

Out Of Thin Air by Dan Jacoby

In the wake of the Christmas Day attempt to wreak havoc on yet another international flight, new restrictions and other so-called “security measures” are being added to both international and domestic flights. While specific information regarding the new steps is being kept mostly under wraps, it appears that it will no longer be enough for airline passengers to remove their shoes, discard large shampoo bottles, and be subject to random full-body patdowns. These new steps only add to the pressure for all of us to change our way of traveling.

The airline industry has never been very profitable, and recent years have added special strains. This past year has been one of the worst, as airline travel decreased by about 20% in the wake of the recession. Time was, even the lowest-class passengers were treated with respect, fed and watered, and offered magazines, pillows and other amenities. Now, passengers must bring their own food (but not too much liquid), and their own methods of relaxation (but don't exceed carry-on luggage limits). Even before boarding the plane, passengers are subjected to a variety of delays and personal humiliations, all in the name, if not the actual fact, of “added security.”

Airline travel used to be considered luxurious, but it has been reduced in recent years to a chore that must occasionally be undertaken, like spring cleaning, but without the reward of having accomplished anything except getting from point A to point B.

There has to be a better way.

Fortunately, a better way is possible, and making it happen, while requiring a major shift in national thinking and federal government action, will result in both a greater ease of traveling, lower consumer costs, a better environment, and a far greater enhancement of national security than requiring people to remove their shoes.

Travel by road, particularly in passenger cars, is a gigantic waste of energy. Four people in a mid-size car traveling at highway speeds will get about 128 miles per passenger per gallon of gasoline.¹ By comparison, air travel is even worse; a Boeing 737-500 fully loaded with 132 people on board² can get over 50 miles per passenger per gallon of jet fuel, but that's it.³

On the other hand, an electric-powered passenger train can get literally thousands of miles per passenger per gallon of whatever is being burned to generate the electricity. Rail travel is also subject to fewer weather-based delays, and is generally faster than travel by car and far less degrading than air travel.

¹ Based on 32 MPG highway EPA estimates. Estimates for most cars can be found at <http://www.fueleconomy.gov/feg/findacar.htm>.

² <http://www.airliners.net/aircraft-data/stats.main?id=94>

³ http://wapedia.mobi/en/Boeing_737_Classic#4.

For overseas travel, an airplane is generally the best available mode of transportation. Even for long overland routes, 300-500 miles or longer, people will generally choose an airplane because it is the fastest way to get to the destination. For shorter travel, however, a train can often get people to their destination faster than any other method. The reason is simple – a train depot is usually easier and therefore faster to get to (and from), and a traveler doesn't have to arrive an hour or two in advance.

In addition to passenger trains, the United States also has the potential to move far more of our freight by electric-powered trains rather than by individual, diesel-powered trucks (or even diesel-powered freight locomotives). Tremendous savings, both in fuel consumption and in cost, could be realized, if only we had the infrastructure in place to handle it.

Unfortunately, beginning in the 1950s our federal government yielded to decades of lobbying by General Motors and other companies, and built the interstate highway system instead of modernizing our rail system. Rail travel and rail freight transport were allowed to deteriorate as government-subsidized roads became the preferred method of transportation. Shortly afterward, air travel began receiving huge subsidies from the government as well, resulting in further decay of our railroads.

(Note: A year ago I wrote about this particular problem in my column, "Bail Out or Build Anew," detailing more of GM's lobbying efforts.⁴)

A shift in governmental priorities, away from roads and air travel and toward rail, will result in tremendous fuel savings. Right now, America imports about 15 million barrels of oil a day, every day, much of it from countries with whom we have significant differences. Unfortunately, our foreign policy goals with regard to these countries are skewed because we depend on their oil. In order to pay for that oil we borrow huge sums from other countries with which we have problems, which adds to our foreign policy problems. We can reduce dramatically our need for oil without ramping up production of other fossil fuels (i.e. coal and natural gas) merely by moving away from cars, trucks and planes and into trains.

In addition to reducing our dependence on foreign sources of oil, such a shift also reduces our production of greenhouse gases, making an international agreement on climate change policy far easier for American businesses to handle. This allows us to push recalcitrant countries to move forward as well. We can push other industrialized countries to reduce their production of greenhouse gases, and help developing countries continue to develop their economies in an environmentally friendly way.

It is true that in order to supply the electricity for the added passenger and freight trains, we would have to build hundreds (thousands?) of new electric generation plants, and historically most of these plants burn fossil fuels. Even if all the new plants ran on oil, however, the amount of oil saved by taking cars and trucks off the road, and planes out of the air, would be far greater than the added demand. In addition, many of the new plants could run on renewable energy sources, further lowering demand for oil.

⁴ http://www.danjacoby.com/politics/columns/writing/181_bail_out_or_build_anew.htm

Since rebuilding and upgrading our rail infrastructure must be done on-site, it means job growth. Many rail cars are already made in the United States, and a number of American companies, such as General Motors, already have experience in this area, and could ramp up production of new rail cars, adding even more jobs. This initiative could stimulate our manufacturing sector, which would greatly enhance our long-term economy and rediversify our job market.

Finally, a proper rail system would have to be built with redundancies, so that a failure on one track would not stop the trains from running. This method increases security, since an attack on our rail system would have to be enormously widespread in order to succeed, and such an attack would be extremely difficult to plan in secret.

The end result of shifting from a transportation policy based primarily on roads, with air travel second, and rail travel lagging behind, to a policy where rail travel is the primary focus, would be cheaper goods, more jobs, greater security, cleaner air, stronger foreign policy, and enhanced trade balance.

And we would be able to keep our shoes on – unless we wanted to kick back and relax.

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