

Thomas Sowell: Obama's push for high-speed rail is world-class chutzpah

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Nothing more clearly illustrates the irresponsibility of Barack Obama than his advocacy of "high-speed rail." The man is not stupid. He knows how to use words that will sound wonderful to people who do not bother to stop and think.

High-speed rail may be feasible in parts of Europe or Japan, where the population density is much higher than in the United States. But without enough people packed into a given space, there will never be enough riders to repay the high cost of building and maintaining a high-speed rail system.

Building high-speed rail between Los Angeles and San Francisco, for example, may sound great, but the distance is greater than that from London to Paris — by more than 100 miles. In Japan, the distance between Tokyo and Osaka is comparable. But the population of Osaka alone is larger than the combined populations of Los Angeles and San Francisco — and Tokyo has millions more people than Osaka. That is why it can make sense to have a bullet train running between Osaka and Tokyo but makes no sense to build one between Los Angeles and San Francisco.

However little Obama knows or cares about economics, he knows a lot about politics — especially political rhetoric. "High-speed rail" is simply another set of lofty words to justify continued expansion of government spending. So are words like "investment in education" or "investment" in any number of other things, which serves the same political purpose.

Who cares what the realities are behind these nice-sounding words? Obama can leave that to the economists, the statisticians and the historians. His point is to win the votes of people who know little or nothing about economics, history or statistics.

To talk glibly about spending more money on high-speed rail when the national debt has just passed a milestone, by exceeding the total value of our annual output, for the first time in more than half a century, is world-class chutzpa.

Since the generations that follow cannot vote today, the Obama administration's latest budget keeps the spending increasing, while regaling us with wonderful plans for big reductions in government spending — years from now, after Obama is gone.

Make no mistake about it, spending wins votes, and votes are the ultimate bottom line for politicians. If fancy words and lofty visions are enough to get the voters to go along with more spending, then expect to hear a lot of fancy words and lofty visions.

— *Excerpted from a column by Thomas Sowell, a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution. His website is istsowell.com.*