



NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF RAILROAD PASSENGERS

Vol. 15, No. 4 April, 1981

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Membership dues start at \$15/year (\$7.50 for those under 21 and over 65) of which \$4.00 is for the subscription to NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF RAILROAD PASSENGERS NEWS, published monthly except in November.

(Vol. 15, No. 3 was mailed May 4)

RETURN REQUESTED

Nationwide Opposition to Amtrak Cuts

Highballing It to Endsville

"Whether by accident or by design, the White House is pushing a proposal along a fast budget track that could wipe out Amtrak, the national rail passenger service.

"The proposal is shortsighted, wrongheaded and possibly even underhanded. Congress needs to flag the plan down before it does permanent damage to a system that the nation needs now and that it will need even more as energy costs push other forms of transportation out of reach of travelers.

"The heart of the problem is that Amtrak, like every other rail passenger network in the world, loses money. Its ridership is up, its on-time record is better than most airlines', and its service has improved, but fares still will cover only about half its operating costs next year.

"Actually, Congress gave Amtrak until 1985 to get to the point where it was paying half its own way, so it is ahead of schedule. That is a good record, considering the heavy investment that it has made to salvage the ramshackle system it inherited from the railroads 10 years ago.

"As Amtrak President Alan S. Boyd told Congress earlier this month, it would be doing better if it did not have to pay for its own terminals and traffic controllers—services that are heavily subsidized for the airlines. It would be paying 60% of its costs and improving, he said.

"But the White House doesn't want to wait for better service and more riders to cut the federal government's losses. It wants to clamp a \$613 million ceiling on Amtrak subsidies next year. Amtrak originally said it needed \$970 million to keep going, and later scaled that down to \$853 million.

"Amtrak says the White House ceiling would force it to shut down service everywhere in the country except along the northeast corridor between Boston and Washington. It supports its claim with some persuasive arithmetic.

"Maintenance and other overhead in the Northeast would take \$250 million of the White House figure. It is committed to pay \$136 million for new cars and locomotives, even if it cancels the orders. Severance pay for 20,000 workers who would be laid off outside the northeast corridor would come to \$200 million.

"That would leave barely enough to subsidize Amtrak's relatively small losses in the Northeast, close down stations in the West and mothball the 284 new double-decked cars that have just begun rolling on western routes. Trains be-

tween Los Angeles and San Diego, which are attracting new riders faster than any other route in the country, would stop running.

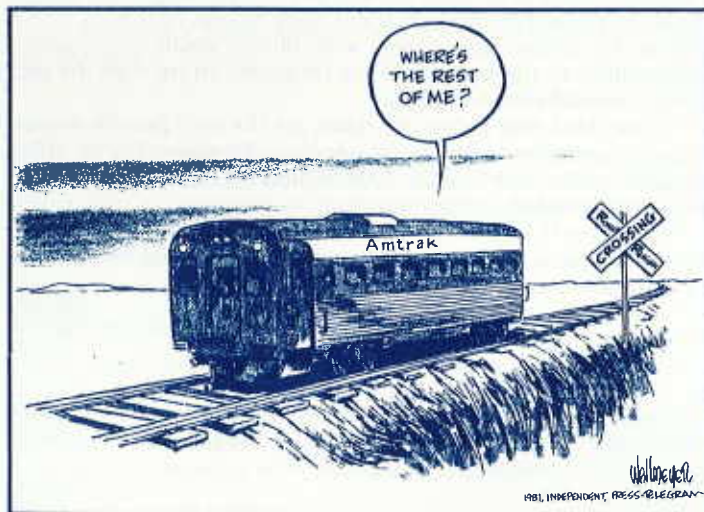
"The White House did not discuss its ceiling with Amtrak before it made the proposal, and has not discussed it since. It shows no interest in bargaining.

"The White House silence could mean one of two things: that the Reagan Administration chose its budget ceiling more or less at random and without realizing that its action could mean the end of rail passenger service in the United States, or that it knows exactly what it is doing.

"Either way, Congress should refuse to let the Administration railroad the railroad. The country nearly lost its passenger system once. It has taken 10 years of hard work and the investment of billions of dollars to restore the fleet and make people want to travel on trains again.

"Letting that investment of time and money slip away for the sake of saving \$240 million would be the falsest kind of economy."

—Editorial, Los Angeles Times,
March 25, 1981



"Almost everyone has his special pet service that he doesn't want the government cutting as we go to war against inflation. Most of us have restrained our carping about cut-backs, knowing that the bitter medicine must be taken for a cure.

"But let us go to bat for Amtrak.

