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POINT OF VIEW, by Mel Dubnick

Let's not sentence Amtrak system to a summary execution

IN A POINT of View in The Denver 'ost on Dec. 22, economist George W. Hil-on summarily declared Amtrak "a failure" nd advocated that Congress "face up" to ie fact and "give up" on that public corpo-ation. A day earlier, Colorado's Sen. Wil-am Armstrong called for the end of Amtrak a locally broadcast TV interview.

Such a coincidence of opinions from a ading scholar with strong ties to the incom-g Reagan administration and a vocal mem-er of the new conservative Republican ma-rity in the U.S. Senate does not bode well r Amtrak's future.

Before being carried away with the intel-ctual logic and political expediency of ing away with Amtrak, we should examine e conditions that caused the rail passenger rvice problem in this nation and the broad- issues inherent in these proposals.

CENTRAL TO Hilton's argument is the ndeniable fact that Amtrak's federal subsi-es support facilities used by only a few mericans. Further, Hilton implies that ese funds are used to satisfy the "taste for ch travel" among those who seem to be either romantically attached to rail passenger transportation or entranced by the "cruise-ship" luxury of train excursions.

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As an Amtrak traveler who is neither romantically inclined nor witness to anything but the most spartan conditions on Amtrak trains, I find it difficult to accept this characterization of Amtrak consumers.

To the contrary, those using Amtrak facilities do so out of some financial or similar need, rather than some cultivated taste. The high (and increasing) costs of many alternative forms of transportation or inability to use them weighs heavily in one's decision to endure the inconveniences and discomforts of Amtrak. It remains a viable and nearly affordable option for many travelers, and no necessarily a desirable one.

Beyond that superficial point, Hilton's analysis is questionable on a more basic point: Nowhere does he focus on historical and strategic causes of Amtrak's problems.

Historically, Amtrak inherited the negative effects of private and public policies which took root in the first half of this century. The public decisions involved large-scale local, state and national efforts to promote automotive, bus and air passenger transportation modes. Massive highway construction programs, a policy of "cheap" oil, financing of public airports, protection of a few major commercial airlines and bus companies through regulatory agencies — these and numerous other forms of "subsidies" aided competitors to rail passenger service.

This is not to say that railroads were ignored, for the Interstate Commerce Commission did much for railroads over the years. But the ICC emphasis was on freight, rather than on passenger service, and this attitude was reinforced by decisions within the industry — which stressed the more capital-intensive and lucrative freight business.

The cumulative result was not only the deterioration of national passenger rail service, but creation of an impossible task for government policy-makers to deal with: saving a terminally ill patient.

Which brings us to the second cause of Amtrak's problems: the choice made by policy-makers who decided to adopt the "public corporation" approach as a solution to the rail passenger service problem.

There are many uses for government subsidies, whether as direct owenrship and/or funding, tax breaks, friendly regulations or loan guarantees. These tools can support and promote a new, vital and innovative enterprise such as automobile and air passenger transportation, or they can be used to save incompetent or inefficient "dinosaurs" such as Lockheed, American Motors or Chrysler.

In setting up Amtrak, policy-makers took the latter approach, for behind the chartering of this public corporation is the mission of "saving" an extremely ill patient — rail passenger service in America.

What is sad about this strategic policy choice is that it did not necessarily have to be the government's approach. Faced with dying corporate entities such as Lockheed or Chrysler, there is little choice but to treat them as ill patients in need of intensive care. But rail passenger transportation is a service, not a corporation, and it could have been nurtured and developed as a new, vital and innovative enterprise.

Those who formulated and implemented the Amtrak policy took the opposite approach. We are paying for that choice.

THE PROPOSAL to "give up" on Amtrak is the equivalent of killing the physician. It might address problems such as too much government bureaucracy and government spending, but it ignores the more basic issues of providing efficient, effective and affordable transportation for the American public.

Hilton's analysis and Armstrong's policy position are simplistic at best and inappropriate at worst, for they fail to consider the more fundamental issues associated with our nationwide transportation problems. We should think very carefully about those problems and their causes before advocating the elimination of Amtrak as the ultimate solution.