



An ice storm caused a series of blockages for Amtrak. But its handling of the subsequent delays attracted a string of complaints.

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AMTRAK'S ICY DIP

Michael R Weinman explains how unacceptable delays following an ice storm have helped to prompt a shake up at Amtrak

Following a road-weary traverse of one third of the world, from Salzburg, Austria to Los Angeles California, your columnist was about to relate observations of the railways and rail transit systems of five nations, when – as happens, it would seem, all too frequently – a major shakeup transpired in the senior management ranks of Amtrak.

This one, taking place in mid-December, appeared to be a combination of political reaction and the result of new CEO Alexander Kummant recasting the company according to his style and beliefs. Political reaction, in that a number of Amtrak officers have come under criticism and even investigation by a clearly reshaped Congress, with a hair-slim Democratic majority in both houses. Some of the impetus for change stems from an incident in which trains on the newly upgraded Chicago-St Louis line found themselves entrapped in a series of blockages caused by an ice storm. This led to unnecessarily bad delays, and some worse-than-horrible customer sensitivity was displayed, resulting in a call for management blood by Illinois politicians.

Some surprising changes in direction seem to be forecast by these upheavals, which are clearly still making themselves felt. Kummant has expressed considerable support for the national system of long distance trains, as well as for investment towards higher speed regional corridors and has seemingly reversed a disturbing trend. This was the gradual reduction in train size

and capacity, along with storage of sizeable segments of the fleet. As the freight railways learned with considerable pain, it is not possible to save one's way into prosperity. Indeed, growth in turnover is probably the only sound footing for a prosperous future and this is especially so if the strength of one's constituency speaks loudly to political decision makers.

A recent article in an industry newsletter suggested that Amtrak could in fairly short order expand its carryings by almost 50 per cent if it did things smartly – but this, it must be noted, would only raise its share of the travel market from about a third of one per cent to half of 1 per cent – and this down from about one per cent in 1971, when the travel market itself was about a third of its presently robust dimension.

Perhaps a more telling statistic relates to one observation made on the morning I had the privilege of addressing the Railway Interiors Expo in Cologne. While breakfasting overlooking the six track Hohenzollern Bridge – itself heavily trafficked enough to have been noted previously in this column – I noticed at one point there were two double-unit ICE-3 trains and two regional trains on the bridge at once. Nothing unusual as far as Die Bahn was concerned – but a quick calculation showed this to be in excess of three per cent of Amtrak's total fleet stretched out across the Rhine in one fleeting moment!

It was hard to rationalise the overall excellence, operational precision, and quality customer

service experienced in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and the UK, with the 'Yo – get that baggage off the seats!' of the conductor on the airport train after arrival back in Philadelphia (and this to permit two of the three cars to be closed to passengers, but open to crew members, stuffing all of us with our holiday bags and gifts into one very crowded car). Will the most backward country here please stand up?

More observations from afar next month, but a news item from Los Angeles revealed that the Los Angeles port topped 800,000 container 20 foot equivalent units (TEUs) handled in October – and topped 700,000 TEU's for the previous five straight months. And next year, the neighbouring Port of Long Beach may well top Los Angeles' port in activity volume. The rise of containerisation and globalisation are not unknown in Europe – a ride from Hamburg to Berlin on the upgraded double track railway saw one or two container and other freight trains scurrying for almost every passing loop to permit high speed passenger trains to overtake them.

This almost-universal capacity crunch is evidently the reason DB can't get to a clockface hourly, much less half hourly, pattern with its ICE trains in this corridor – even though the traffic would likely support such a radical increase in service.

Another German-American comparison is in the basic similarity of the new Berlin Hauptbahnhof to the old 30th Street Station in Philadelphia. Both have lower-level north-south tracks serving intercity trains and upper level east-west tracks serving suburban trains and even the numbers of tracks are roughly the same. Berlin has a major shopping complex in the station, but it is likely that it also tops Philadelphia in numbers of trains and passengers – perhaps by a factor of five to 10!

As this column was completed, just before the New Year, the goings-on during our visit to the UK included such imponderables as the exorcism of the GNER franchise, and the complete blockage of the WCML due to overhead wires being down in a day-long incident reminiscent of recent Amtrak experience. But a visit to a holiday party sponsored by a section of the Institution of Railway Operators provided the best hope for an optimistic future – for that was a joyous event attended by many young professionals whose faces were not sullied by the wear and tear and aggravation of so many years of solving problems not of our own making.

There is hope for the future of our important and fascinating business.

Michael R Weinman is head of PTSI Transportation USA, a railway management consultancy. He is a former Amtrak officer of New York Central, Penn Central and Amtrak.