"At a time when the world scratches and claws against inflation, an inflation caused in large slices by the cost of energy, we need all of the help we can get in conserving on the use of oil. Amtrak helps with that. If we have a viable railroad passenger service, we will be able to keep the use of gas-eating automobiles down somewhat.

"Other countries of the world, in Europe, in Asia, continue to upgrade their railroads. The United States was rather late catching onto this. We were blinded by our love affair with automobiles.

"But we did catch on, and the creation of Amtrak and the upgrading of service and equipment started. It is now well under way, and if you've travelled Amtrak lately, you know about the improvements. . . .

"We trust that Congress once again will feel that cutting Amtrak is a false economy we cannot afford. It might just cause more inflation and other social ills than it would be worth in dollars because of higher consumption of precious oil, the abandonment of equipment, the cancellation of contracts and the unemployment that would result."

—Editorial
 Fargo, ND, Forum: March 13, 1981

"The irony of it. Just when the nation's principal railroad passenger service, Amtrak, is beginning to roll, the Reagan administration is trying to hit it in the head.

"Amtrak is a national resource. It is a transportation alternative the nation needs to maintain and strengthen."

—Editorial
 Detroit Free Press: April 23, 1981

"The Administration's proposed changes in the Amtrak system, however, strike me as particularly shortsighted. In my opinion, the combined effect of the recommended legislation and budget cuts would mean nothing less than the destruction of the system. And, there should be no mistake, once the system is dismantled it will be gone for all time to come. . . .

"I don't think there should be any pretense. This kind of cut would be the death knell for rail passenger service in this country. For want of \$240 million, the corporation will be chopped from a national system of 22,000 miles to a regional service of about 400 miles. And only a dreamer could believe Congress would long support rail service for the Northeast when taxpayers in other areas go without."

—U.S. Sen. Thomas Eagleton (D-MO)
 March 31, 1981, letter to DOT Sec. Drew Lewis

"It would not be cheap to kill Amtrak, either. According to some labor economists, laying off 22,000 employees could cost a billion dollars in benefits the first year. According to an Amtrak study, in Fiscal 1979 Amtrak spent \$606 million in Illinois alone, and its 1.6 million passengers with Illinois destinations added \$309 million to the state's tourism revenues. More than the passengers would miss Amtrak. . . .

"Some think that passenger trains are the only people movers to get government subsidies. A year ago, President Carter asked for \$890 million for Amtrak, \$920 million for aid to airport facilities, and \$7.86 billion for highways.

"It is more than a bit unfair to Amtrak to spotlight its subsidy while turning a blind eye to government spending in behalf of other means of transportation."

—Editorial
 Chicago Tribune: March 30, 1981

"Amtrak is not a historical curiosity or a railroad buff's hobby device; it is an alternative to air and long-distance car travel made excessively expensive by fuel costs."

—Editorial
 Kansas City Star: Feb. 26, 1981

"The administration is wrong in slicing Amtrak. That statement is not another plea to cut the budget for everyone else, but leave this pet project alone. The fact is, Amtrak already has taken severe slashes. It's time for someone else, airports and highways, to name two, to take more of the lumps."

—Editorial
 Burlington, IA, Hawk Eye: April 2, 1981

"(M)any times there really is a cost to cutting the cost. An example is the nation's passenger railroad.

"Amtrak President Alan Boyd said the administration's proposals would leave the railroad with about 700 idle passenger cars, many of them new, a new reservation system that would be useless, and contractual commitments costing more than \$350 million."

—Editorial
 Asheville, NC, Citizen: March 23, 1981

"Transportation Secretary Drew Lewis in congressional testimony last week makes no secret of his profound distaste for Amtrak. The puzzle is why, particularly at a time when most Amtrak trains have new equipment, an increasing number of passengers and, (Alan) Boyd claims, an on-time record better than most airlines. . . .

"Lewis asserts that Amtrak must be cut back 'drastically' because it 'is a monument to bureaucracy—a mode of transportation from a bygone day.' The secretary is almost emotional about this: he 'feels stronger about cutting Amtrak than any other part of my budget.'

"Emotion may be getting in the way of reason. A number of highly industrialized countries must be startled to learn that rail travel is a 'bygone' mode of transportation. . . .

"(It) is one thing for Lewis to claim there is no public interest served in having a national rail passenger system and, therefore, the federal government should cease subsidizing it. It is quite another matter for Lewis to argue that Amtrak should cease to be subsidized because it fails to meet criteria not required of other subsidized forms of transportation or, say, the subsidized tobacco farmers of North Carolina.

"The transportation secretary should be tough with Amtrak—but for the right reasons. Emotional catch-phrases are not reasons, let alone right reasons. Which leaves us wondering what the secretary's real reasons are."

