

# An Idea Whose Time Has Come Again

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LET US THINK back to our US history lessons and the invention and expansion of the railroad. It connected our country together. It allowed someone to go from the East Coast to the West Coast in a matter of days rather than spending grueling months in a wagon, like that great 90's computer game *The Oregon Trail*. There have been so many technological improvements since those days. We invented not only the automobile but eventually the airplane. Now a passenger can travel from the East to the West in a matter of hours. But at what cost? A plane burns through fossil fuels at an alarming rate. Cars and trucks, though allowing more flexibility and slightly more space, are not much more fuel efficient. Although passenger trains are not always as fast or convenient as planes and automobiles, I believe that they have a larger role to play in fulfilling our nation's transportation needs owing to their greater comfort and better use of resources.

Amtrak provides the United States with all its intercity passenger rail transportation. According to Amtrak's Vice President of Health and Safety, Roy Deitchman, Amtrak now operates 515 stations across the country and employs 20,000 people (190). It was established by Congress in the seventies. Before Amtrak, passenger rail was made up of a hodgepodge of routes maintained by various freight companies. The implementation of a national system made for a more complete set of routes and a

better rider experience. Amtrak now owns 626 miles of passenger rail specific track and otherwise operates on shared freight rail track (Deitchman, et al. 191). After settling a case with the EPA in 2001, Amtrak has thrown itself into an effort to lead the way towards environmental sustainability. They now employ thirty environmental managers nationwide, dedicated to keeping the company "on track" towards their environmental goals.

The Biden administration has made fighting climate change a major cornerstone of its agenda. Joe Biden, well known for loving Amtrak, famously spent years commuting from Delaware to Washington, DC, when he worked as a senator. According to *Time Magazine's* Patrick Lucas Austin, part of the American Job's Plan is investing \$80 billion in Amtrak to encourage train use instead of fossil fuel guzzlers like flying and driving (24). Part of that investment will go to adding lines to new city stations and more frequent service to other existing stations. Most railroads are already congested and can only handle trains running at certain speeds. High speed rail lines require their own tracks, and that will require more investment. Seth Moulton, a Democratic congressman from Massachusetts, introduced the American High-Speed Rail Act in the hopes of creating a larger network of faster trains. About his bill, Moulton said, "Americans will ride the train if the service is better. That's the bottom line," (qtd. in

Austin 24). He has a very good point.

There are examples of American passenger train networks showing great promise. In California, there are three lines running along the coast that are paying off with increasing ridership. The Pacific Surfliner, the Capitol, and the San Joaquin travel between the large cities throughout California. In his article for *Railway Age*, Julian Walinsky details the rise in investment in these California rails and the reward we are now seeing. These three lines now account for 15% of all Amtrak's passengers. They have achieved this by escalating the number of trains running per day to increase the usability for commuters. California is also working on a twenty-year plan to increase train speeds to 125 mph and open new routes (Walinsky 95-7). This is a great example of what we should be trying to implement throughout the more populated portions of the country.

The two things that restrain intercontinental customers from using trains over airplanes are the availability of departures and the speed at which they travel. There are usually only two options per day for rail customers outside of the big coastal corridors. For individuals that live in the Northeast or California there already are plenty of options and this is where we see rail travel working. Naturally, planes travel much faster than trains can, not to mention, they can cross large bodies of water with ease. Besides the fact that train tickets are cheaper than airfare, the saving grace for the railroad industry is the lack of time one must spend in airport security. If we must tuck two hours on to every flight to be processed through the extra checkpoints, then maybe planes aren't quite as fast as we thought. In Hope Jahren's *The Story of More*, she writes that across Western civilization, the number of railroad jobs has steadily decreased over the last twenty years and the railroads themselves have degraded or have been scrapped

altogether. At the same time the ridership has been slowly increasing (Jahren). Clearly the demand for rail travel is there, but an increased number of passengers combined with a decreased quality of experience does not make for a good situation. America should respond to this uptick in ridership with investment.

A train ride is a luxurious experience when compared with an economy class plane seat. When arriving at the station, there is no fuss about checking in, there are no long lines to wade through, and no extra luggage fees to pay. After a short time in the waiting room the train arrives, it is on time, boarding and finding the reserved seat is simple. The seat is like a throne as opposed to the cramped little space reserved on a flight. If more space is needed or wanted, a compartment can be reserved instead of a seat. Luggage stows in the ample space provided, and the train leaves the station, no delays waiting to taxi. If a rider finds that they are hungry, instead of waiting what feels like forever for a steward to bring something, they walk down to the dining car and order whatever they like, all while sitting at an actual table. They can read, work on their computer, get up and walk around, or just enjoy the view of America rolling by the window. We can have this whole experience, all while saving money and burning a fraction of the fossil fuel, all it costs is a little more time. I used to ride the train down to my grandmothers every summer, and I will never forget those trips. The romanticism of train travel is tied to the nostalgia of a younger America. As the America of our memory gets further out of touch and the planet heats up from excess carbon emissions, our chance for a better America of the future slides further out of reach.

Climate change is affecting the whole planet and the exponential increase in carbon pollution is at fault. In their study on

transportation emissions, Moshe Givoni, Christian Brand and Paul Watkiss found that in a trip from London to Paris, the CO2 emissions per person of airplane passengers were more than four times that of train passengers (80). These numbers are ludicrous when considering that a train takes only an hour longer. It is understandable that flying across entire oceans won't be replaced by long voyages by sea, but any time a train can be used for short distances instead of flying, it should be. If America invested in a stronger, more consistent and more extensive train system, we could cut our CO2 emissions significantly. Most decent sized American towns already have a train track running through them. We could lower highway congestion; people could spend the time they would have

spent in traffic working on their laptops while taking advantage of the free WIFI. It would be worth it to just avoid the hypertension and stress brought on by stand-still traffic. When vacationing throughout the United States and visiting relatives the train is much easier and safer than a car, and there is no need for unnecessary bathroom breaks and snack stops. Parents can interact and spend quality time with their children instead of driving. There are so many reasons to replace some of our plane trips with train travel, so many opportunities to ride the train instead or drive our cars. Instead of looking to the technologies of the future, often we can look to those of our past to see the best way forward. Let us look to trains to help solve our climate crisis and still carry us from point A to point B.

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