

CALIFORNIA'S HIGH-SPEED RAIL PROJECT: LOST IN A VOID OF POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

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The largest infrastructure project in the United States is in crisis. On February 12, 2019, California's high-speed rail project was declared dead by the program's ultimate chief executive, Governor Gavin Newsom. The governor, as quoted by the Associated Press during his first State of the State address at the Capitol in Sacramento, said, "Let's be real. The project, as currently planned, would cost too much and take too long ... Right now there simply isn't a path to get from Sacramento to San Diego, let alone from San Francisco to L.A. I wish there were."

A way to project completion exists. Blazing that trail requires extraordinary political leadership. Stronger political leadership could deliver to Californians the high-speed rail project they voted into reality on a 2008 ballot initiative. Proposition 1A, the Safe, Reliable High-Speed Passenger Train Bond Act for the 21st Century passed with nearly 53% of the vote.

California's high-speed rail project, thus far, has failed because of a void of political leadership at the highest levels of state and federal government. The technology is not the problem. The rest of the world's developed nations benefit, everyday, from high-speed rail systems built long ago as well as one built recently. Money is not the problem. California is the fifth largest economy in the world and can afford an expensive railroad. The seemingly impossible problems are matters of political science, not physical science.

Both, Presidents of the United States, and past governors of California, have failed to lead the way towards making high-speed rail a reality. Had President Barack Obama, through stronger leadership, successfully convinced Americans of the need for higher speed trains, a sustainable federal program may have taken hold and buttressed the now failing California project. Today, President Donald Trump appears to be more concerned about building border walls than high-speed rail lines. In 2008, California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger could have better set the rail program up for success by level-setting the public's expectations. The project's cost, schedule, and benefits were largely absent from public discourse as was the strengthening of public support of the transformative project. Starting in 2011, after nearly a decade in charge and billions of dollars spent, California Governor Brown delivered about just two percent of the physical rail project. His lack of constant support and continual consensus building may have fatally wounded the project. Governor Gavin Newsom now inherits a project in disarray. But, he can still save the project.

The need for speed is real. One of the surest ways for the United States to compete, and prosper, in a global economy, is to rebuild its vital, but sadly decrepit, infrastructure. Even better, is to create energy efficient transportation systems that positively transform travel behaviors.

California's high-speed rail project—still—promises to be that exemplarily project. It is a badly needed program cable of stimulating local economies while reducing the negative economic impacts of the crippling housing shortage and continually changing climate that California is suffering from. A short ride to affordable housing is possible when a 220-mile-an-hour train

allows people a tolerable commute to a better job. A fast train allows industries to tap a broader pool of talented workers. Replacing the astronomically high number of heavy carbon dumping short trips by aircraft that are flying between Los Angeles and San Francisco with high-speed trains, sets an example to other cities and states that also depend on aircraft to make short trips within 500-miles.

Leadership, like obscenity, is hard to explain but easy to recognize. Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart said of hardcore pornography, "I know it when I see it." You know strong political leadership when you see it. Since the limits of this paper demands brevity, a bold example of what political leadership is capable of is necessary. The following three examples of remarkable political leadership are of two U.S. presidents and a governor during the last 150 years. Each leader delivered the largest infrastructure projects of their time to a nation which greatly benefited from the projects, and continue to benefit from the them.

In January, 1863, at the bloodiest time of the American Civil War, inarguably the deepest political crisis in U.S. history, Abraham Lincoln launched the construction of the nation's first Transcontinental Rail Road. The Central Pacific Rail Road Company began its work in California's new state capital, Sacramento. In Lincoln's time, the politics were seen as insurmountable. But, so were the civil engineering and supply chain challenges. Equipment and tools had to be shipped from the East Coast on sailing ships, transferred to paddle boats in San Francisco Bay and hauled into the mountains. Starting at forty-feet above sea level, Central Pacific crews laid track into the Sierra Nevada Mountains, up to Donner's Pass. In less than a hundred miles they reached 7,000 feet above sea level. Irish and Chinese crews, when they weren't fighting amongst themselves, blasted numerous tunnels through granite with crude black powder.

