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Generations of Transit Disaster: The New York City Subways

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Abstract
The New York City subways are a mess. Both routine maintenance and new lines are often delayed. The last seventy-five years of subway history demonstrate the failure of the current system of government ownership and operation. Previously, the system included some private management companies, which built the first lines in what was the subways' golden era. This period, from 1904 to roughly 1920, was a time when the subways were considered an engineering marvel. The lines also made money. This paper documents the system's decline.

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I. Introduction

If ever there were an example of a state enterprise with a protracted history of failure, it is New York's deteriorating subways. Complete government ownership and operation of the subways—this year marks the seventy-fifth anniversary of the ouster of the last private management companies—has turned a once great system into a nightmare. Problems include delayed maintenance, political unaccountability, poor communications systems, angry transit unions threatening to shut down the city—and sometimes doing so, as in the 1966 strike that crippled the city's economy for weeks—and the problem of almost every other business operated by governments: relentless red ink. Delays constantly plague the system, as illustrated by endless stories in New York newspapers (see, e.g., Harshbarger 2015; Soria 2015).

What happened to the subways, which were once regarded as a transportation jewel? And why did the private management companies eventually depart, selling their assets to the city, which eventually transferred control of the system to a state authority?

Government price controls and political tinkering drove the owners of private management companies to destruction as they ran huge deficits in the 1930s after the first fifteen years or so of running in the black (1904–19). The government was "exploiting" private management companies with its price controls, wrote one historian who did a financial review of a private management company (Derrick 2001, p. 236). Yet, private management subway companies were once highly profitable. A subway historian called one of them, the Interborough Rapid Transit Company (IRT), "a goldmine" in its first years (Hood 2004, p. 123). Private managers were economical. They sought to make money by controlling costs and attracting as many riders as possible, something that has not been happening for generations. They built lines in the most profitable areas first and planned the less potentially profitable lines later. This process was similar to how many railroads were built in the United States in the nineteenth century: freight service came first because it was more profitable. Passenger service was secondary because its potential profitability was less.

But the subway system's initial success inevitably led to problems. Politicians—corrupt, as well as well-meaning "good government reformers," or what some would call the "goo-goos"—constantly complained that the private management companies were making too much money. That led to calls for reform against "greedy" companies.

Increased politicization of the subway system followed. Politicians and regulators imposed rules, controlled prices, and eventually killed the private management companies. The politicians and the reformers showed the private management companies the door, taking complete control of the system in 1940. Some seventy-five years later, most people, including many of today's goo-goos, agree the system has many problems.

II. The Good Old Days

The subway system was not always bad. It had a golden era in its first decades. That was when private management companies, responsible to stockholders as well as to riders—the IRT and the Brooklyn Rapid Transit (BRT), which later became the BMT—operated the first subways under the terms of the dual contract between the two companies and the city. The subway began with 28 stations on October 27, 1904 (MTA 2012). The next fifteen years or so was a period when the system expanded and worked. Remarkable as it may sound to today's embattled riders, the subways were praised by riders, some of whom rode for fun.

The system's success also helped develop the city's economy in the early twentieth century, just as private railroads helped the country prosper in the nineteenth century. The subways changed the nature of work. People no longer needed to live close to work or at work. They could move out of densely populated slums in lower Manhattan. They could live in suburban parts of the city, upper Manhattan, and the then-pastoral Bronx. The subways were also popular because the fare was low.

The nickel fare subways operated well for the first twenty years or so. People came from around the world to ride and study them. They were amazed and awed by them. (As a child growing up in the Bronx near Yankee Stadium in the 1950s, I explored every line because each seemed different. In those days, before I started using them for work, I ignored the shaking cars and the delays.)

Today, the golden era sounds unbelievable. Yet, the subways were good for the same reason most other services are good: they made money, something that is unthinkable under various forms of government services in which it is accepted that service is horrendous and will always be.

So, with apologies to transit advocates and even a few supposedly free-market supporters at the Manhattan Institute—who have told me that public ownership must continue—private lines did make money and built much of the system. Indeed, private management companies in the early days of the subways provided shareholders with dividends, built new lines, and generally provided good service.

Even critics of the private management companies—a group that includes most subway historians—agree that the private management companies made vital contributions in the first generation of subway operations. A few concede that the system could never have been built without private participation, since city government in the early twentieth century was often near its debt limit.

Then why were the private management companies ready to leave the market by the late 1930s? And how did we go from a subway system that was admired to one that was a disgrace, ridiculed even by a Communist official in the late 1950s?

Under the private management companies, the fare never rose above a nickel. That was despite repeated requests in the 1920s and 1930s for an increase. A system of price controls killed the private management companies. This policy was a form of socialism without doctrines. Progressives such as Herbert Croly advocated it in the early twentieth century.

A critic of private railroads, Croly believed that railroads should be highly regulated. They then could later be taken over by the government (Croly 1965, p. 377). Democratic congressman William Jennings Bryan, after visiting Russia in the 1890s and being told that the railroads were owned by the state, called for the same in the United States (Wilson 1970, p. 289). This philosophy of government transportation companies would triumph in New York City in 1940, where many politicians had criticized private subways for decades.

III. Tammany and the Goo-Goos Team Up

For years, elected officials would constantly complain when the private management companies wanted to raise the nickel fare. Examples include Jimmy Walker. He was a sleazy state senator and later mayor in the 1920s and 1930s. Walker, a product of Tammany Hall, was a mayor so venal that he resigned and left town. He fled to Europe to escape investigation of his corrupt administration. Another private management company critic was 1920s mayor John Francis Hylan, who had been fired as an IRT motorman.

The politicians and the goo-goos were not always allies on every issue, but they agreed on one thing: Subways should be run by the government. And, until that could happen, the fare should never be raised. The goo-goos were the public-interest Progressives who believed private transportation systems were bad because their goal was to make money. The goo-goos succeeded in some ways. For instance, there can be no more complaints about the "gross" profits of private management companies—there are no private management companies in the subways. There are no profits.

