

Gil Carmichael: intermodal visionary



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The transportation world shrugged in resignation when President George H.W. Bush named Gilbert E. “Gil” Carmichael as federal railroad administrator in 1989. Unknown in the railroad world, the onetime automobile and newspaper advertising salesman and Republican activist was dismissed as another political hack who had earned a favor from the new president. In his four years at the Federal Railroad Administration, Carmichael was anything but a hack, making a superhuman effort to turn the FRA into a meaningful agency.

Carmichael and the FRA had a structural problem. The agency, created in 1967 along with the Department of Transportation, had little more than rail safety responsibilities. Unlike the Federal Aviation Administration, the Federal Transit Administration or the Maritime Administration, it has no promotional mandate. Carmichael thought his job should include promoting railroads as the industry transitioned from a tightly regulated business to the market-driven industry it is now. He became an unabashed advocate of the rail mode.

Carmichael understood early that rail could make a bigger contribution to the national economy. He told *Railway Age* magazine in 1990, “If this debate is lost and we lose thousands more miles of railroad, then we may have such a huge highway repair job that the economy of this country will be severely damaged.”

His interest in transportation and railroads continued after he left government. Carmichael served on the Amtrak Reform Council and was a founder and first chairman of the Intermodal Transportation Institute

at the University of Denver. (Disclosure: I am on the ITI board). For the past seven years, Carmichael has served as senior board chairman of the nation’s first degree-granting intermodal educational institute. Having turned 80 last June, he now is giving up daily responsibilities and moving up to founding chairman of the ITI.



Gilbert Carmichael

Carmichael saw the coming of intermodalism as the future of freight transportation and came up with the idea of establishing what he calls “a think-and-do tank” at a major university. He turned to a professor he knew at the University of Denver, which embraced the concept and the ITI at a time when the school was expanding its academic footprint.

The ITI’s early years were hard. The institute covered operating expenses, but needed the forbearance of university leadership until student enrollment rose to make required contributions to university overhead.

The institute now is self-sustaining. The ITI started as a full-time program and awarded a master’s in intermodal transportation systems (now intermodal transportation management). Enrollment increased when institute officials refocused the program on mid-career people who already knew what intermodal was.

Students now come to Denver for one week each quarter and do most of their work by distance learning. On-campus work draws faculty from several University of Denver schools as well as visiting faculty from gov-

ernment, industry, labor, other universities and the ITI board. The 50-person board includes executives of railroads, ship lines, consulting firms and companies using intermodal.

Carmichael has been the indomitable force behind the institute. He took emeritus status at an ITI board meeting in Washington early this month. Thomas Finkbinder, who had been chairman, succeeded Carmichael as senior chairman, and Stephen Branscum, group vice president of consumer products at BNSF Railway, became chairman.

Those who know Carmichael appreciate his unceasing efforts to increase understanding and use of intermodal in a society with a deteriorating infrastructure. He misses no opportunity to advocate for a national transportation policy.

In a recent speech, he criticized what he called a lack of strategic thinking on the part of government leaders. He noted that many officials seek stability, which translates into a competition-without-losers mentality. Saying that the DOT “gives intermodal an abstract endorsement,” he called for the department to be reformed, and that everything except for transportation security functions be divided into two basic operating divisions — passenger and freight.

Gil Carmichael may have been unknown in the industry when he joined the FRA, but he’s had an impact. He’s one of the good guys.

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