



Bankrupt Buses, Pricey Beer, and Bad Wars

Locally, I drive home from work in Pittsburgh listening to people calling the talk shows to complain about how the reduced bus schedules aren't getting them to work on time.

The bus system is running critically in the red in spite of a 7 percent county tax on beer, wine, and liquor that was imposed three years ago to bail out the transit system. On top of all the other local and state subsidies to the bus system, this new liquor tax transfers about \$27 million a year from the county's boozers to the buses and still the transit system is projected to be \$60 million in the red next year. We just can't drink enough to keep everything afloat.



"I'm paying more and getting less," grumbled one caller. "With the nation's highest parking taxes in Pittsburgh, I can't afford to drive downtown and now my bus is gone. What am I supposed to do, sit home with the bus drivers who are milking early retirements?"

Then the bus drivers call in, saying, like Nixon, that they're not crooks.

"I just went down there and applied for a job when I was 20 years old," explained one driver. "So now I'm 47 and been retired for two years. That was the deal I was offered. Any of the callers who are complaining could have gone down there and got the same job for the same deal."

True, but we'd still be broke no matter who went down back then and got the job because we can't afford to pay people to do nothing for four decades just because they worked for two or three decades.

It's like the Social Security problem. Starting out, there were plenty of workers per retiree. You worked your whole life and retired at 65 and died at 66, if you were lucky. Life expectancy in the U.S. was 61 years when Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Social Security into law in 1935.

That was my grandfather's story. He was in the coal mines for half a century and then retired in March and died in November. His biggest break in life was at the end when he got to drink his homemade cherry wine on the porch for one whole summer without having to go into the mines.

There was no red ink. The four dozen workers chipping in to cover his retirement checks for eight months didn't have to borrow the money from China.

But the bus driver on the radio was right. He didn't hold a gun to anyone's head in order to get his deal. Well, at least not as an individual. But have a union boss tell a politician that he has a bloc of votes that can de-rail the politician's gravy train and it's not much different than aiming an AK-47 at his forehead, as we've seen via many a bloated contract in the public sector.

And so we've ended up with no money, unhappy riders, unhappy drivers, pricey beer, a failed transit system and a partially completed and totally unnecessary mass transit tunnel under the Allegheny River



Written by [Ralph R. Reiland](#) on April 4, 2011

that will stretch for a grand total of 1.2 miles and cost half a billion dollars when it's all over.

No nation in the world has ever paid more per mile to move people from a shrinking downtown to watch their subsidized baseball team drop another game.

More globally but just as madly, we're now fighting three mismanaged wars in the Middle East while we're \$14 trillion in the hole (more precisely, \$14,223,405,410,454.55 as I'm writing this sentence), and shooting off missiles at \$700,000 a pop with not one Arab sheik offering to pick up the tab.

The crazy part is that we don't know if the rebels we're helping in Libya are al-Qaida. You'd think we'd know that information, given that we spend an estimated \$50 billion a year in 18 "intelligence" agencies (maybe it's even higher - the spending totals are classified).

"Even after a month of demonstrations in Tunisia had brought about the downfall of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, on January 14th, some White House officials, along with American and Israeli intelligence experts, put the likelihood of a copycat revolution in Egypt at no more than twenty percent," reported Wendell Steavenson in *The New Yorker* on March 14th. "The hundred and twenty-five million dollars' worth of algorithmic computer modeling that American military and intelligence agencies had ordered over the previous three years to forecast global political unrest didn't seem to be of much help, either."

Doesn't anything work anymore?

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