The subways today lose so much money that the system can barely be maintained, no less find money to make improvements or add new lines. Together, the goo-goos and the politicians made it impossible for the IRT and BMT to turn a profit. So, owing to heightened regulations, the advocates of public ownership would win. They have inherited a public system that is a mess.

This kind of transportation regulatory policy would be duplicated at the national level. Many passenger railroads were regulated out of existence (Carson 1971, pp. 90–91). Fare increases and route changes were made impossible with the predictable result: the passenger railroads, in the same Goo-Goo spirit, were ultimately taken over by the government under the Nixon administration (Bresiger 1999, pp. 35–53). Another example of this was the Long Island Railroad under private management. The railroad, which eventually went bankrupt in the 1950s, was not allowed to raise its fares for decades (Ziel and Foster 1965, p. 277).

Here is one example of regulating until a railroad is ready to cry "uncle": it took the Pennsylvania and New York Central railroads decades to win regulatory approval for a merger (Bresiger 1999, pp. 35–53). By the time the merged entity, Penn Central, was approved—and it was also stuck with taking the bankrupt New York–New Haven railroad as a condition of approval—the two roads were hopelessly weak.

Penn Central went bankrupt a few years after the merger. Its failure surprised its regulator, the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) (Salsbury 1982, p. 49). The ICC, like the politicians and regulators in New York City, was a critical player in the destruction of private transportation companies, just as tax and regulatory policies have destroyed numerous industries. For instance, New York City was once a major manufacturing center. However, it, as well as many other high-tax cities, has shed hundreds of thousands of jobs over the last seventy years or so. This trend was detailed in books such as *Power Shift* by Kirkpatrick Sale (Random House, 1975) and *The Assassination of New York* by Robert Fitch (Verso, 1996).

Nixon administration transportation officials who pushed for a nationalized passenger railroad system were echoing the goo-goos and the New York politicians in the 1920s and 1930s. They promised great things once the government took over private railroads. These were promises, as we will see later, that were never kept. How could they have been when at times the government subways could not generate enough money to fund routine maintenance? And this underfunding has meant generations of problems for subway riders. Many descendants of goo-goos and ruling politicians have continued to scapegoat the private sector for their failures.

IV. Signing on for the Nickel Fare

In the case of the private management owners, subway historians—just about all of whom support government ownership and operation of the subways—say the private management owners, in their initial agreement with the city, agreed to the nickel subway fare for decades.

Why agree to a nickel? They feared politicians and the government's regulatory bodies. They thought that, under political pressure, the regulators might reduce the nickel fare (Cudahy 2003b, p. 81).

The subway system was superb in its first years. It had been designed by private management companies operating under a city franchise. Still, numerous politicians and goo-goos insisted that the private management companies had to go because their profit-making goals were unacceptable. Politicians also insisted that the nickel subway fare was essential and should never be raised, which it never was until the government took over the system and raised the fare to a dime in 1948 and later to 15 cents in 1953. The fare, the goo-goos and the politicians insisted, should be protected by the government. The system would also would work more effectively as a totally public system, they said. They looked forward to the day when the private management companies would be ousted.

The opposition of many politicians to the private management companies' push for higher fares and profits is ironic. In the thirty-six-year era of private management companies (1904–40) in the subways, politicians like Walker and Hylan often complained about private sector avarice. The nickel fare became sacrosanct; that is, until the government took over. Indeed, the history of public management of subways is one of almost constant fare increases. This, combined with deficits—as documented by the history of mayors such as William O'Dwyer, who raised the fare to a dime, and Vincent Impellitteri, who succeeded O'Dwyer and raised the fare to 15 cents as well as ceded control to a state authority (LaGuminina 1992, p. 222)—led to persistent problems. There were fare increases in 1948, 1953, and 1966 as well as many others since then (the basic fare was recently raised to $2.75). And pressure is building today for more fare increases, while taxpayers pay still more to keep the system on life support.

The nickel fare of the private management companies kept the system in good shape until the inflation of World War I. That eventually made the lines unprofitable. Government takeover and management of the passenger railroads during World War I also made many of them unprofitable when they were returned to private ownership after the war (Hines 1928, pp. 226–230). The often reckless spending of government enterprises is one reason why they are unable to turn a profit. For instance, later we will see that when the government ran the subways, politicians, under pressure to avoid or end strikes by public workers, made outrageous settlements. In 1968, Mayor Lindsay approved allowing subway workers to retire on half pay after only twenty years (Sparberg 2015, p. 161).

By contrast, the need to economize and the inability to raise subway fares meant the private management companies were hamstrung. They could not generate enough money to keep up the subway standards of the first fifteen years. Private management companies were not allowed to manage the system in an economic manner. Eventually, these political pressures killed them. But hostility to market forces is a trademark of many New York politicians.

The same price-control process takes place in much of the city's real estate. Under the city and state's ancient rent-control laws, profits are often impossible, so improvements are difficult to make and housing shortages are inevitable (Friedman and Friedman 1998, p. 152). Vote-hungry politicians almost always feel obligated to side with tenants and others who oppose market forces.

V. The Decline of Private Management Companies

Decades of price controls, combined with the Great Depression, were hard on the subway system by the late 1930s. The system was going down, with private management companies filing for bankruptcy protection. By 1940, the BMT and IRT were gone. The system was totally under public control. The supposed golden period of the New York City subways, a unified system under government control, was about to happen.

That never occurred. The fare continued to be a tricky issue and has been ever since. The subways' problem is that they are based on a system that discourages and ultimately outlaws profits, which are the result of both pleasing customers and keeping expenses at reasonable levels.

