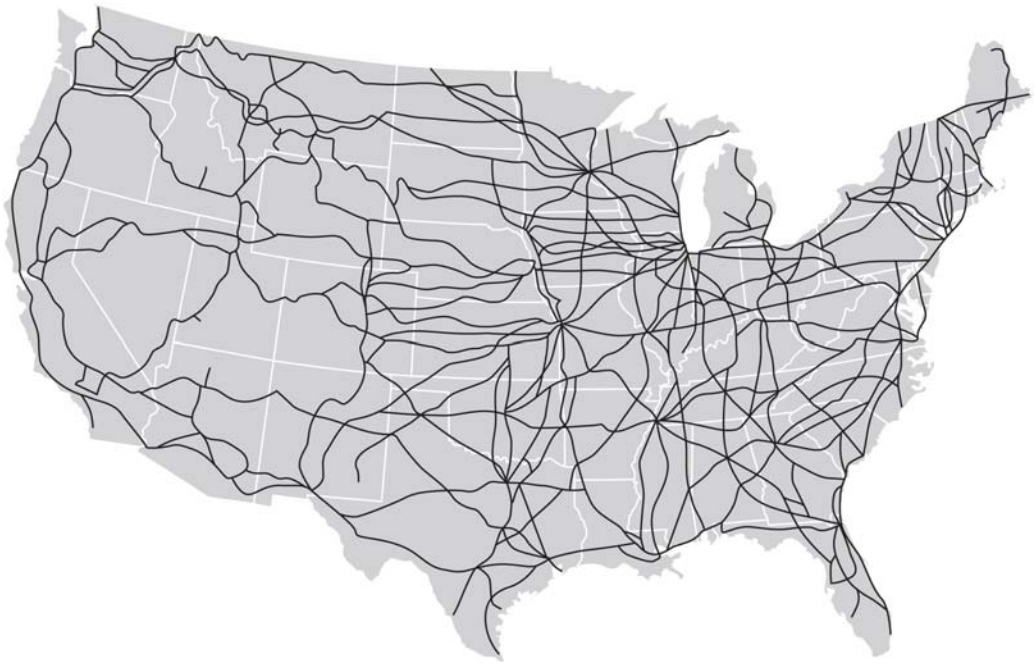
  Just as with bus services, supply would follow demand. Initially, the Act would create only a skeletal system. For rail services, that would mean continuing Amtrak's current trains, with perhaps a few expansions into areas that now have no passenger train service. As people either choose

public transportation or are driven to it by the price or shortage of gasoline, both rail and bus service would expand to meet the demand.

Two maps offer an idea of what rail service might be like under the Act, each representing one end of a scale. The first is a map of Amtrak's current trains:

Map 1: AMTRAK Routes in 2007

The second shows the passenger train service that was offered in the 1950s, which was probably the last decade when Americans could travel conveniently without a car:



Map 2: Primary Passenger Train Routes in 1950

Depending on what happens to America's supply of gasoline, rail passenger service under the Act would probably fall somewhere between what is illustrated by these two maps. In our view, Amtrak would not necessarily be the only passenger train operator. Some of the railroad companies might prefer to run their own passenger trains; if so, they would be allowed to compete with Amtrak for the subsidies. So would states or groups of states that wanted to run passenger trains.

Conclusion

National security and infrastructure are two of the government's most basic and long-standing responsibilities. Both go back to the earliest days of our republic. In the proposed National Defense Public Transportation Act, these two responsibilities come together.

If the 20th century was the bloodiest on record, the 21st century promises to be among the more disordered. In growing portions of the world, the state itself is becoming a polite fiction or even disappearing altogether. Already, the decline of the state in places such as Nigeria is affecting America's vital supply of imported oil.

The United States faces a choice: either we must commit ourselves to more foreign wars for oil, in more places like Iraq, or we need to make ourselves less dependent on foreign oil. At present, that dependence is complete: if the importation of foreign oil is meaningfully reduced for more than a very short period of time, gasoline will either become unaffordable for many Americans or simply be unavailable at any price, as was the case in the 1973 and 1979 oil crises. In turn, because mobility for most Americans now depends on automobiles, America will come to a literal halt. People will not be able to go anywhere.

Reducing our country's dependence on foreign oil will be an evolutionary, many-step process. But there is something we can do relatively quickly and relatively inexpensively to create "virtual" energy independence, by which we mean an ability to travel without a car if gas is unavailable. We can create a new infrastructure of public transportation that will give Americans an alternate means of mobility.

As we noted in the introduction to this study, the new infrastructure the National Defense Public Transportation Act would create is really an old infrastructure. Enough of it was still in place, in the form of inter-city passenger trains, local and long-distance buses and, in some fortunate cities, electric streetcars and interurbans as recently as the 1950s to permit travel without an automobile. The creation of the interstate highway system did away with almost all of what remained of that infrastructure, leaving America dangerously dependent on cars running on imported fuel. The National Defense Public Transportation Act would remedy a threat to our national security that the National Defense Interstate Highway Act of the 1950s inadvertently created.

The time to undertake that remedy is now. As conservatives, we do not believe in waiting until the house is on fire to buy some insurance. We can already see flames engulfing some parts of the Middle East, where most of our imported oil originates.

The skeletal public transportation network of buses and trains the Act would create would give us the insurance we need, insurance that would keep America from shutting down because of an oil supply crisis. The basic infrastructure the Act would establish could be expanded much more quickly than such an infrastructure could be created from nothing in an emergency. In the meantime, that skeletal network would give tens of millions of Americans an option they now lack, the option of traveling without driving. That is an option an aging population may want to have, even if gasoline improbably remains both available and affordable.

Having as we do a conservative understanding of man's imperfectability, we accept that one of the tasks each generation faces is fixing some of the blunders of its predecessors. President Eisenhower's National Defense Interstate Highway Act gave Americans unprecedented mobility in a time when oil was plentiful. It did not foresee, nor could it have foreseen, a time when America's supply of oil would come under serious threat.

However, that time is arriving, if it is not already here. Just as the interstate highway act was far-sighted for its time, so the proposed National Defense Public Transportation Act is far-sighted for ours. We think future generations will thank us for having bought them some insurance.

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