

## Book Review

### *Gridlock: Why We're Stuck in Traffic and What to Do About It*

Randal O'Toole

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*Gridlock* by Randal O'Toole is one of a slew of recent books and reports about transportation that have been released in anticipation of federal surface transportation reauthorization—the so-called “highway” bill, passed every five or six years by Congress, which sets federal spending limits and establishes policies for both highway and urban public transit in the United States. This book identifies major problems with transportation policy in the United States, pinning the blame on planning and planners, and on what the author considers to be their misguided emphasis on solutions based on rail and land use policy for a variety of problems that would be better addressed without what is dubbed “social engineering,” instead focusing on technology and sound principles of economic efficiency. Reading this book in one sitting, I found I could not dispute most of the facts brought to bear by the author in support of his case. Where this book will be controversial is in the author's implicit (and sometimes explicit) support for a particular set of political values. The book, published by the Cato Institute, unapologetically espouses a (somewhat inconsistently) rationalist and libertarian perspective that emphasizes efficiency in government services, minimization of those services, and maximization of freedom for travelers, and then aims to apply that perspective without modal prejudice.

We must begin with a caveat about the title. “Gridlock” in traffic terms is largely hyperbolic; it is seldom the case that cars are unable to move because intersections (on grid networks) are blocked and thereby locked. But the term is used as much to describe traffic as it is to describe the policy process which is stuck, and getting more stuck over time, in what the author views as strategic policy errors. It is really the governance structure for transportation that is in gridlock. Adopt-

ing this title, “Gridlock,” suggests that the primary transportation problem is traffic congestion. The subtitle alludes to *Stuck in Traffic*, an earlier book by Anthony Downs on the same topic.

The first substantive chapter, “Land of Mobility,” provides an excellent though brief overview of transportation history in the United States, showing how the national wealth rises with travel speeds through a series of snapshots at 50-year intervals.

It is in the second chapter, “Potholes in the Road,” where the controversy begins. O'Toole opposes what he views as anti-mobility forces that aim to slow traffic. He takes aim at the infrastructure panic (p. 27), traffic calming (p. 32), and accessibility (p. 33), among others in a few broadsides that miss their mark, in my opinion. “Accessibility” is simply the ability to reach (access) destinations (e.g. how many destination one can reach in 30 minutes by a particular mode at a particular time); it is a modally neutral concept that the author conflates with transit and walk accessibility. His use of the term “mobility” (the ability to move on networks) for auto accessibility is needlessly confusing. Why congestion, while annoying and wasteful, should be the central transportation issue, rather than accessibility, which the author elsewhere essentially says increases the productivity of cities, is never made clear. Why the author believes that concern about infrastructure is a “panic,” when bridges are in fact crumbling and collapsing, is also unclear. The I-35W Mississippi River Bridge, in the most recent and most noteworthy of recent infrastructure failures, collapsed because of a chain of events that began with a design mistake, but also included every decision not taken which could have discovered and remedied that mistake. O'Toole appears to believe any investment that does not add

capacity is waste, a position that fails to allow sufficient funds for operations and maintenance.

O'Toole then contrasts the "Smart Growth" agenda promulgated by planners since the mid-1990s with the "efficiency" agenda he advocates. Smart Growth aims to increase densities ("build up not out") and support those higher densities with transit. The author notes that these policies are likely to be largely ineffective in changing behavior, and are also likely to be expensive. I am sympathetic to the author's critique of the overly prescriptive nature of so-called Smart Growth; I would suggest that instead Smart Prices (e.g., setting impact fees at appropriate levels) be implemented to incorporate the full social cost of development (roads, water, sewer, schools, parks, etc. required to accommodate development while ensuring adequate public facilities), to direct development with the invisible hand, allowing developers to decide where it is worth paying the price, and where it is not.

Fixed rail investments at the urban and inter-urban levels are O'Toole's next target. He dislikes high-speed rail, seemingly the nation's next major infrastructure investment, which he labels "The Next Boondoggle." The problems, O'Toole argues, are many, and follow those of transit, strategic misrepresentation and optimism bias on the part of project promoters, and general ineffectiveness in building a capital-intensive mode that is neither faster nor more agile than its competitors. O'Toole's identification of the problems in this area is spot-on, in my view. These problems arise from the structure of transportation financing in the United States, where the subsidization of capital investments by the federal government biases local governments toward capital-intensive transportation improvements. Further, the incentives of members of Congress to maximize immediate benefits to their own constituencies do not align with the national interest.

