

TIM RUTTEN

Transit held hostage

IF YOU'VE BEEN having a hard time following the murky political melodramas over the proposed half-cent county sales tax increase to fund more public transportation, you shouldn't blame yourself. You've probably been making the naive citizen's basic mistake of considering the question on its merits. Silly you.

None of this is really about alleviating the ever-worsening traffic that is strangling the region's economic growth and rendering daily life unlivable. Nor is it about whether it's a good idea to raise the most regressive tax government can impose in order to construct an extension of the subway down Wilshire Boulevard from Western Avenue to the sea, or build a light-rail line along Exposition Boulevard to Santa Monica, or start any of the other crucial projects the Metropolitan Transportation Authority proposes to fund with this levy.

No, this whole backroom knife fight is about the things that really count in our dysfunctional local politics: outdated but reflexive geographic animosities — Eastside versus Westside, San Gabriel Valley versus city of L.A. — and petty personal feuds between and among politicians.

The animosity starts on the county Board of Supervisors. Despite the fact that the MTA board decisively voted to attach a specific set of projects — such as the subway to the sea — to the ballot proposition authorizing the sales tax hike, Eastside and San Gabriel Valley lawmakers, notably Supervisors Mike Antonovich and Gloria Molina and a raft of small-city mayors, still are waging a guerrilla war on behalf of their pet projects. They're opposing the tax measure, rallying under the banner of equity, but is there any justice in their case?

Antonovich and Molina have found a novel way of framing the issue, arguing that transit dollars ought to be allocated on a roughly per capita basis rather than to specific projects. It's a superficially appealing idea, but they also want to exclude from that calculation the billions of dollars that already have been spent to improve the movement of goods — and not incidentally relieve surface street congestion — out of the ports of Long Beach and Los Angeles, along the Alameda Corridor and its feeder rail lines, and through the San Gabriel Valley.

Beyond that, although public transportation is inadequate everywhere in Southern California, it's less inadequate on the Eastside and in the San Gabriel Valley than elsewhere, because the region already has the Gold Line and its Eastside extension, Amtrak service, the El Monte Busway and regular bus lines. The region also happens to have three east-west freeways and two-and-a-half running north-south. The Westside has bus service and two freeways, the 10 and the 405.

From there, things get personal. Molina has nourished a transit grudge against Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky, who represents the Westside, since 1998, when he pushed through Proposition A, a ballot measure that halted sales tax funding of the subway. Molina wanted an Eastside extension of the underground system and opposed Proposition A, though her district approved it by nearly 2 to 1. (Paradoxically, the Eastside ended up a winner; it got the extension of the Gold Line light-rail instead of a subway, which meant more transit for less money.)

Why Antonovich and Molina (and Supervisor Don Knabe) voted to put the sales tax proposal on the November ballot but to oppose it may seem mystifying — but no more so than what's happening in Sacramento.

There, the Legislature needs to pass Westside Assemblyman Mike Feuer's bill raising the limit on L.A.'s sales tax or it won't matter what the voters decide in November. One of the things holding that measure up is an intramural Eastside feud between state Sen. Gil Cedillo and Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa. The two went to Roosevelt High together, then on to UCLA and the People's College of Law and into jobs with organized labor before entering politics. Somewhere along the line, they fell out. Villaraigosa is the subway to the sea's biggest cheerleader, so Cedillo is demanding that the bill also include money earmarked for his pet project, the extension of the 710 Freeway through South Pasadena. There's also bad blood between Molina and another Eastside lawmaker, state Sen. Gloria Romero, so they're competing to force the addition of funding to extend the Gold Line to the city of Whittier.

What makes all this sweaty infighting particularly grating is that early polling shows that, despite the economy, if the half-cent sales tax increase were on the ballot tomorrow, more than 70% of the county's voters would approve it. That won't matter if Sacramento passes a bill laden with earmarks the MTA board hasn't approved, because that would trigger a "poison pill" provision that kills the whole proposition.

So, \$40 billion in vital infrastructure investment and the people's good sense are being held hostage by a handful of pols' brain-dead rancor.