In 1865, just months after Lincoln's assassination, Union Pacific crews dusted off the ashes of the Civil War and began laying over 1,000 miles of track. Attacked by Native American warriors, U.S. Cavalry crews were required to guard the railroad's surveyors and pic swingers. In the last 12 hours of the race to completion, crews laid ten miles of rail. The symbolic completion of the project, at Promontory Summit in the Utah Territory, took place on May 10, 1869. Lincoln's vision of a country united by rail was achieved. His leadership and the legacy he instilled made the project possible.

In June of 1956, President Dwight D. Eisenhower launched the construction of the U.S. Interstate System, the largest single civic endeavor ever undertaken in the history of the world. Nearly every major lobbying group opposed his initial efforts. Governors from his own party demanded that he, the Commander in Chief, keep the federal government out of the road-building business. In 1956, as a Republican president, he united special interests, a Democratic House of Representatives and a Democratic Senate to work together to build what became known as the Dwight D. Eisenhower National System of Interstate and Defense Highways. Sophisticated lobbying, strategizing, and politicking delivered the project. It took Eisenhower his entire first four-year term to finally get legislation passed.

Finally, Governor Michael Dukakis, against political pundits' predictions, successfully launched the construction of the nation's largest urban megaproject, the Central Artery/Tunnel Project,

known to most as The Big Dig. Overcoming the objections of a very popular President Ronald Reagan, not to mention Reagan's Presidential Veto of the 1987 Transportation bill carrying the Big Dig's federal funding, Governor Dukakis oversaw the project's transformation from a political long-shot to a full-blown construction project. In 1991, before retiring as Massachusetts's longest serving governor, Dukakis launched the megaproject through appropriation and authorization of funding, early environmental approvals, and preliminary design and the beginning of construction that took the form of utility relocations. Governor Dukakis's political leadership insured the nascent project moved forward, well into the administration of his successor, Governor William Weld. Weld chose, unlike Governor Newsom, to see to completion a growingly unpopular megaproject. Today, the city of Boston is prospering because of The Big Dig.

An argument that political leadership is irrelevant, or more likely, that mediocre political leadership is good enough, needs to be addressed. Challenges galore exist on California's high-speed rail project. Overcoming them depends on leadership at every level. Recently, inside the project, as many as 28 "Functional Areas" existed. They are: Executive Leadership, Planning, Environmental, Right-of-Way, Procurement and so on. It's fair to note that more effective management could have produced better results thus far had these disparate groups been better aligned to work with one another.

Land acquisition through legal right-of-way actions alone has been held up as one of the reasons that rail project has failed. Dealing with BNSF and Union Pacific railroads and their ongoing operations has been a challenge. All of these matters have stalled the program. But even if these groups had been more functional, they still have lacked the direction needed from their ultimate leader, the governor.

Governor Newsom is a skilled and charismatic politician. He possesses the skills necessary to keep the project moving forward, until his predecessor is on the job to do the same. He'll have to lead a skeptical public, the state's body of divided elected officials, and a project management team in disarray. He'll also have to manage an unmanageable U.S. President Donald Trump.

To do this, he needs to reassess the schedule, the costs and most importantly, the hearts and minds of his citizens. Then, he'll have to manage the project down-and-in by selecting a superb Chief Executive Officer to head the California High Speed Rail Authority. He'll need to reorganize the program to better value highly skilled professionals already on the job. Starting with the CHSR Business Plan, Governor Newsom should swiftly move to relegate that biennial publication to a simple publicly facing document. In the past the Business Plan has been driving project management instead of the other way around.

Lastly, the governor will need to learn every mile of rail to be laid, and get out in front of the megaproject, make it his own, take responsibility for missteps going forward and own the success, or failure, of the project. If he's earnest, regardless of the outcome, history will look more favorably on his leadership.

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<https://blogs.wsj.com/law/2007/09/27/the-origins-of-justice-stewarts-i-know-it-when-i-see-it/>: Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart said of hard-core pornography, "I know it when I see it."