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Raise the Gasoline Tax!

A Speech America Needs

(This is our Christmas present for Pres. Reagan, but his successor could easily adapt it. We solicit comments from all who read this.)

Fellow Americans, we all want the nation run in a way that promotes peace and prosperity not just for ourselves but also for our grandchildren. Our legacy to future generations must include a lifestyle that can be sustained—not one that would have to be altered dramatically by entirely predictable events.

I am proud of the economic progress America has made since I became president, but—to help insure that this progress is solid and not a "bubble" that may burst in the future—I ask your support for a difficult decision which many experts have recommended and most politicians and interest groups have rejected.

Today, gasoline is cheaper in the U.S. than in other industrialized nations. We rely more on automobiles and less on public transit, bicycles, and walking than do other modern nations. I am asking Congres to approve a gasoline tax increase that would encourage more use of alternatives to the automobile while protecting lower income people, those who must drive long distances to work, and the economy as a whole.

Why Tilt Future Investment Towards Transit, Away from Roads?

- Unhealthy levels of carbon monoxide and ozone in the air of many metro areas is primarily the result of too much auto use. My Environmental Protection Administrator, Lee M. Thomas, advocates expanding mass transit and car-pools to help improve air quality in cities with the dirtiest air. (*The Washington Post*, Nov. 18.)
- The Environmental Protection Agency also said in November that increasing amounts of toxic runoff from roads is counteracting some of our progress in controlling industrial and municipal waste discharges into rivers and lakes. (*Post*, Nov. 11.)
- Dependence on foreign oil is growing—a trend likely to continue, since oil prices are high enough to profit OPEC but low enough to discourage domestic drilling. Most of the cheaply obtained U.S. oil is gone. The Commerce Dept. estimates we'll spend $46 billion to import oil this year, up 25% from 1986. 11% of our total import bill is for oil. Oil is the 2nd-largest import item—after motor vehicles! (*The New York Times*, Nov. 19.)

Gasoline price deregulation should spare us a repeat of 1979—when federal officials sent gasoline to vacation spots while people stayed home due to the shortage—but dangers remain.

(continued on page 3)

SAMUELSON FAVORS OIL TAX

"Are we crazy? It's hard to watch the ongoing turmoil in the Persian Gulf without a sense of despair.... [The industrial world] could lose vital oil supplies in a moment. But... there's now hardly a peep in Washington about adopting the essential policies to limit our vulnerability.... We need an oil excise tax of 20 or 25 cents a gallon to discourage consumption....

"The worst case examined in a recent Reagan administration study on energy security was a 6-month cutoff of Mideast oil. Unfortunately, the Mideast has a way of defying Western logic. Future conflicts might not have a clear winner.... Or suppose there were successive crises... The margin of safety lies in larger reserves and lower consumption. But our policy is to dawdle....

"As for an oil tax, it's drifted off Washington's political agenda. The Department of Energy estimates that a 25 cent-a-gallon tax would cut oil use a million barrels a day by 1995.... Considering today's large government budget deficits, an oil tax ought to be a natural....

"To minimize [the inflationary] impact, it ought to be introduced slowly, say a penny per gallon per month. Some large oil-using industries in international trade might be put at a competitive disadvantage... Perhaps modest exceptions should be made. But the main objectives are clear: to promote energy efficiency and to fill the strategic reserve while oil supplies are ample."

—Economist Robert J. Samuelson,
in The Washington Post, Aug. 12

[An Aug. 11 *Post* news story quoted "an economist for a major oil company": "We're real scared about the long term. As we get into the 1990s, all the surplus capacity will be gone, except for the Middle East OPEC surplus. Then they'll really have us under their control."]

Dukakis, Riley Ride the Turbo!

(Left to right) Gov. Dukakis, Massachusetts Transportation Sec. Frederick Salvucci, FRA's Riley, and Dukakis aide John DeVillars, next to Turboliner at Back Bay Station.

