

Zachary M. Schrag, *The Great Society Subway: A History of the Washington Metro* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).

Zachary Schrag, a historian, has produced a spellbinding account of the process that brought Washington's Metro rail to life. Writing with uncommon fluency, Schrag has an eye for detail in explaining why and how, with public demand for automobiles ever increasing, Washington substituted a subway for freeway construction.

Schrag's explanation is political; political opportunity came from growing opposition to the environmental damage that freeways were seen to cause; Kennedy era appointments and civic organizations that saw transit as an alternative to freeway construction; and the Urban Mass Transportation Act of 1964, which legislated a public role for transit development.

The political struggle to build Metro is described vividly; route choices were cast in terms of the need to please eight local jurisdictions; approval by Congress was only possible after a long fight, which culminated in the House overruling Representative William Natcher, Chair of the House Subcommittee on District of Columbia Appropriations. Natcher had blocked the go-ahead for Metro because he wanted the highway program confirmed and continued along with transit construction.

Schrag shows how Metro was sold politically on the basis of claimed low public cost. All but \$180 million of the \$793 million system proposed to the Kennedy Administration was supposed to be repaid from fares. The system grew in extent and cost. Nonetheless, Congress was assured that the \$1.047 billion grant it was asked to approve would cost only \$438 million, with \$600 million repaid from fares. As of December 1978, capital costs had grown to \$6.833 billion, while fares, earned from a ridership that would turn out to be far below that forecasted, would prove incapable of covering operating costs, let alone make any contribution to capital expenses.

While Schrag provides a lucid and, indeed, gripping, account of the politics behind Metro, his writing loses authority when he attempts to justify the choice of rail transit. He points out that both Robert Post and I use history to reveal and explain questionable decisions. "Unlike Richmond

and Post,” Schrag writes, “I consider fun to be a legitimate goal of public policy. If it is all right for an individual to spend his money on a snazzy sports car when a humble hatchback would get him to work just as well, why is it wrong for a region or nation of free people to buy collectively a more glamorous transit system than strict engineering specifications would demand?” (p. 286). Schrag quotes, with seeming approval, a system planner who said “I have no apologies to make for overestimating ridership and revenue. . . It was in the public interest” (p. 281).

Schrag makes no reference to the two 2003 books on megaprojects (Altshuler & Luberoff; Flyvbjerg et al.), both of which are very helpful in telling us how grand projects such as Metro in Washington come about. In particular, Flyvbjerg’s accounts of how politicians are almost invariably sold projects that end up costing far more and supplying far less benefits than claimed present the megaproject phenomenon as a challenge to democracy. Would Metro have ever been approved if its final cost had been known up-front? Of course not. And is it ethical for politicians, managing scarce public resources, to be misled with “overestimates,” which, in plainer language, might be termed “lies?” I do not believe so.

Schrag tells us that “overall, blacks and whites use Metro at similar rates;” also that African Americans are “almost four times more likely to ride buses to work than whites” (p. 113). He does not, however, make plain the inequitable distribution implied by these statistics. Since minorities have lower rates of car ownership and higher incidences of transit dependency than whites, they would be expected to use transit at far higher rates. The fact that they only use Metro rail at similar rates to whites indicates its lower relative utility to them as compared to the bus system. And, while Metro rail is geared primarily to attracting higher-income riders, Schrag recognizes that buses have played “second fiddle in a subway agency” (p. 178). Little has been done to enhance basic bus services upon which the transit-dependent rely. Metro rail was not only expensive, but a regressive use of public funds.

While Schrag expertly unfolds the series of political events leading to Metro rail, he does not take us behind the scenes to try to interpret what was going on in decision-makers’ minds. A clue to the form of thinking comes from Schrag’s description of President Nixon being convinced during a helicopter ride over Washington of the need for rail transit. As I found in my own study, *Transport of Delight—The Mythical Conception of Rail Transit in Los Angeles*, politicians readily form simplified synthetic impressions rather than engaging analytical thought processes. The sight of a congested metropolis can readily convince a politician that an alternative set of transport tubes is needed to carry away the excess traffic, whatever the results of formal analysis might suggest.

With rail appearing to the untutored decision maker, who relies on gut reactions, as fast, smart, and attractive to users, it is hard to advocate less-virtuoso forms of transport such as the bus or the van, which might provide greater connectivity at lower cost. While Metro may have its “fun” aspect—in effect, adding a new monument to Washington’s collection—politicians also view the virtuosity of rail as making it effective at attracting passengers. In reality, much more mundane factors, such as overall journey time and cost, weigh in much more significantly when commuters decide how to travel.

While national politicians were led astray by optimistic performance and financial projections, the glamorous imagery of rail added to the error by making this form of transit seem to be a more effective transportation device for the money than it could really be. The misunderstandings of politicians make for serious barriers to effective public policy formation. We should seek educational processes that equip decision makers to perform more effectively, not rejoice at the glamorous results of their erroneous perceptions. And if, as they are entitled to do, politicians select expensive megaprojects nonetheless, let them at least do so from a basis of knowledge.

The Great Society Subway is a book filled with insight, and is of value for scholars and students who wish to learn about how politics shapes policy processes. It is enjoyable to read as well as

thought-provoking. If there are omissions from a work of intense and detailed research, perhaps it is for further volumes to provide additional enlightenment. I have no problem in recommending this book highly as it stands.

REFERENCES

- Altshuler, A. A., & Luberoff, D. E. (2003). *Mega-projects: The changing politics of urban public investment*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.
- Flyvbjerg, B., Bruzelius, N., & Rothengatter, W. *Megaprojects and risk: An anatomy of ambition*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

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