Profits pay for quality service and gratify investors. Initially, in the subways, elements of the private sector were allowed by politicians who realized the city could never find enough money to build the system. But, once built, the municipal utility model triumphed.

It took a while for New York politicians, regulators, riders, and media to realize that the subways were not on the verge of new golden era. There would be no more complaints of excessive profits. The latter is a difficult concept, given that a system such as the New York City subway—which today has some 468 stations, 659 miles, and 24 lines, according to the latest Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) yearbook (MTA 2012)—needs huge amounts of capital just to maintain what it has, which it is definitely not doing today. Some historians of the city, such as Robert Caro, said it took a while for the government system to start failing. But, within a decade of the takeover, the red ink was growing.

The system ran an operating deficit of $1.2 million in 1950. Two years later, the operating deficit jumped to $25 million (Hood 2005, p. 254). About a decade after unification, the deficits continued. But worse were the service woes in a system that once had been superior.

"So superbly had it [the subway system] had been designed, that it took decades to break down," wrote Caro in his landmark biography of Robert Moses (Caro 1974, p. 932), New York's most controversial builder and its most powerful unelected bureaucrat. Moses was more powerful than many of the elected officials he served. Caro, for instance, tells the story of how FDR—who had detested him when he was governor of New York—tried to destroy Moses in the 1930s when he was president. FDR, a master politician, lost for one of the few times in his political career.

Moses played a big part in the system's deterioration. Moses, by the way, didn't like subways and helped to run them down by convincing lawmakers to starve the system. Instead, he persuaded them to spend lots of money on government highways, which are today also a mess. By the 1950s, the subways were on their way to becoming the disaster that they are today. Caro, reviewing the incredible problems of the subways some fifteen years after the private management companies were ousted, documented the decline. "New York had once been enormously proud of its subways," he wrote, but by the mid-1950s, it no longer was. "It was in 1956," Caro adds, "that there was instituted on the New York City subway system, because of a lack of funds, a policy of deferred maintenance—a phrase which, translated into practice, meant that the brakes and signals and switches were inspected less frequently, that electrical relays, which should have been replaced every five years, were replaced every thirty years, that the vast system was out of light bulbs to replace burnt out signals, alcohol to keep switches from freezing and other basic supplies" (Caro 1974, p. 932).

The industrial policies of Moses and his political allies in the 1940s and 1950s were to use public money for new highways, tunnels, and bridges, but to generally spend little on the subways, even though they could not take care of themselves because they consistently ran in the red. Yet, politicians, both Republican and Democrat, loved Moses the Builder. He could finish projects just before elections. So Moses, at one time, held some half dozen state and city posts. (Ironically, in the one time he ran for public office—a race for governor against Herbert Lehman in 1934—the voters overwhelmingly rejected him.)

His most important job was as chairman of the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority. As greater numbers of New Yorkers bought cars after World War II, the authority generated so much money that there was talk in the 1950s of ending all tolls. Such talk seems comical now, after countless increases. Moses kept these toll revenues away from subway development, however, and the system started to fall apart in the 1950s as the memory of private management companies faded.

After a few years of a politicized subway system with no private participation, the subways had entered an era of decline. But let us remember what New Yorkers were told in 1940 and why the promises of government subways were ridiculously unrealistic.

VI. Flawed Ideas

The idea of public ownership and operations of the entire system was based on flawed assumptions. What do I mean by "entire?" The city government, at the urging of then-mayor Hylan, had built its own competing subway system in the 1920s and 1930s called the Independent (Diehl 2004, pp. 70–73). The lines began operations as a New Deal project. They immediately started losing a lot of money. Nevertheless, the goo-goos continued to insist that unification would solve the subways' problems. Government ownership would lead to endless benefits. These promises, none of which ever worked out, included the following:

- There would be economies of scale that would come from combining the IRT, the BMT, and the Independent into one public system.
- Ousting "greedy" subway owners would be the best thing for riders. The private management companies would only provide poor service, but the government would make the best of the system.
- Economies of scale would facilitate the extension of lines, such as the infamous Second Avenue subway and a new line from Jamaica to the city line in Eastern Queens, in a public system that would make money. This unsuccessful transportation socialism was similar to what happened with Amtrak in the 1970s.
- One Amtrak official, after the government took over a group of regulated-to-death bankrupt passenger railroads, famously predicted: "Now you're going to see the greatest business turnaround in history" (Vranich 2004, p. 12). Forty

years later, Amtrak has lost incredible amounts of taxpayer dollars, as have the subways.

- Both New York and federal politicians want the taxpayers to dig deeper to keep their systems afloat. For example, the new Madison Square Garden (MSG) and Penn Station were built in the late 1960s. Transit advocates now say the two should be knocked down and a new Penn Station should be built for Amtrak. There is little serious discussion on where MSG, which houses the New York Rangers, Knicks, and Liberty, would go. And, in a remarkable document called "Penn 2023," there is little discussion of how this massive new project would be financed by a government railroad that has lost billions of dollars (Alliance for a New Penn Station 2013).
- Government subways, since they were not run for profit, would have better relations with labor than private-sector companies. There would be peace in the subways. IRT and BMT subway-union members would become obedient civil servants.

This last promise was based on the risible claims of Fiorello LaGuardia (mayor from 1933 to 1945) that subway workers would come under open civil-service regulations, and the closed shop would not be in force (Jeffers 2002, p. 275).

Unfortunately for LaGuardia and subsequent mayors, labor peace and the open shop never happened. Numerous illegal strikes and threats of strikes have happened since 1940. Many have crippled the city, a large part of which is dependent on this ramshackle government transportation service.

Indeed, the transit-workers union in 1966 illegally struck even after the city obtained an injunction. Its leader, Mike Quill, famously told the new mayor, John Lindsay, and the court to "go to hell" (Sparberg 2015, pp. 144–50). Yet, the union ended up winning most of what it wanted, and it would continue to defy the city and the courts. (Some forty years later, the transit union would also break the state's Taylor Law, designed to prevent a repeat of the 1966 strike.)