—Editorial
 Quincy, IL, Herald-Whig: March 17, 1981

"Cutting back Amtrak service is an honest political question, but smearing Amtrak with lies and half truths is not the way for the Reagan administration to go about reducing Amtrak operations."

—Editorial
 Pasco, WA, Tri-City Herald: March 1, 1981

"The Reagan administration would like to see up to 75 percent of Amtrak's trackage eliminated, (Drew Lewis) said. . . .

"It's almost ridiculous in that we are attempting to run rail lines in areas that should be better served by buses or some other mode of transportation,' the secretary observed.

"What's really ridiculous is the shortsighted attitude that the country can cut out essential transportation services without regretting it later on. . . .

"The same administration that proposes to take two giant warships out of mothballs to bolster our defenses is prepared to put the new locomotives and passenger cars into mothballs as if Americans could continue to travel as they do now on the highways in a real national defense emergency.

"Penny wise and pound foolish. That's our assessment of negating all the past efforts and money spent to save Amtrak, and the prospect of laying off 20,000 employees, just to save a relatively small sum in the 1982 budget."

—Editorial
 South Bend Tribune: March 12, 1981

"Why are our government budget-makers so oblivious to the necessity of maintaining a workable rail passenger service in view of the proven waste and vulnerability of automotive travel? Rather than cutting back rail passenger support, we should be strengthening it. America is a nation on wheels. Without mobility, society and commerce suffer. If our own lawmakers fail to grasp this message, you can be assured the OPEC powers are properly appreciative."

—Editorial
Harrisburg Patriot: April 9, 1981

"Amtrak's situation can hardly be called one of 'special interest.' It is of national interest. And as the cost of other forms of transportation goes up, the growth of rail passenger service will result in a decrease in government subsidies for Amtrak."

—Editorial
Chico, CA, Enterprise Record: March 24, 1981

"Whenever this reporter rides the rails the train is nearly full. Many lower and middle-income people can be seen riding the passenger trains. They ride Amtrak because it saves them money and time.

"Ronald Reagan seems to have declared, with his terrible budget cuts for passenger trains: 'Average American, stay home.' . . .

"President Reagan has misinterpreted his big November victory. Voters did not say, 'Go ahead and cripple our way of life to stop inflation.' They were simply saying, 'We don't want Jimmy Carter.'"

—Editorial
Holdrege, NE, Citizen: March 16, 1981

"But the administration doesn't seem to recognize that all transportation is subsidized by the federal government—highways through taxes levied specifically for them, airlines through federal aid for construction of airports and management of the skies. Indeed, it was the federal subsidy for highways which, by diverting traffic, destroyed so much of what once was the greatest railroad system in the world. And the subsidies for highways and air travel are not being reduced in the Reagan budget in the same proportion as the railroad subsidy.

"A decade of federal investment in the passenger railroad system may be on the verge of paying off. Ridership is increasing greatly, and the need for subsidy is diminishing, though some subsidy always may be required. But then no country makes a profit on its passenger train system; other countries choose instead to give rail travel a greater share of their transportation subsidies.

"Large increases in the price of gasoline, prompted by the President's early removal of oil price controls, already have reduced long-distance travel by car and airplane and will continue to make rail travel more attractive. Yet even as highway use declines, the Reagan administration proposes to build highways.