Bipartisan support for the intercity passenger train was evident during a "nonpolitical" Oct. 14 trip sponsored by the Coalition of Northeast Governors (CONEG) and designed to show that turbine trains such as now serve the New York-Niagara Falls Empire Corridor could provide enhanced Boston-New York service very soon; Pittsburgh-New York is also possible.

Amtrak's Claytor (left) speaks at Back Bay Station dedication Oct. 14, as Gov. Dukakis listens.

John H. Riley, who has served as Pres. Reagan's federal railroad administrator since November 1983, Gov. Michael S. Dukakis (MA), a Democratic presidential hopeful, and Amtrak Pres. W. Graham Claytor Jr., all made the entire trip, speaking in ceremonies at South Station and Back Bay in Boston, and in Providence, New Haven, and New York, joined in the latter three cities by Govs. Edward D. DiPrete (R-RI) and William A. O'Neill (D-CT) and Transportation Commissioner Franklin White (D-NY), respectively.

Riley said, "We know there's no safer form of transportation" than passenger trains. He said the railroads and New England grew and declined together, and "we've come back together." He urged people to "ride our trains!"

Dukakis foresaw "a new era in high-speed, clean, efficient all-weather transportation . . . . the beauty of [rail] is the capacity of this system is virtually infinite. We need about $100 million in capital improvements in the corridor. That isn't an enormous amount of money when you think about what we spend per mile of freeway." Add in $200 million for rolling stock, said Dukakis, and Boston-New York could be a "top-of-the-line" rail service which would "go a long way to maintain support for the economic success of New England . . . . We are going to choke on our own success if we don't make this investment . . . . I would be willing to offer a higher-than-normal state match in order to attract federal funds for this project, but there has to be some collaboration" by Washington.

"Right now, 30% of the flights from [Boston] Logan International Airport are to New York City. 30%! Cut down on that, and we have an opportunity to provide for more longer trips at the airport." ("Over 40% of Logan's total passenger volume is generated by the New York metro market," said MassPort Dir. David Davis in a June 18 reply to former Federal Aviation Administrator Donald Engen's Apr. 29 letter urging Dukakis to work towards expanding Logan or building a second Boston airport. Davis said expanding Logan was "simply unrealistic" and opposed a second major airport.) Amtrak now handles 12% of Boston-New York air + rail travel vs. over 33% New York-Washington.

Dukakis urged joint funding by the states and Congress: "There's a real and obvious federal interest in good air transportation; if you don't think there's also a federal interest in rail, you don't know what's going on."

Claytor urged elimination of remaining New Haven-Boston grade crossings and said he was "satisfied that [faster trains] can more than double ridership." He expressed hope that next year both political parties would adopt platform planks recognizing that "we must have an improved national passenger train system."

The turbo's unpublicized Oct. 13 eastbound run took only 3:44 from New York to Boston South Station with 2 stops (3:02 to Providence with 1 stop). Most current Amtrak trips are scheduled for about 4:35 with 9-11 stops, 10 minutes to change engines, and another 5 to add/remove Springfield cars. (Had the Oct. 13 run stopped at Back Bay, a 3:40 New York-Boston time could legitimately have been claimed!)

The turbo can use third-rail electric power, so requires no engine-change at New Haven; a higher horsepower-to-weight ratio permits faster acceleration than diesel-hauled trains have; acceleration could be further improved by "gearing down" the turbos from a top speed of 125 mph to 110. 110 is now the top limit on the New York-Albany run; current track conditions would also permit 110 on much of the Boston-New Haven line (103 is the seldom-achieved top speed of the diesels that run there).

Claytor said regular Boston-New York turbo service could be established if someone found $10 million to refurbish Amtrak's 3 remaining French trains now in storage. (Amtrak has been refurbishing its other 3 French trains to expand Empire Corridor capacity. The first refurbished set began revenue service Nov. 19.)