The union would play a big part in the politicization of a system that was crumbling under government control. Its ability to pressure politicians to give it all sorts of deals—such as a pricey pension plan that costs the taxpayers huge amounts—has been one of the biggest factors in why the system is consistently in the red.

Clearly, the riders and the taxpayers—who have repeatedly had to bail out the system since unification through higher fares and other taxes—are the big losers. (When a system is publicly owned, a fare increase effectively constitutes a tax.) However, the politicians who fought for unification nevertheless could see the dangers of a political class trying to run an inferior business. So they have been careful to shield themselves from any possible political damage when trains are delayed (I will not say "late." Subways have no posted schedules, although supposedly a government authority keeps track of train performance).

VII. I Don't Ride the Subways, but You Should

Some politicians feared the effect of a public system on their careers. So, in the post-1940 era, there was the issue of getting politicians out of the line of fire. After the first thirteen years of government control—first by a city agency, the Board of Transportation, that had some political accountability—politicians turned to a system of various authorities (The city Transit Authority, in 1953, followed by a state authority, the MTA, in 1968).

Whether under a mayor accountable for the subways or an authority few understood, the public system continued to have problems. Still, politicians knew that operating the system could be a dangerous issue, so they didn't want accountability. By the late 1950s, it was obvious even to a Soviet visitor that the system was crashing.

Subway historian Clifton Hood noted that in 1959, a visiting Soviet official, in the wake of the Kitchen Debate between Vice President Richard Nixon and Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev, was pointing to the New York City subways as an example of why capitalism didn't work (Hood 2005, pp. 256–57). The Soviet official called the subways "lousy. He said the subways were 'dirty' and that 'the air was very bad.'"

These problems remain to this day. Rats in some stations come right up on the platform as though they expect to join you on the next F train to Queens. Another problem was the fare: fare increases were coming, and no mayor or governor wanted to be responsible for them.

Today, the governing system of the subways is one in which no elected official is ever held directly accountable. The mayor was the point man for the subways in the 1940s and 1950s. He would take the heat or the credit. (A mayor running for reelection was defeated in 1953 when the fare rose from a dime to fifteen cents. Before that, Mayor William O'Dwyer, who succeeded LaGuardia in 1946, received thousands of angry letters when the fare was raised to ten cents in 1948.)

There's another irony of this politicized system: New York's political ruling class, both in the 1950s and today, generally shuns the subways, just as many of them praise public schools, then send their kids to private schools. (At a "town hall meeting" in Briarwood, Queens, with then U.S. representative Charles Schumer some ten years ago, I noticed that he arrived and departed by car.)

Possibly the city's most famous chief executive, former mayor LaGuardia, is regarded as the patron saint of modern New York City mayors. His name is often invoked by city officials the way national officials from time to time try to cloak themselves in the Lincoln mantle. LaGuardia was one of the leaders in the battle for the city subway takeover. However, he was generally uninterested in the subways (Hood 2004, p. 226).

LaGuardia preferred to fund new highways, highways that would ultimately starve the subway system of needed improvements and even basic maintenance funds. Politicians ducked responsibility by turning it over to authorities. Many realized that frustrated subway riders—and there were lots of them, then as now—would take it out on them at election time. So they got out of the line of fire and handed over accountability for running the trains to an authority.

This is a familiar process in the modern welfare state democracy. Congress or a state legislature passes massive reform bills, but only a handful of people understand what is in these laws. Then, huge bureaucratic organizations, which translate the legislation into rules, actually make the day-to-day decisions on how things get done. Complaints to elected officials are channeled to the "experts," the authority members, who do not run for office.

This is true in the securities markets and in the New York City subways. For instance, how should one regulate swaps, those controversial contracts that some believe caused the crash of 2008? Lawmakers, in the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act of 2010, repeatedly called for general principles—clearing of these transactions whenever possible— then left most of the follow-up work to regulators. The latter, not the lawmakers, would be the ones to translate the laws into rules. In New York, the state legislature is supposed to oversee the transit bureaucracy. But few lawmakers actually understand it, no less take an interest in supervising it. The trademark of this anomalous system is that the public sector takes less and less responsibility at the same time it has more and more power. An economist writing about the London Transport Board brilliantly made this point some seventy year ago. "More and more the state interferes or controls (according to the political bias of the observer); but the more it interferes and controls, the less does it show a disposition to accept ultimate and direct responsibility for what it has done," wrote British economist Alexander Gray (1946, p. 509).

Today, a big, unelected, and virtually invisible state bureaucracy makes the most important decisions about the New York subways. The MTA operates the subways, along with the region's bus system and commuter railroads. It has its headquarters in the most expensive part of town, Madison Avenue in Midtown Manhattan. But even many of those who favor public ownership concede that few understand the MTA.

Still, possibly because so few New York power brokers ride the subways today, save for perfunctory media events around election time, there is little pressure for radical change. And the subway problems documented by Caro have continued in this century. Indeed, some seventy years after the government takeover in the 1940s, the situation was worse than even in the last days of the IRT.

"Beset by floods and fires and built on technology that predates the Model T, the subway, the very essence of New York, has become frighteningly fragile," Clive Thompson wrote in *New York* magazine ten years ago (p. 36). "Money for basic maintenance has been drying up," he also wrote, blaming then governor George Pataki.

Given the history of government railroads—both urban and long-distance trains—these pathetic conditions should have been expected. Since long before the New York politicians of the 1920s and 1930s, governments have tried to run railroads. The results have been disastrous. Take the case of Michigan in the early nineteenth century. Many politicians wanted a say in how trains were run. The problems, as documented by one historian reviewing the Michigan experience, appear similar to the problems of the New York City subways.