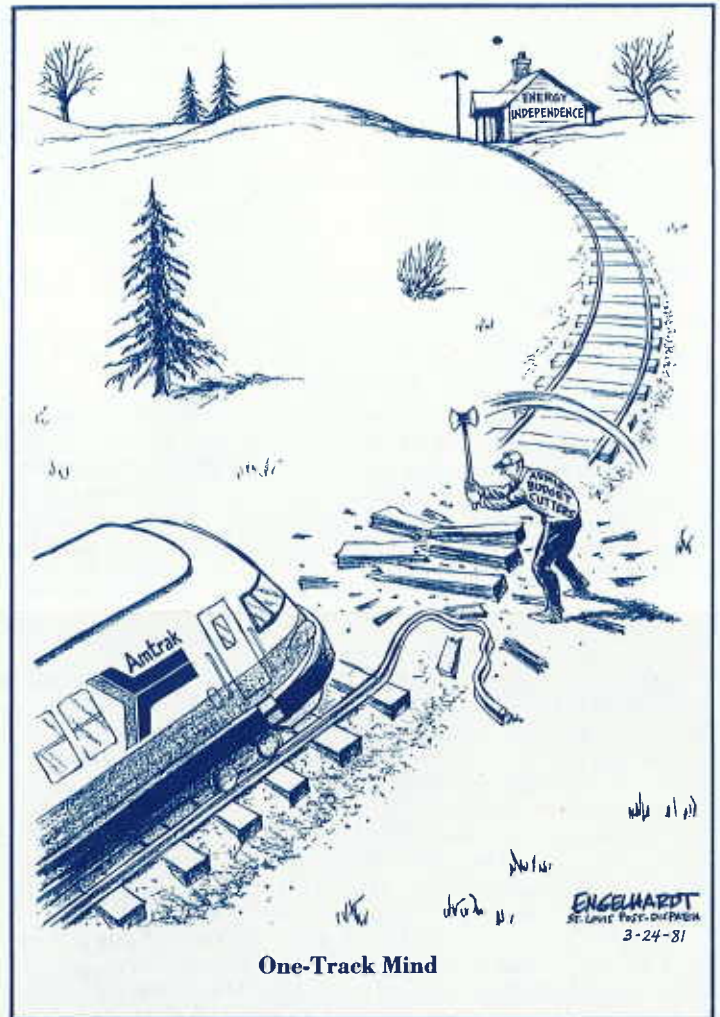
"Railroads have a part in the restoration of cities, which becomes more important as energy costs make distant suburbs less economical. Highways cause energy-costly sprawl, as do airports, as they must be located away from the most densely populated areas. Railroads and railroad stations, meanwhile, are compatible with downtowns and even necessary to them. . . .

"Making a budget is a matter of setting priorities, and the Reagan administration has the right idea in reducing federal spending. Railroads are no more important than some other things. But the total transportation budget probably can be reduced and Amtrak given the chance it deserves by a reallocation of money to rails from highways and air travel."

—Editorial
Tolland County, CT, Journal Inquirer: March 12, 1981

"I can think of enterprises that began in much sounder condition than Amtrak and lost money for many years. The infant industry is one. Color TV is another. Sports Illustrated lost money for a decade before becoming the highly profitable magazine it is now. Gimlet-eyed Reaganites, do not despair of Amtrak!"

—Nick Thimmesch, Columnist
March 1981



One-Track Mind

"(David) Stockman cuts first and asks questions later. Congress has a duty to make sure this isn't more haste that ensures wasting a valuable national resource—rail transportation."

—Editorial
Chicago Sun-Times: March 30, 1981

"(Amtrak) is now completing a program to replace or renovate the entire passenger car fleet. Revenue increased by 14.4 percent last year, despite a 16 percent cut in route miles. And it provided almost 11 passenger miles for each dollar it received from the federal government (in 1980), compared to only 7.5 (passenger) miles in 1978. . . .

"Just when Amtrak appears to be getting its act firmly on the track, it faces proposed budget cuts that could all but knock it out of business. . . .

"It would be a costly mistake for Congress to let Amtrak curtail its operations (so severely)."

—Editorial
Ocala, FL, Star-Banner: March 28, 1981

"I am very concerned that just at a time when equipment, on-time performance, and general public attitudes have showed some positive improvements, we are again facing the possibility of service discontinuance.

"I have requested that my State Planning Division staff of the Department of Finance and Administration prepare correspondence to President Reagan, the New Mexico congressional delegation, and Transportation Secretary Drew Lewis, requesting preservation of the existing Amtrak network. Though short-term savings would be possible by eliminating and cutting back service, we must consider the long-term potential of the system as well, and the costs involved in reinstating service and renegotiating contracts with the railroads at a later date."

—New Mexico Gov. Bruce King
March 30, 1981, letter to NARP

"Generally, President Reagan's proposed reductions in the federal budget are as defensible as they are heroic. Something had to be done to keep the nation from staggering into bankruptcy; and he has shown the way.

"With one notable exception: slashing federal support for mass transportation, especially Amtrak. . . .

"Every other civilized nation on Earth provides an alternative (to automobiles): mass transportation, subsidized by their respective governments and with no nonsense about such a vital service trying to show a profit.

"The United States, as the wealthiest nation on Earth, should do no less."

—Editorial

Nevada, MO, Daily Mail: April 8, 1981

"This would seem to be a propitious time to encourage, or at least maintain, Amtrak, rather than eliminate it.

"That is not said out of any particular nostalgia for the romance of train travel. Rather, the economics of transportation appear to be turning rapidly in favor of train service. The reason (is) because fuel and other costs of plane and auto transportation are pushing out of reason."

—Editorial

Benton, IL, Evening News: March 11, 1981

"We are as much in favor of cutting back federal spending and balancing the budget as the next person. But indiscriminate cutting commits the grave error of assuming that every federal dollar spent provides the same quantity and quality of return. That's far from the truth.