Welcome to L.A.

timothy.rutten@latimes.com

Conduct a little unbecoming

By Etgar Keret

A FEW WEEKS AGO, I SAW a short news interview of a man who killed his wife with a kitchen knife. "Are you sorry for what you did?" the interviewer asked, and the murderer shrugged and said, "A little." His answer was only two short words, but they contained a ton of subtext. As if the murderer had said, "OK, I accept the fact that slaughtering my wife in front of my kids wasn't really right, but to handcuff me for it, to take me to court and send a TV crew? Don't you think you're overdoing it a little?"

An Israeli military court last week held a hearing about an incident captured on videotape that allegedly shows a regiment commander holding a bound, blindfolded Palestinian man, arrested at a demonstration, while a soldier shoots a rubber bullet at his leg. There is some disagreement be-

Shooting at a bound person isn't serious, Israel's army said.

tween the soldier and the officer as to whether the soldier was ordered to do so. The two were indicted on the charge of conduct unbecoming to members of the Israeli army. The prosecution apparently is not even seeking any prison time, and some reports say that a plea bargain is likely.

There are many charges that could be brought against soldiers and commanders who fire at a handcuffed detainee, and the army's choice of conduct unbecoming carries the same tone as the statement made by the man who murdered his wife: We don't think it's really right to shoot at a handcuffed detainee who poses no

threat. But, guys, let's keep things in perspective. The bullet was rubber, not steel; the kid didn't die, he was just wounded; and let's not forget that we're talking here about a pain-in-the-neck demonstrator and not someone strolling innocently along the beach promenade eating ice cream.

Years ago, when I was still in high school, my older brother was brought up on the charge of conduct unbecoming to a soldier in Israel. During one of his guard-duty shifts, out of boredom, he decorated the antenna he was guarding with huge cardboard wings and a sharp-featured face, turning it into a totem pole. His commander, who showed up for a surprise inspection, claimed that he found my brother worshipping the antenna.

Because there is no way the Israeli Defense Forces can prosecute a soldier for paganism, my brother was charged with conduct unbecoming and found guilty. Unlike the soldier and officer who were involved in a

shooting, my brother actually did find himself in the brig for 30 days.

In retrospect, there is no doubt that it would have been better for my brother to relieve his boredom by shooting bound detainees. Because shooting bound detainees is not only more exciting and entertaining, it is also — so it turns out — a much less serious offense. After all, although both acts are conduct unbecoming, there is some kind of scale, and the IDF system of punishment testifies to it: Tying huge cardboard wings to an antenna is conduct unbecoming, but shooting at a bound person is also conduct unbecoming, but *less* so. Or, to use the language of the man who killed his wife, "Conduct a little unbecoming for a soldier in the IDF."

ETGAR KERET is the author of, most recently, "The Girl on the Fridge and Other Stories." This essay was translated from Hebrew by Sondra Silverston.

NATIONAL SECURITY



Our own worst bioenemy

By Wendy Orent

WHATEVER you can say about the Soviet bio-weapons scientists," a Bush administration official once told me, "they never killed anyone."

We can't say the same about our bio-weapons scientists. Someone, most likely Bruce Ivins, at the U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases at Ft. Detrick, Md., turned powdered anthrax spores into a deadly weapon. It's ironic that the Soviet scientists were making offensive weapons. Our people, since 1969, have worked strictly to defend us.

One of those defenders killed five people, sickened 17 others and plunged the nation into hysteria for weeks in the fall of 2001. After a seven-year investigation by the FBI, the source of the deadly anthrax strain has been identified — our own bio-defense program at Ft. Detrick. That is the real legacy of the FBI investigation.

Since the anthrax-laced letters were mailed in September and October of 2001, U.S. bio-defense has blown up out of all proportion to any rational assessment of the bio-weapons threat. Earlier this year, an article in the journal *Biosecurity and Bioterrorism*, analyzing government bio-defense spending from 2001 to 2008, stated that \$49.66 bil-

lion has been allocated for civilian bio-defense. According to microbiologist and longtime bio-defense critic Richard Ebright of Rutgers University, actual spending is even higher, amounting to \$57 billion.

In 2005, he and 757 other microbiologists sent a stinging open letter to Elias Zerhouni, director of the National Institutes of Health, protesting the government's preoccupation with "priority pathogens" — germs such as anthrax that could be used in a bio-weapons attack. But Zerhouni and Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, would have none of it. In a letter published in the journal *Science*, they disagreed: "The United States has experienced an anthrax attack, and security experts repeatedly express concern that future attacks with biological weapons are likely, if not inevitable."