"Overloaded locomotives were run at twice the recommended speed. Under the strain of continuous operation and jarring impact of high speed on strap-on rails, locomotives and cars were shaken to pieces, and the cost of operation mounted dramatically," writes Burton Folsom (1998, p. 47). Other states also tried to run railroads and had bad experiences. Michigan, in a new constitution, ultimately banned state railroads.

Yet, there is a contradiction in the New York transit system. It is in how much an ostensibly pro-transit political ruling class distances itself from responsibility while insisting that the government must always operate the system. Indeed, even many city histories reflect this "trains are not important" view. An authority on New York City municipal history is *Governing New York City* by Wallace S. Sayre and Herbert Kaufman. The book, published in the mid-1960s, devotes few pages to subway management.

LaGuardia's scions today prefer to hand over the heavy lifting to the MTA while taking credit whenever the authority breaks ground for new lines. Unfortunately, while some have been started, few have been finished since the 1940s, and some have been discontinued.

VIII. Where Are the New Lines?

The MTA's infamous and little-publicized history includes myriad cost overruns and several unfinished train lines. These are the "subways to nowhere" (Vitullo-Marti 2014). Taxpayers have paid numerous times for these lines, most of which have never operated.

Stories of all the lines that were supposed to be built, but never were, could fill books. These ill-fated projects included an unbuilt line from Jamaica, Queens, where the E and F trains now terminate, to Rosedale, Queens, at the city border with Nassau County, Long Island. Today, New Yorkers who live in eastern Queens ride the subway to the last stop, then transfer to a bus for the last leg home. (Curiously enough, given the problems of the MTA's often poorly maintained buses—many of which rattle the bones of passengers—the great success of the region has been the gypsy vans that riders tend to favor. These vans can often haul passengers short distances at lower fares—that is, if they can avoid the police.)

Other projects did not work out or were never started, despite much talk about the need for airport-rail connections. These include a direct subway line from Manhattan to Kennedy Airport and a subway line to LaGuardia Airport. Governor Rockefeller proposed the former airport train service when he was running for reelection in 1970. Governor Cuomo recently mentioned a train to LaGuardia. But this line hasn't even been worked out in theory, no less money found to pay for it.

The Kennedy Airport line now finally operates, but not as a one-ride train to the plane service as was originally promised. Riders must go to Jamaica, then carry their bags to a train terminal and pay another fare for a separate service to Kennedy.

As for the airport named after New York City's patron saint mayor, a July 7, 2014, newspaper article in the *New York Post* documented that public transportation to LaGuardia is poor and slow. Most riders take a subway and then a bus at Jackson Heights to get to the airport. The service is so bad that it is faster to take a cab to the airport despite clogged highways.

However, the most infamous of the unfinished lines is the Second Avenue subway. Mayor LaGuardia, whose last administration concluded just after World War II, promised a Second Avenue subway. In the 1940s, the IRT's Second and Third Avenue elevated lines (els) on the East Side were, as part of the 1940 takeover, designated for dismantlement. (There were also els on the West Side on Sixth and Ninth Avenues. These were private lines regulated by the state that preceded the subways. They were built in the 1870s and were eventually unified under the IRT.)

As the els went down on the East Side in the 1940s and 1950s, the city's politicians assured New Yorkers that a better replacement for the two els was coming—a new Second Avenue Subway. That projected line is now more than seventy years or more behind schedule. And it is not as though New Yorkers have not paid higher taxes for it. The voters in 1951 approved a Second Avenue bond issue. The voters also approved another one in 1967 and a third recently. After the second one in 1967, the MTA, with much fanfare, started work on the Second Avenue subway.

But in what was possibly bad karma, at a 1972 groundbreaking ceremony for the Second Avenue subway, various elected officials, including U.S. Senator Jacob Javits and Mayor John Lindsay, were unable to break ground with a jackhammer (Cudahy 2003a, p. 150). Owing to later fiscal problems, the project ceased for decades.

IX. Show Me the New Subway Line

What happened to the Second Avenue money borrowed through the bonds in the 1950s and 1960s? Bond money was spent on other things. The system in the 1950s and '60s, as today, ran huge deficits almost every year. So bond money went just to keeping the system going. Indeed, the subway system usually could not even generate enough money for routine maintenance. Decades after the 1967 transit bond issue, city and state politicians, betting on the historical illiteracy of the voters, sold them on yet another transit bond issue in 2005 to build the Second Avenue subway.

I remember voting against the last bond issue (Bresiger 2005).

Both Republicans and Democrats backed the new bond issue. Republican governor George Pataki supported it, and it easily passed. What politician running for election could oppose the idea of promising more subways, even if they were never built?

Still, by 2009, the MTA was plastering ads throughout the system promising that the Second Avenue line, once again, was around the corner. Here's the MTA announcement I saw one morning when I looked up as I was stuck between stations on an F-train that had suddenly become an E train: "Starting in 2015, the new Second Avenue Subway will help relieve overcrowding on the Lexington Avenue Lines. Overdue, but excellent news."

Unfortunately for long-suffering East Side riders, the Second Avenue line will not be coming in 2015. Once again, the MTA is running behind schedule. The construction of the new line is now years behind schedule, over budget, running into construction problems, and wreaking havoc with businesses on the East Side. The first phase of the Second Avenue Subway is now slated to open at the end of December 2016, according to the MTA.

Will the government and its authorities ever meet its much revised schedule on the Second Avenue Subway?

It never has before. And there's a reason for its perpetual tardiness. While the MTA and its political allies constantly talk about new lines, there is perhaps a more important issue: it continues having problems maintaining its existing lines.