Amtrak is committed to continuing the testing process whatever its FY '88 funding level turns out to be; Congress has indicated strong interest with report language attached to both DOT appropriations bills (the House report specifying $4 mill.). On Dec. 9, Amtrak signed an agreement for Boston-New York tests of the "passive tilt" Spanish Talgo train, to be tested behind Amtrak turbo power cars, probably in April after the second refurbished turbo is available.

Most pro-rail observers see the extension of electrification from New Haven to Boston as the logical ultimate Boston-New York solution, but don't expect the necessary funds soon. Meanwhile, strong interest in improving the service quickly may help bring similar improvements to other non-electrified routes.

For example, Scott Casper, director of Pennsylvania DOT's Bureau of Mass Transit, said of the tests: "We are hopeful the equipment there proves successful. Then we want to look at

Gov. Dukakis (left) speaks at Oct. 14 dedication of Boston's new Back Bay Station. Among the listeners is Federal Railroad Administrator Riley (far right), who also spoke.

Pennsylvania." According to the Nov. 3 Harrisburg *Patriot-News*, "Casper said if Turboliners prove effective along the winding Connecticut coast, it may be possible to reduce time along the curvy mountainous tracks in Pennsylvania—particularly between Pittsburgh and Harrisburg."

The report said Harrisburg-Philadelphia ridership "has dropped dramatically since Amtrak eliminated 4 daily round-trips there early last year" while "ridership on trains that travel [all the way to Pittsburgh] has increased." Said Casper, "We know there are people who would like to have the option of utilizing rail passenger service rather than going through the expense of flying." ■

GASOLINE TAX *(continued from page 1)*

First, worldwide oil industry surplus capacity has dropped 38% since the early 1980s (9 mill. barrels/day now vs. 14.5 mill. then). Since 1979, OPEC production capacity has fallen 13 mill. barrels/day, U.S. refinery capacity has fallen 14% (Western Europe's fell 29%), and 1/3 of the world tanker fleet's capacity has been scrapped.

Second, electric utilities switching to coal and gas accounted for over half of our 1979 decline in oil demand, but they won't be able to do a rerun in a future crisis. (*Technology Review*, Nov.-Dec.)

Third, in 1986, 63% of our oil went to transportation, up from 54% in 1979, and the increases have been more dramatic in Europe and Japan. This makes it even more important that our transportation system be as energy efficient as possible and argues for the greater use of electric rail service which does not require liquid fuels. Instead, cheap gasoline is making big cars popular again, a point made by World Resources Institute, one Washington organization which supports a gasoline tax increase.

Fourth, while deregulation assures more efficient allocation of oil during a future crisis, it also means prices could rise much more quickly than during the 1970s crises, with car-owning poor people suffering more. We have a special obligation to those people to work to reduce our vulnerability to a future crisis.

Finally, *world* oil reserves are limited: known reserves will be exhausted in about 30 years at current production rates; new reserves may buy us only 5 to 55 more years. (*Journal of Commerce*, June 2.)

- Over 46,000 people died on our highways in 1986; 3.4 million were injured. The victims and their loved ones suffered terribly, and—according to the Dept. of Transportation—these accidents cost Americans at least $74 bill. (including $27 bill. for property losses and $21 bill. for insurance expenses). (*Post*, Nov. 27.) All forms of public transport are much safer than the automobile; this would remain true even if we realize the most optimistic projections from our efforts to promote seat-belt use and discourage drunk driving. Stories like this are all too common: "One person was killed and at least 9 others were injured in Sun City, CA, as 30 to 40 vehicles became involved in several wrecks on a fogbound stretch of I-215." (*Post*, Nov. 24.)
- 14% of all households—and 40% of households with incomes under $10,000—have no automobiles. Among the 11.7 million car-less households (about 32 million people) are many urban poor who need access to suburban jobs. Better public transit—and the long-term development patterns it would encourage—could help many of these people become productive members of society.
- Continued road construction means less land to enjoy, farm, and live on, but no *lasting* improvement for motorists. In Maryland—one of only 7 states with an agricultural land preservation program—twice as many acres of farmland have been lost to development as have been protected. (*Post*, Aug. 23.) On California's urban freeways, average rush-hour speed is 23 mph and, by the year 2000, is expected to drop to 15 (half that on some freeways). (*J of C*, June 2.)

