

Opulent America

It was a rather routine trip. I had to go down to Washington, DC on business to meet with some lawyers at the Justice Department. I thought, aha, here is my change to take the Acela. I have a soft spot in my heart for trains. Having grown up in Long Island, New York, I recall in my youngest years taking the Long Island Railroad with my mother. I learned to love those train rides on the Long Island Railroad.

I have taken plenty of public transportation in Europe and in Israel, but never the high-speed train down the northeast corridor. One of my attractions to the law firm where I now work is that it was an old railroad law firm. Originally started by Reading and Allen, Reading got bored and went out to start a little railroad. By the time I got to the firm, they still represented Conrail. It was a real thrill for me to drive up to Renovo and climb around on the locomotives after a crash or some other event that led to the railroad needing legal work.

So, there I was, on the Acela headed down to Washington, DC. The inside of the train looks like an old narrow-bodied airplane. Although I expected a smooth, stratosphere-like ride, I was surprised by the jostling and bumpiness. It was like flying in an airplane through constant turbulence. Clearly, the United States has a long way to go to match other developed nations in a comfortable and affordable public transportation system.

Then there was Washington DC in all its Romanesque, neoclassical magnificence. Having lived in Washington and worked there for a number of years, I made many trips to our nation's capital. Something about it was different this time. The city was surprisingly uncrowded, the streets seemed wider, the buildings more numerous, and the façades even more imposing. Truly, the dream of the Founders of this country and their French architect L'Enfant have been realized by creating the capital of an Empire. The lack of people and cars reminded me of one of those horror movies where all the people suddenly disappear; and yet, the buildings remain.

In order to enjoy the ambiance of the city, I decided to walk to my Justice Department meeting, even though it was cold and windy. After my very cordial and pleasant meeting, which barely touched on politics, I hoofed it back to Union Station. On the way, I made two stops. The first one was a gigantic red brick building. It was the old "pensioners" edifice either of the DC government or perhaps federal government, I am not sure which. Entering the building reminded me of the sights of Rome and Jerusalem, except they pale in comparison! The inside of this building had four gigantic columns on each side, with an enormous fountain in the middle. The ionic columns (and, who knows, maybe they were some other kind) soared to a ceiling so high that it hurt my neck when I looked up. What is this building currently used for, I asked? There were a few private offices around the perimeter, but it did not seem to be much more than an open indoor space simply to marvel at. How many taxpayer dollars, I wondered?

On the way back to the station, I stopped at my alma mater, Georgetown University Law School. When I was there, there was just one building and my recollection of the place

was the impressive steps leading upward to the entrance with the three tightly contained floors within. Now, I was told, this is only one building of the Georgetown Law School “complex.” There is a separate building for the International Law program and professors’ offices. The Law School has dorms, instead of making the students scurry around looking for housing as we did, and a fitness center. The fitness center has a pool, gym equipment and an indoor track. I wonder how that contributes to the quality of legal education or ethical precepts? It does indeed seem to be true that college and graduate law school education in America has become big business.

Heading back to Philadelphia on the train, I opted not for the fancy Acela but rather the Amtrak Northeast Corridor. So, here is the deal; the regular train is much less expensive, the cars are just as nice and the ride is maybe 10 minutes slower. Why would anybody pay three times more for the Acela, unless they had to? It escapes me!

The train rumbled and bumped through the slums of Baltimore and South Philadelphia. I looked out at those burned down buildings with rows of abandoned streets and derelict cars. Some of the houses and buildings were missing roofs, walls and windows. This is America too.

One cannot help but wonder, regardless of political affiliation, how in the United States we could have the magnificent public expenditures that we see in Washington, DC right alongside of what can only be described as our apartheid cities? The answer to that seems to reject not on common values that we all share, but rather relates political affiliation. Democrats would say that the rich make too much and government money goes for the wrong things. Republicans would say that our government encourages indolence, lack of character and laziness. Is it possible that both points of view are correct?

Yet, just yet, if it is possible to pull oneself back from the precipice of political obstinance, perhaps there is a combination of opinions which would explain the inconsistency which we see in America. We have fantastic new interstate highways, but roads in our cities and suburbs that are almost undriveable, truly lousy public transportation, uniquely crafted, impressive public buildings, and inexplicably unacceptable burned-out ghettos. It would be nice if we could have a top-down evaluation of whether we really need all the layers of government that exist, some of which are doing the same jobs, with public spending that we take for granted. Maybe Trump is right when he says that our well-to-do allies should share more of the burden of worldwide defense against the savagery of those who would bring down Western civilization. On the other hand, Trump’s arbitrary rejection of bilateral international arrangements is certainly not the way to achieve the goal of greater cooperation with less American expenditures.

What about taxation? Why not eliminate all loopholes, deductions and exemptions and have a simple three-tier system similar to that which has worked well in states like Pennsylvania? Everybody should pay taxes except the working poor. Everyone should contribute to society, and all young people should have to do public service of some kind before they enjoy the fruits of an expensive, often debt-ridden, public or private education. We could fund this if it was a priority and if we would create a sensible tax and spending system.

America will not correct its imbalance of ideals and finances until we see a more than 30% turnout at elections. That's right, the government does all the bad stuff that it does because voters tell the politicians that they do not really care. People who care are those who give big dollars to political action committees and get ginned up about issues that raise the blood pressure but have very little consequence for the bureaucrats in Washington or the destitute people of inner-city Baltimore.

Perhaps democracy will fail for lack of interest. It seems that only extreme and angry politicians, whether it be Obama or Trump, turn out people at the polls. Perhaps we need more Harry Trumans or Gerald Fords and fewer show horses who are good mainly at raising money.

*Clifford A. Rieders, Esquire
Rieders, Travis, Humphrey,
Waters & Dohrmann
161 West Third Street
Williamsport, PA 17701
(570) 323-8711 (telephone)
(570) 323-4192 (facsimile)*

Cliff Rieders is a Board-Certified Trial Advocate in Williamsport, is Past President of the Pennsylvania Trial Lawyers Association and a past member of the Pennsylvania Patient Safety Authority. None of the opinions expressed necessarily represent the views of these organizations.