X. Trains Go Off the Rails under State Ownership

New Yorkers today often ride in trains that are shaking or where the wheels are squealing and over tracks that haven't been properly maintained, as *New York* magazine discovered a few years ago. My wife, Suzanne Hall, a Delta Airlines mechanic with two certifications, can point out numerous problems whenever we ride the trains.

"Throughout there is the constant grinding of wheels," wrote Clive Thompson in *New York* magazine in 2005. The grinding leads to sparks that trigger numerous track fires. The communication system is outdated. Motormen often can't talk to the base because there are numerous dead spots throughout the system.

New York magazine also documented how fragile the system is. When it rains or snows, the system often breaks down, as it did during one September 2004 rush hour because of heavy rain.

The MTA has called these incidents "acts of God." It has blamed the National Weather Service for not giving ample warnings; climate change for bringing severe and erratic weather; and city officials for not doing more to fix the aging sewer system. These are examples of the aging system's inability to handle unexpected problems. Indeed, according to the MTA Office of Inspector General, an oversight arm, in some parts of the system, pumps haven't been updated for as many as 75 years.

The subway system's woes extend beyond flooding. On January 23, 2005, a fire destroyed a signal relay room at the Chambers Street station in lower Manhattan. While many control rooms had been modernized to improve their resistance to fires, the one at Chambers Street had not. These problems all lead to delays and mean trips take longer.

A childhood friend of mine who became a subway motorman—explaining to me why a familiar Manhattan to Queens trip on the E-line seemed to take longer than when we were teenagers back in the 1960s—told me my suspicions about the length of rides were correct. There are many "go slow" places in the system, he explained.

The subway also has an outdated signaling system that leads to endless delays. My friend the motorman also cautioned me to avoid the system during off-peak periods. He said it is a notoriously bad time to ride because old equipment is often used.

XI. Latter Day Goo-Goos Start Complaining

A riders' advocacy group called the Straphangers Campaign started analyzing the electronic alerts sent by the MTA to subway riders. The MTA sends out alerts warning straphangers of "significant" delays when something happens that it believes will delay a train for more than eight to ten minutes. The problem of delays is likely worse. The MTA keeps its own score, and since there are no posted schedules, it's a strange kind of scoring. The MTA is like a golfer who never counts all the strokes he takes and gives himself plenty of mulligans. The state agency has been criticized for not counting all the trains that are actually late.

"In 2011," the Straphangers Campaign continued, "the agency sent out those sorts of alerts for "controllable" incidents (those not involving circumstances like sick passengers and police investigations) 2,967 times. In 2013, the agency sent out such alerts 3,998 times. That's a 35 percent jump. The increase in alerts is a troubling sign that subway service is deteriorating," said Gene Russianoff, staff attorney for the Straphangers Campaign, in a May 2012 statement.

That's no surprise to most veteran riders. Many passengers can see the service breakdowns. They gird themselves for the worst whenever they ride. Trains again are becoming dirty. Kids, trying to cage money from passengers in narrow cars that are often sealed between stops, turn up boom boxes and scream, "It's showtime." They have a captive audience until the next stop. They put on acrobatic shows between express stops and sometimes are flying through the air, spooking riders who are afraid kids will crash into them. Most demoralized riders try to ignore such performances, as well as the frequent delays, which are often the result of outdated equipment.

Some ten years ago, an annual MTA report announced that reverse signaling was on the way. The ten years have passed. Reverse signaling, like the Second Avenue Subway, hasn't arrived. Reverse signaling provides maximum utilization of a system's tracks during high-usage periods. Say you have a four-track system. The signals are normally set as two tracks going west and two going east. In the morning, more traffic is going east. Reverse signaling allows you to have trains going east use three tracks. The process is reversed at night when most traffic is headed west.

A major transit system not having reverse signaling is tantamount to a writer today not having email. Yet mass-transit advocates, including some car driving politicians, lecture riders on how selfish they are to use their cars.

Maybe so many New Yorkers drive because they can't abide a system with so many delays. It is also a system that seemingly operates in a parallel universe on weekends and during other off-peak times. That's when train line routes often change. Expresses often become locals. Everything you know about the system is turned upside down for a few days. These are hard times for a system once known as "an engineering marvel."

More difficult to explain is why more money spent by government has resulted in worse service. Why—despite rising fares, subsidies, several transit taxes, and transit bond issues—have riders been waiting generations for new lines and improvements that would possibly reduce overcrowding and delays? These public officials have ruled out any possibility of a return to private management companies.

XII. Why Doesn't the 1940 Reform Work?

The biggest problem is obvious. The system is caught in a vicious cycle. It can't run in the black. It lacks sufficient ridership and revenue to make vitally needed improvements, despite the constant MTA claims that the ridership numbers are great. As with many other claims by MTA officials, they're not exactly true.

For instance, the MTA says subway ridership recently reached a sixty-five-year high: "Annual subway ridership of 1.708 billion is now the highest since 1949," the MTA said in its official press release (2014). But why not compare the number to the peak number achieved just after World War II? The 2013 number was up to 1.7 billion, and last year it rose to 1.75 billion, according to the MTA (2015).

Yes, ridership is up. However, so is the city's population. Since the end of WWII, it has gone from eight million to some 8.4 million. But in the long term, ridership is down. The MTA never mentions that peak annual ridership was a little over two billion a year just after World War II. (In 1947, the subways carried some 2.051 billion riders (Goldman 1982). And ridership numbers have actually been worse. In the late 1970s, they once fell below one billion. So, in fact, the recent 1.7 billion number actually means that ridership is still down about 17 percent compared with the peak number.

Why aren't ridership numbers higher? Why can't they reach the annual ridership numbers of just after World War II? That's what I asked David Gunn, president of the New York City Transit Authority. He told me about fifteen years ago that "it's because people now work a five day week instead of a six days week." However, don't people, with additional free time, still travel? Most of my neighbors—I live outside the city center, in the Central Queens community of Kew Gardens—use their cars on the weekends. They often go to the suburbs to shop since it is city policy to discourage most big box stores (with Walmart garnering the hatred of many city officials even though many of their constituents shop there or wish there was one in their neighborhood).