Turning conventional wisdom on its head, O'Toole argues that transit and high-speed rail are not only more expensive than the auto-highway system, but more environmentally damaging as well. He asserts that technological solutions to pollution, reinforced by government policies like the Corporate Average Fuel Economy (CAFE) standard, have been very effective, while behavioral solutions have all failed. It is in some ways surprising for the author to be supportive of CAFE policies, given his opposition to so many other regulatory efforts.

O'Toole proceeds to describe the funding situation for transportation today, and discusses the question of subsidy and cross-subsidy as well as the user-fee concept behind the transportation trust fund. About one-fourth of highway user fees are spent on transit projects (despite a transit mode share

considerably lower than one-fortieth of all trips or all miles traveled). The cross-subsidies in urban transportation are essentially unidirectional. This helps explain the shortfall the trust fund has seen in recent years, along with the decline in vehicle miles traveled associated with higher gas prices and economic recession. The existence of cross-subsidies should not argue for a ban on additional transit funding; there may be an economic case for subsidies, but the policy debate devolves from rational argument to name calling—"He gets more money than me!"—pretty quickly.

*Gridlock* does propose some remedies for these ills. To counter the subjective and often misguided nature of present-day planning, O'Toole argues for what is effectively short-run planning using a rationalistic planning and decision-making process. I generally agree that there is little reason to exert ourselves to identify problems that will arise thirty years from now when there are plenty of problems laying about unsolved today. I believe there is a tendency among planners to bring distant dangers near. The potential would be for a community to establish a vision of where it wants to be, and then to check each decision it makes against that vision (does it move the community closer to or farther from its goal?). That vision would be periodically revisited. That is not, however, what Mr. O'Toole proposes. He would eliminate the federal requirement for long-term planning (which, I agree, should be left to the discretion of local communities), but does not even suggest it would be wise to think about the long-term impacts of decisions. In practice, many problems in community development are coordination games: I will build a transportation facility if you build the development; I will build houses if you build offices; etc. In this context, establishing a vision of the future to which the community can subscribe makes coordination much easier. Such visions can become self-fulfilling prophecies that result in the betterment of the community.

Another remedy examined in *Gridlock* is Intelligent Transportation Systems (ITS) and their promise to increase both roadway capacity and safety. O'Toole notes the chicken-and-egg problem of deploying smart cars and smart highways simultaneously, but in an argument at odds with his critique of government management of infrastructure, he seems to feel that providing smart highways is an option. At this point in the development of ITS, it should be clear that autonomous vehicles capable of operating in mixed traffic represent the most viable future direction; the other options are non-starters. It should be noted that my own work with students is cited. While O'Toole, like me, favors technological over behavioral remedies for transportation problems like pollution and congestion, only one of many technology-

development paths can actually be pursued, and time spent barking up the wrong tree will delay the deployment of the ultimate solution. This is a case where one would think the author would see the difficulties of central planning.

*Gridlock* lays out several policy prescriptions, some of which (allowing road tolls and avoiding earmarks in transportation funding) represent mainstream thinking within the academic transportation community; others, such as eliminating federal planning mandates and clean air requirements, are likely to spark dissent.

Overall, I think O'Toole overstates the power of planners, and he should consider the forces that underlie the ability of planners. He suggests that voters are misled by referenda, and that the central problem is simply that a few beneficiaries of expensive investments are able to persuade voters to support them by outspending diffuse populations of losers. Certainly that is part of the story, but is there more? Do people perhaps have different values about freedom than the author himself? Is it possible that network effects and positive externalities do exist, and thus that collective action in support of higher densities and transit might create economic spillovers (agglomeration benefits) for everyone? The author admits these exist in New York City; why cannot similar benefits be attained elsewhere?

*Gridlock* is an important contribution to the policy debate, and O'Toole, who writes a blog called "The Anti-planner," brings a fresh and seldom-heard perspective grounded in empirical evidence and relentless application of objective analysis drawing from the tradition of Hayek. While many planners may not subscribe to his values, it is crucial that they understand the facts laid out in this work, if only to sharpen their own arguments and disentangle propaganda from reality.