"One potential casualty that falls into this category is mass transportation. In particular, it applies to tried-and-true rail transportation and to Amtrak routes that provide a valuable local or regional transportation service to people and a valuable energy-saving service to the nation. . . .

"Writing off our nation's rail passenger service will admit defeat in a transportation area every other advanced nation on Earth has put to work effectively and efficiently. If there was a dwindling need for passenger trains when gasoline was 35 cents a gallon and aircraft jet fuel was 15 cents, that is no longer true. Giving up on Amtrak now is folly.

"While we will concede that this isn't the time to begin spending billions for new subways or monorails or exotic people movers, we think it is shortsighted false economy for the Reagan administration to give up on the tried-and-true trains that have served us well in the past and now hold a bright promise to do so far into the future."

—Editorial

Port Huron, MI, Times Herald: March 13, 1981

"Those who bristle at the word 'subsidy' and who think rail passenger service is the only form of passenger transportation being subsidized by government should look more closely.

"Subsidies to other forms of transportation are everywhere. They've merely been disguised.

"Beyond the question of the hidden subsidies is the more fundamental question of whether this nation needs a passenger rail system. The answer is clearly yes."

—Editorial

Carbondale, IL, Southern Illinoian: March 20, 1981

"(Reagan's proposals) reflect a conviction that the benefits of transportation services are limited to those who use them and that there is no broader national interest to be served by having the services. . . .

"To insist on the test of profitability to determine whether a transportation service should be offered is to misunderstand the proper relationship between the private sector and the public. To say that the government should not participate in a major way in the movement of people and goods is to forget that this was one of the primary motives for creating the government in the first place."

—Editorial

St. Louis Post-Dispatch: March 20, 1981

"America has put all its transportation eggs into high-energy baskets, highways and airports. This country needs a good railroad system in place as well—both for freight and passengers—if it is to meet its present and future needs. . . .

"The arbitrary budget cut sought by the Reagan administration would effectively destroy Amtrak as a national system, reducing it to operations only in the busy 'Northeast Corridor.'

"This should not be allowed to happen."

—Editorial

St. Paul Pioneer Press: April 16, 1981

"My office became concerned with the rail passenger situation in Alabama during the public hearings involving the restructuring of the Amtrak system. We expressed the view in each of these meetings that due to the increasing cost of fuel and inflation, rail passenger ridership would increase and should be maintained in Alabama.

"It is our definite opinion that a viable rail passenger service is a very important part of the overall transportation system in Alabama, as well as the nation."

—Alabama Gov. Fob James

April 16, 1981, letter to NARP

"America is going to need railroad (passenger) service more in the future than it does now. Let's not abort its rebirth and have to start anew in the not too distant future."

—Editorial

Newport News, VA, Press: March 23, 1981

"Rebuilt, restructured and reequipped, Amtrak is on the verge of becoming economically viable if given half a chance. . . .

"It's appalling that the Reagan administration suggests eliminating passenger rail service when mass transit is a necessity because of shrinking world oil supplies."

—Editorial

Milwaukee Journal: March 30, 1981

"According to the (Dr. Harvey) Greisman report, 'One of the most energy-efficient, safest, fastest and least environmentally harmful ways of transporting people and goods is by the technology of flanged wheel on steel rail.'

"If he is right—and there is plenty of evidence to back him up—then keeping the trains running is in the national interest, even if the government has to supplement railroad earnings.

"This is not suggesting that there is not waste and inefficiency in Amtrak and within the private sector of the railroad industry. There almost certainly is. If Lewis can locate and correct these problems, fine. Let us not fall into the trap, though, of thinking that all worthwhile endeavors can pay their own way."

—Editorial

Altoona, PA, Mirror: Feb. 16, 1981

"Although the federal rail passenger company is the target of a lot of attacks—with ammunition supplied by bus companies and other competitors—it has been making progress. New equipment is getting on the tracks and ridership continues to rise.

"If we let (Amtrak) disappear, it is hard to see how we could ever afford to rebuild it from scratch. When the budget-cutters are busy, they ought to remember that the basic structures of a nation should not be scrapped for short-term gain."

—Editorial

Wilmington, NC, Star: Feb. 12, 1981

". . . Amtrak has made remarkable progress in recent years in increasing its efficiency and service to the public.

"(Passenger) railroads provide an important link in the nation's transportation—one which is energy-efficient and growing in ridership. With the energy situation still far from resolved, logic demands that rail transportation be kept alive as a viable alternative. It is clear that devastating budget cuts would serve no long-term purpose. They would, in fact, be contrary to the national interest."

—Editorial

Birmingham News: March 26, 1981