Most of my neighbors, like most politicians, ride the subways as infrequently as possible. They understand the system is antiquated and that taking the fastest route often means avoiding the subways. About two decades ago, the *New York Post* reported that the MTA maintained a fleet of cars for officials who attended nighttime community board meetings. These MTA officials were like restaurant owners who don't eat their own staff's cooking.

Could it be that the politicians and the authority leaders, along with my neighbors, understand that the subway has been falling apart for years? Even MTA employees seem to understand the problem. I was recently walking by an MTA transit facility on Sutter Avenue in Cypress Hills, Brooklyn, when I noticed a parking lot for MTA employees. It was jammed; every space was filled. There was a subway stop about a quarter mile away, yet many transit workers were driving to work. Would you go to a restaurant in which the cook didn't eat his or her own cooking?

XIII. New Yorkers Vote with Their Cars

Why do so many New Yorkers drive even though it is incredibly expensive? Tolls are collected at almost every bridge and tunnel. The city aggressively collects traffic fines, assigning many of its police officers to bring in revenue. And the city has some of the highest car insurance rates in the country. For example, New York is the second most expensive state for auto insurance (DiUlio 2014). So shouldn't it be cheaper and easier for many drivers to use the subways?

The problem is that the path to subway improvement has always been blocked by the hard realities of the post-1940 era: The subways, like Amtrak, are not anywhere near self-sustaining. The system loses lots of money almost every year, even though fares have been raised many times and likely will go up again in the next few years. Even with these hikes, fares make up a smaller and smaller part of the money needed to run the system. More and more, the system depends on state subsidies and fees. Less fare revenue means it is easier to ignore the rider. The authorities and the politicians, unlike an alert business person, can pay less and less attention to the customer. The customer doesn't pay the full bill—not directly, although certainly indirectly through numerous taxes—so it can afford to ignore him or her.

In this flawed system, political forces, not the rider, become more important. The MTA, which is obligated to have a balanced budget, must depend on bigger and bigger handouts from the state and federal governments. It doesn't always get them. The MTA frequently raises fares.

"Subway and bus fares," said the Straphangers Campaign in a recent testimony (Contino 2014), "have gone up four times in the past six years. And the price tag for the 30-day unlimited MetroCard has nearly doubled since they were introduced in 1998—from $63 to $112!"

Taxpayers and riders pay more than that. The MTA also quietly takes money out of taxpayers' pockets through fees and tolls. And yet, the outdated system, running with what *New York* magazine calls

"Model T standards," still runs huge deficits. Under the current state system, fares go up, but they still don't generate nearly enough money to pay for all the maintenance, no less the improvements, the system needs, leading to another cycle of fare increases.

In 2013, the New York City Independent Budget Office (IBO) estimated that the subway fare—the basic fare is $2.50—will rise 50 percent over the next ten years. "Given the financial pressures the MTA will face over the next decade," the IBO wrote, "some fare increases are likely" (Treffeisen 2013). Such increases are a constant of the post-1940 era.

The continuing red ink robs the system of improvement funds. Despite the political promises of the 1930s and 1940s that the system would be great, subway executives have never been able create the virtuous circle that almost every well-run firm can.

You make money. You give some of it back to the shareholders and productive workers, making two key groups happy. You also plow some of it back into the business. You buy more tools. They make the company and its workers more productive. That leads to a new round of profits as the firm grows. More productivity means prices can be kept at a level that attracts more customers. That hasn't been happening in the subways since the private management company days.

So are today's reformers, the twenty-first century version of the goo-goos, part of the problem or the solution?

XIV. Are Goo-Goos Part of the Problem?

The Straphangers Campaign is a descendant of the public interest groups of the 1920s and 1930s, the so-called good government groups, or goo-goos. Unfortunately, these groups, though sometimes critics of the MTA today, are part of the problem.

To repeat, the goo-goos were the public interest groups of the 1920s and 1930s that pushed for the government to buy out private management companies. They were and are against privatization. They are joined in their opposition by just about every politician and union official in New York. That means that they want to continue in some form the same system that banished private companies, companies that were certainly in trouble before the government took over.

But since 1940, the system has had a history of cutting service, neglecting maintenance, delaying new lines, and losing money. Yet, transit historians support the general principles of this public system.

In fact, one major historian of the system, Peter Derrick, who wrote *Tunneling to the Future: The Story of the Great Subway Expansion That Saved New York*, has worked for the MTA. Another became a federal transit agency official. Still, these pro-government historians will sometimes grudgingly concede the accomplishments of the private management companies.

The most important of the accomplishments was this: "Without private money," writes Brian J. Cudahy (2003a), the subways "would not have been possible." Cudahy became an official of the Federal Transit Authority (FTA), which is supposed to oversee the system and ensure that safety standards are being met. But the FTA apparently passes the subway buck as well as the New York politicians. I learned this recently when I corresponded with an FTA official, pointing out the subway's many deficiencies.

XV. A Federal Official Explains It

The FTA is supposed to police unsafe conditions on the subways and municipal transit systems around the nation. I asked why the agency wasn't cracking down on some of the problems that my wife and I frequently see. The delays and other countless problems, I wrote, were making me "*meshuggah*" (crazy). Here is what FTA press spokeswoman Amy Feinstein wrote back.

"I know from meshuggah, believe me. The FTA has spearheaded the charge for several years now to convince Congress that more funds are needed to modernize our public transit systems and plug the "infrastructure deficit" we are facing," she wrote.

"Our agency has, in fact, allocated a greater percentage of its resources in recent years to help bring these rail systems into a state of good repair than ever before. But you must understand that Congress holds the purse strings. You should let your elected representatives in Congress know your views."

