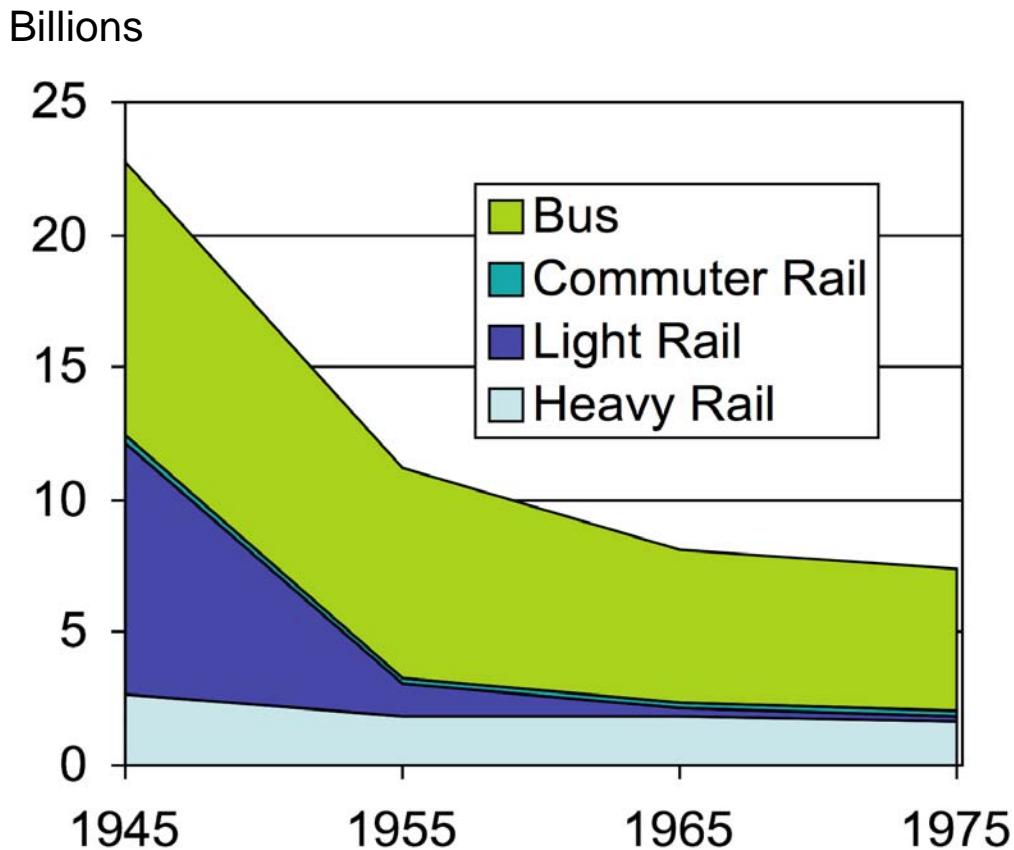


Benefits of the Interstates Undeniable

Amid the celebrations of the 50th anniversary of the Interstate Highway System can be heard the cries of the revisionists: “Freeways promoted sprawl and suburban flight leaving minorities and the poor behind. They condemned public transit systems to decline, thereby transforming a society largely reliant on streetcars and its own two feet for getting around to one dependent on the automobile.” As with all conventional wisdom, there is some truth to these assertions. But...

Suburbanization began in America in the late 19th century before the invention of the automobile, facilitated by streetcars, steam-railroad “suburban” commuter service and interurbans. This pattern is clearly seen in the so-called “railroad towns” in suburban Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, and other large older regions. When given a choice and the means to take advantage of it, many (not all) people have demonstrated a preference for living in the suburbs, and have done so for more than a century.

As indicated in the figure, public transit ridership declined precipitously from its World War II heights long before President Eisenhower signed the Interstates into law, much less before their opening could influence travel behavior.



US Public Transit Ridership, 1945-1975

Pent-up demand for autos coupled with exploding demand for housing by families engaged in “baby booming” fueled suburban growth in the late forties and fifties. While not originally planned to accommodate the resulting increase in suburb-to-city traffic, some Interstates did indeed carry this load. But did they “promote” sprawl? “Enabled” is a better word.

Research shows that in locating a home (or a business) decision-makers first decide on a city or suburban locale, then search for a specific site. While transportation availability is an important part of the second decision, the first appears driven primarily by quality-of-life and affordability concerns (or in the case of business labor and land availability and price). In fact an argument can be made that the Interstates actually slowed the inevitable suburbanization of employment by allowing managers to live in the suburbs and commute to plants remaining in the cities, rather than moving both their homes and businesses out immediately.

Interstates undeniably, some would say gloriously, increased the mobility and lifestyle choices of the American people. Not only could families choose homes in developing suburbs with open space, clean air, good schools, and low crime, taxes and housing prices, but they could connect more freely with a wider variety of activities than any people before. Those who chose (or were forced) to remain in cities also saw great benefits from the Interstates.

American urban and suburban life today without limited-access highways would be very different. More traffic congestion? For sure. Fewer options in terms of accessible jobs and other activities? Absolutely. A weaker economy? Undoubtedly. While those nostalgic for trolley rides might think they prefer such a world, even they must admit that the Interstates serve an essential function. What the Interstates are about is choices and mobility. While traffic congestion, sprawl, and pollution may at times obscure these benefits, there is simply no denying that the Interstates are an essential component of life in 21st century America.

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