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High Speed Rail: Fact vs. Fiction

A few groups are making baseless claims against high-speed rail to advocate for the status quo – the same status quo that has brought us gridlock, high fuel costs and severe pollution.

Most of the “research” and quotes online and in the media can be linked to just three conservative groups: The Cato Institute, the Reason Foundation and the Heritage Foundation, which receive funding from the likes of Chevron and Exxon Mobil.

FICTION

“High-speed rail is a technology whose time has come and gone” (*Cato Institute, July 09*)

FACT

If high-speed rail’s “time has come and gone,” someone needs to tell the public, which increasingly flocks to this clean and efficient form of travel. Between FY 2006 and FY 2007, Amtrak’s Acela grew its share of the air/rail market between New York and Boston from 36% to 41%—even though obsolete infrastructure allows 150-mph operation over only 18 miles of the 231-mile route. Overseas, where trains run on state-of-the-art tracks at true high speeds, rail dominates. On the 284-mile Paris-Lyon TGV route 2 % of all travelers fly and only 18% drive. Similarly, between Madrid and Seville, the high-speed AVE trains now carry 80% of the air-rail market. California and Florida are planning high-speed rail networks because their states have choked themselves with roadways and airports and still can’t move people efficiently.

FICTION

“Many trains, particularly Amtrak trains, are notoriously late, requiring travelers to factor in a time “buffer” on both ends of their destination.” (*Reason Foundation, May 2009*)

FACT

That’s today’s Amtrak—not high-speed rail. Trains are frequently delayed because they share congested tracks with slow, heavy freight trains. The problem is compounded by outdated signal systems. Replacing tracks and adding modern signals to existing routes will relieve these problems. On the busiest routes, tracks dedicated to high-speed trains and totally separated from streets and other railways will be even more reliable, in all weather.

(continued)

FICTION

“Boosting Amtrak trains to higher speeds will make them less energy-efficient and more polluting than driving”
(*Cato Institute, July 2009*)

FACT

The Department of Energy study opponents refer to assumes the same locomotives— many of which are decades old – would be used, and that the speed would simply be boosted from 79 mph to 110 mph on the same old trains. Those trains will be replaced with brand-new, energy-efficient trains.

Respected transportation economists Richard Gilbert and Anthony Perl reported that electrified high-speed trains traveling on their own right of way are about 9 times more energy-efficient per passenger mile than private automobiles or domestic jet travel (and hence emit about one-ninth as much pollution as air and auto).

FICTION

“The Department of Energy says that, in intercity travel, automobiles are as energy-efficient as Amtrak” (*Cato Institute, July 09*)

FACT

High-speed rail opponents simply take government figures out of context and resort to fuzzy math. The Cato Institute “fact” above ignores a key variable agreed to by the DOE researchers in that very same paragraph: adding passengers to a train is done “with virtually no additional energy use” while adding car travelers means more cars on the road, with their own additional costs and pollution. The very table cited by Cato shows intercity rail still being more efficient than cars in any case.

The bottom line is undisputed: Department of Transportation figures show high speed rail consumes nearly 10 times less fuel than cars and six times less than planes. Side-by-side comparisons by USDOT show trains’ overall energy consumption per passenger is nearly half that of planes or cars.

FICTION

“It's not realistic at all because it's not competitive on price and it's not competitive on convenience.” (Heritage Foundation, July 2009)

FACT

Trains fares tend to be cheaper than competing airfares, and even driving. That is especially true in high-speed corridors, like the U.S. Northeast where the Acela operates. Railroad stations are far more convenient than airports, with both downtown and suburban locations... and stations are far less congested than airports. Perhaps more importantly, high-speed trains are more convenient to use because their roomy, comfortable interiors turn travel time into work or leisure time.

FICTION

“Asking everyone to shoulder the financial burden of building train lines to benefit a narrow and wealthy segment of the traveling public is just wrong.” (Reason Foundation, July 2009)



FACT

This charge pretends that passenger trains are the only mode of travel that receives federal subsidies. In fact, all do. Until 1971, airports and the FAA were financed solely by subsidies from the General Fund. Ticket tax receipts now cover airport construction costs, but the costs of running the FAA –over \$3 billion per year – is subsidized by all taxpayers, even those who never fly. A study released by Mintel Business Intelligence in August 2001 showed that only 3 in 10 Americans had flown during the previous year and 4 in 10 adults will not fly at all.

Other studies show that gasoline taxes and other user charges pay for only about two thirds of U.S. highway costs, with the balance covered by subsidies from income, sales and property taxes. In July 2008 Congress voted a \$8 billion subsidy from the General Fund to the Highway Trust Fund, which had gone broke because the federal Motor Fuel Tax was not raised to cover highway expenses.

The taxpayer return on public investment in rail will be as great if not greater than it with roads or airports because of the reduction of pollution and dependence on foreign oil that high-speed trains bring.

FICTION

“No high-speed rail in the U.S. will ever pay its operating, much less capital costs.” (Cato Institute, July 2009)

FACT

In the U.S., Acela trains already cover their operating costs. The State of California projects revenues from its high-speed network will generate \$1 billion in revenues over expenses annually. The State of Florida has reached similar conclusions. The original Paris-Lyon TGV line completed in 1981 paid off its 15-year construction bonds in 11 years and remains a moneymaker for the French National Railroad. While most high-speed rail lines cannot boast the same financial performance as Paris-Lyon, subsidies per passenger-mile worldwide remain reasonable compared with subsidies to the air and highway systems.

FICTION

“Less than 1 percent will ride.” (Cato Institute, July 2009)

FACT

More fuzzy math. This projection is based on current ridership numbers for regular Amtrak service: the trouble is that there currently are too few quality options for people to ride the train in great number.

History has proven that newer, more convenient and more frequent train service attracts riders. Passenger numbers for the Acela exceed that of planes along many segments, and ridership doubled in Illinois when regular Amtrak service was increased.

In fact, the number of rides annually on Acela high-speed trains already equal 1 percent of the U.S. population, and that’s just on a few lines in the Northeast.



FICTION

“It doesn’t work in Europe” and “it doesn't work in Japan” (Cato Institute, July 2009)

FACT

Tell that to the people who account for 90 million rides on French TGVs every year (for a country with a total population of 65 million), or the 6 billion rides in Japan since the technology was introduced. The economies of those countries would come to a halt if the high-speed trains stopped running.

FICTION

Europe’s rail network carries 6 percent of passenger travel....But European trains carry less than 17 percent of freight, while 73 percent goes by highway....In other words, to get 6 percent of passengers out of their cars, Europe put nearly three times as many trucks on the road. (Cato Institute, April 2009)

FACT

This assumes a cause-and-effect relationship that simply doesn't exist. European countries have built separate, dedicated high-speed rail lines while keeping their other rail network for “low-speed” passenger and freight traffic. High-speed trains are not the culprit.

FICTION

“Every car off the road means more new trucks on the road... trains will push freight onto the highways.” (Cato Institute, April 2007)

FACT

We haven't used the word “bunk” yet in the document because we were saving it for this gem. The new tracks and better signals built for fast, frequent and dependable passenger trains will also allow for more – not fewer – freight trains getting across the country faster.

Visit www.cato.org, www.reason.org and www.heritage.org for more on what these organizations support, and what else they oppose.

Visit www.midwesthsr.org to learn more about high-speed rail.