I am grateful for Feinstein's response, since the MTA never replied to any of my questions about subway safety and various projects. But I will translate what Feinstein and all the bureaucrats of our ever-growing federal government are saying: I, the obedient citizen, "must" understand. *Demand Congress allocate more money for my bureaucracy.*

By implication, although no politician or bureaucrat wants to say this, the logic is stark: we should raise taxes and fares and pass more bond issues. This is the answer of almost every government bureaucracy ever created. These bureaucracies usually follow the same line of reasoning whenever anyone wants less government and points out the weaknesses of the current system. It is also the way they reply whenever a taxpayer makes the logical assumption that numerous government agencies should be ended and that, in the meantime, surviving agencies should live with a zero-based budgeting system.

And *pace* Feinstein, why should I let "my elected representative" know my views? This is precisely what taxpayers have been doing for generations, and what has been the result? Most politicians tell you they are "for" mass transit and refer you to an authority. Then authority members and other transit officials such as Feinstein send you back to Congress.

Most of its members' only experience with riding mass transit is the Capitol Hill subway. Most never have been on the New York City E-train as it suddenly turned into an F-train, confusing passengers and making them late for work or an appointment. The economic effect of poor mass transit should be studied in detail. I believe it will inevitably show that the reforms of the 1940s and 1950s have hurt the system and the city in myriad ways.

XVI. History Repeats Underground

In the period since 1940, when almost every big city politician feels obligated to be pro-mass transit, the results have been uniform: subway service has become worse and worse, while myriad fare increases have gone into effect.

When a system is owned by the people, as the New York City subway system is, fare increases represent a tax increase. John Lindsay conceded this point in the 1960s (Klein 1970, pp. 186–97). He ran for mayor the first time in 1965 on a platform of not raising the 15-cent subway fare and other taxes.

However, Mayor Lindsay raised both his first year in office. He gave New Yorkers their first city income tax, which has gone on and on. Forty years later, *Money* magazine called New York City "tax hell." New York City and state, as affirmed by *Money* and other publications, has some of the highest taxes in the country. And, over the last half century, the subway fares of the state-owned system have gone from 15 cents to $2.75. Half century and numerous fare increases later, still more are expected.

My email to the FTA was silly. It is a stretch to expect one level of government to correct another. It is crazy to expect officials of large units of government to understand, no less feel bound by, the concept of the *Rechtsstaat*. This is the idea of government under law, obeying the same laws that it enforces on the citizen (Hayek 1960, p. 193).

This lawlessness of government is similar to that of city police officers. Many are pressured by an always money-needy city government to ticket as much as possible. But that pressure doesn't extend to ticketing fellow city workers. Several anonymous police officers have conceded in New York tabloids that they don't ticket their "fellow municipal workers," even when city bus drivers go through red lights.

No one is ticketing a transit system that is breaking down. At the same time, since there are no private management companies and no profits, it is illogical to think that the transit system has any incentive to improve.

XVII. The Golden Era and Today

What regular rider of the subway is "proud" of New York City's system now, especially those who ride the lines into Manhattan from the outer boroughs on long trips? What supporter of the current state system could ever condone a policy of delayed maintenance?

Decades of neglect will never be corrected over a few years or through still another bond issue, since it seems no one can compel the government to spend money on the things it promises it will (see the Social Security Trust Fund. If a private entity "borrowed" from a trust fund, it would be severely penalized). More government meddling with trains has only worsened a bad situation. Even many defenders of the system concede its problems.

Writes Cudahy, the FTA official, toward the end of one of his histories of the New York subways, "If anything has emerged as a timeless and universal characterization of the New York Subway, it is the endless search for some future salvation, some not-yet-realized resolution of its difficulties and cure for its ills. Plans are made, programs developed, goals established. But they never quite live up to their initial expectations, and a new cycle must begin" (Cudahy 2003a, p. 159).

Still, our politicians, mainstream media, and bureaucrats are always ready for another cycle of subway bond issues and promises of new lines. They want to do more, much more, of what has been done over the past 75 years. For instance, a few years ago, there were suggestions of various new taxes to fund the system. Then-mayor Michael Bloomberg, running for reelection in his last campaign in

2009, said he had a plan "to fix" the subways.

What was it?

Raising more taxes on drivers and creating still another government subway authority!

Some things in life can be fixed. Other things are too far gone and must be ended, just as efficient markets liquidate poorly performing firms that take customers for granted. The latter is an apt description of the history of the New York City subways since 1940.

XVIII. Government Enterprise?

We live in a nation in which governments have proven, time and again, their incompetence in running businesses. Therefore, I believe that the words "enterprise" and "government" should never be used in the same sentence. This is a nation in which Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac went belly up. It is one in which Amtrak, despite the grandiose Nixonian promises of the 1970s, has lost untold billions of dollars over decades.

Yet, most New York political players imitate the Bourbon kings in their subway policies: they "have learned nothing and forgot nothing." Indeed, the Coalition for a New Penn Station is urging taxpayers to tear down the current Penn Station and Madison Square Garden—both only about forty-five years old—so taxpayers can give the money-losing Amtrak a new home in New York.

The lesson of the past seventy-five years is simple: nothing can be saved in the current governing structure of New York's government transit systems. They can only be ended, because they have clearly failed. They will continue to fail as long as politicians and goo-goos insist that only the government and its agents can run the trains that have become a disgrace, and as long as no pol is ever held responsible for these problems. Taxpayers and riders will continue to pay more and more for a bad service and have no effective say in how the system is run.

There is only one logical answer to the problems of the subways after generations of government mismanagement. New York should do what Michigan did in the nineteenth century after its disastrous experience running state railroads. It should get out of the transportation business forever and then some by writing an airtight prohibition into the state constitution.

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