Under-utilized, federally-funded commuter rail, rapid transit, and local bus lines parallel I-270 in Washington's Maryland suburbs. Nevertheless, I-270 is being widened from 6 to 12 lanes for $125 mill. William K. Hellman, Maryland's former transportation secretary, says the road will be back to a large parking lot in 10 years.

- Is a 12-lane parking lot better than a 6-laner? The time people waste stalled on freeways costs money and jeopardizes long-term economic growth! Adding lanes just encourages developers to continue locating too many homes and jobs where they are 100% auto-dependent. That's why, the longer we postpone a serious push to improve mass transit, the more difficult that push will be.
- Fairness! It is high time to admit that those who by choice or necessity do not use the auto for much or any of their travel have been making life easier for the rest of us. For years, transit users have endured fare increases and service reductions while watching gasoline prices fall and hearing public officials attack transit subsidies.

But transit users, and those state and local governments who support transit, help all of us. Urban auto commuters benefit from less competition for road space because so many of their neighbors use transit. Low gasoline consumption rates in transit-oriented cities mean more gasoline at lower prices for the entire nation! Transit-dependent Washington, DC, for example, has a per-capita gasoline consumption rate lower than in any state and less than half that of Indiana, Kentucky, South Dakota, North Dakota, Tennessee, Nebraska, and Iowa.

The Right Gasoline Tax Does the Right Things

Consider these facts:

- Increasing gasoline prices at the pump would discourage driving and encourage transit use and improvements, alleviating the various factors I have just described.
- The inflation-adjusted price of gasoline is about the same today as it was in 1973 and almost 50% lower than in mid-1981.
- Gasoline, a non-renewable resource, costs only about 1/10 as much as coffee, a renewable resource!

• Terrible job losses would accompany a 3rd worldwide oil crisis.

• Revenues from a gasoline tax increase could help us make unprecedented progress in reducing the federal deficit.

In early November, I said I would accept a budget package that included a gasoline tax if Democrats took the lead. They didn't. Now, with our budget summit agreement under attack for not cutting the deficit enough, my leadership on this issue is essential. **I propose increasing the gasoline tax a penny per gallon each month for the next 25 months.** This would ultimately yield $25 billion a year.

Reacting to my November comments, the American Road & Transportation Builders said using gas tax revenues for deficit reduction "would destroy the user-fee concept of the gasoline excise and any resultant decrease in gasoline consumption would drain needed revenue from the Highway Trust Fund. In light of the president's softening on the issue, ARTBA will mount a campaign to encourage nationwide opposition to this . . . approach."

I don't blame ARTBA for trying to protect its own short-run interests, but my job is to protect the national interest. The justification for a 25-cent increase in the gas tax is clear, since the free market tends to ignore long-run supply problems of a nonrenewable resource whose availability seems assured in the short run. However, I could not defend a doubling of federal transport spending, which is what a $25 billion/year increase would mean, in the face of the need to reduce the deficit and in the face of other pressing needs, including spending increases related to AIDS, catastrophic health insurance, and child care.

If you must see the gas tax increase as a "user-fee," think of it as covering the many non-transport costs caused by over-development of highways and underdevelopment of transit: health costs imposed by dirty air, welfare for car-less people unable to get to jobs, and on through the list I gave you earlier.

In Congress, my November comments produced bipartisan opposition. Some members said the gas tax would be regressive, unfairly burden rural taxpayers, and slow economic growth. These objections can be met.

To protect the poor and near-poor, I propose an income-tax deduction for federal gas taxes for these people. Similarly, I am asking Transportation Secy. Burnley to recommend ways to protect those who must drive long distances to work. The penny-a-month phase-in will help minimize the impact on economic growth, but long-term benefits of "tilting towards transit" will **boost** the economy.

How to Spend the Money

I seek to earmark most of the revenues for deficit reduction, but I do want to earmark 2 additional pennies for mass transit capital projects, this funding to augment—not replace—money transit now gets from general funds.

I also want a half-penny designated for intercity passenger train capital improvements nationwide. Secy. Burnley will develop mechanisms to insure that Amtrak operations remain efficient and that sufficient attention is paid to improving services that can noticeably reduce airway and airport congestion. I am not holding my breath for new airports to be built, except possibly in Denver. Last April, the Federal Aviation Administrator wrote to 10 governors urging construction of new runways and airports; 2 governors did not respond, and 1 lectured me on the need for fast trains!

In arguing against a deficit-reducing gas tax, legislators also said it would limit the ability of state and local governments to raise revenues for transportation projects. Well, as you see now, my full proposal would *enhance* the ability to fund those vital projects for which money has been hardest to find.

My proposal should be welcomed by San Diego's mayor, who, on *60 Minutes* Dec. 6, lamented that "everybody loves the trolleys. The only problem now, Harry, is that we can't get them into the neighborhoods fast enough." I think also of those pushing for west-side light rail in Portland, Oregon, where the project "is caught between the need that is demonstrated twice a day by congestion on Sunset Highway and the futility of finding $235 mill. or more to pay for it." (Sep. 6, *Oregonian* editorial.)

Finally, I think of my own Urban Mass Transportation Administrator, Alfred A. DelliBovi, who was recently quoted as saying he often drives to work because the last bus home leaves too early. (*Post*, Nov. 19.) Now, Fairfax County, VA, where congested roads have become an explosive issue, can seriously consider developing a badly needed light-rail network that could feed Metro and bring a full day's service schedule closer to thousands of homes, including Al's!

What Do the People Want?

In 1979 the Congressional Office of Technology Assessment published a big study, "Changes in the Future Use and Characteristics of the Automobile Transportation System." I recall this sentence from it: "American society is not having a love affair with the car so much as it is having a love affair with mobility."

This was based on interviews conducted in 1978. I think appreciation of public ground transportation is even greater now: we had the 1979 oil crisis; successful new light rail lines have opened in San Diego, Portland, and Buffalo; and Amtrak just completed its 5th straight year of rising passenger-mileage with some of the biggest successes coming in my home state, the supposed bastion of the auto!

November, 1987, votes on transportation ballot measures in southern California are instructive: San Diego County approved a 20-year program with $750 mill. (one-third of the total) earmarked for transit, mostly rail, but San Bernardino County rejected a 100%-highway proposition. Meanwhile, Pittsfield, MA, voters rejected a highway bypass by a 3-2 margin. In 1983, about 1,200 residents turned out at a public hearing on a freeway that would cross Montgomery County, MD; most residents opposed the freeway but construction is assured! This year, at public hearings, over 1000 people spoke against a new 4-lane highway PennDOT wants to build. (*J of C*, Dec. 11.)

Yes, I think many people are dissatisfied with our current transportation priorities, have waited a long time for a president to say what I've just said, and will support my proposals. "Balanced transportation" is a cliche that's been tossed around and rarely implemented. With your support, we can change that, get a transportation system that will not resemble a clogged parking lot, and cut our budget and trade deficits! Thank you, and God bless you. ■

TRAVELERS' ADVISORY

Los Angeles-San Diego "San Diegans" 774, 783 will *not* be extended northward to Santa Barbara Jan. 19. A new date has not been set, but will likely be in Feb.

On Dec. 4, Amtrak raised fares 2% on most long-distance routes, 3% on most short-distance routes. Some NE and SW Corridor city-pairs had hikes greater than 3%; Chicago-Detroit and Chicago-New Orleans routes had no increase.