But we didn't actually experience an anthrax attack. The whole incident amounted to a snake eating its own tail. No ingenious bio-warrior from Al Qaeda sent the lethal envelopes through the U.S. postal system. An American scientist did. The FBI and its genetic analyses leave no doubt: Though 16 laboratories had access to the "Ames strain" of anthrax used in the letters, only the samples that came from Ivins' laboratory at Ft. Detrick matched the genetic

fingerprint of the attack strain.

In the sorry aftermath of the anthrax investigation, it's clear that the National Institutes of Health and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have to rethink the priority-pathogens list, which includes anthrax, smallpox, plague, tularemia, Ebola and other germs that rarely, if ever, threaten American lives. It's the "non-defense-related" germs that are killing us. Randall Wolcott of the Southwest Regional Wound Care Center points out that 500,000 Americans a year die of biofilm infections — such as diabetic ulcers — that are almost impossible to treat by conventional means. That's almost twice as many as die of cancer.

ACCORDING TO the CDC, infections caused by methicillin-sensitive *Staphylococcus aureus*, or MRSA, kill 19,000 people a year. Still, staph itself isn't considered a priority pathogen, despite the emergence of highly resistant and increasingly virulent strains. Only one of 40 staph toxins is on the priority list.

There's another problem created by the priority-pathogens list. The ballooning of the bio-defense program, according to Ebright, means that about 14,000 individuals are now considered qualified to

work with priority pathogens.

It hasn't always been easy to find qualified people for this research. In the days when the FBI was pursuing former "person of interest" — and now exonerated — Steven J. Hatfill, one senior government scientist said of Hatfill's background, "You take what you can get — not many people with his abilities show up very often." So where do 14,000 suddenly qualified bio-defense experts come from? And how can they be vetted? As bio-defense expert Leonard Cole, author of "The Anthrax Letters," told me: "There are 15,000 to 16,000 people now working in labs on select agents — that's many more possibilities of another bizarre individual doing illicit work."

The lesson of the anthrax letters isn't that we're in danger of a bio-weapons attack from terrorists. It's that U.S. bio-defense itself has become a threat. We have met the enemy — and it is us.

The next administration should pull the plug on the bio-defense excesses of the Bush administration and put most of the thousands of microbiologists to work on the germs we really need to worry about.

WENDY ORENT is the author of "Plague: The Mysterious Past and Terrifying Future of the World's Most Dangerous Disease."

The Pandora's box of sovereignty

By Thomas Meaney and Harris Mylonas

FOR THE COOLEST composure while going to war, the gold medal goes to Vladimir Putin. The Russian prime minister maintained his characteristic calm during Friday's Olympic opening ceremony in Beijing — giving a firm salute to the Russian athletes marching by — while he arranged for another kind of march into the disputed territory of South Ossetia. It's clear that Putin considers this payback time, not only for Georgia, Russia's meddlesome neighbor to the south, but for President Bush.

In February, Bush and most European leaders backed the independence of Kosovo from Serbia, which Putin vociferously opposed. Don't worry, assured U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, saying, "Kosovo cannot be seen as precedent for any other situation in the world today." But precedent is exactly what it set. Just as the West wanted to shield Kosovo from Serbian domination, so Putin hopes to free South Ossetia and Abkhazia from Georgian interference and keep them in the Russian orbit of influence. Thus far, he has succeeded by rolling out tanks while the West has

paid only lip service to the territorial integrity of Georgia.

If the United States wishes to avoid carnage like this in the future, we need to be more consistent about how we treat fledgling independence movements. Beyond Kosovo and South Ossetia, why do we encourage the independence of the southern Sudanese but condemn the uprisings of the Kurds in eastern Turkey? Why do we speak up for the Tibetans in China but tune out the Basques in Spain?

Like every great power, the U.S. favors self-determination movements that destabilize its competitors — Russia, China, Iran — and opposes (or ignores) ones that might upset our allies. That's the code of realism in foreign policy. But it's also a Pandora's box. If America opts not to respect the principle of national sovereignty, it discourages other world powers from doing so and undermines state sovereignty the world over.

In order to prolong its global influence and enhance the legitimacy of international institutions, the United States should send a clear message that partition is rarely an answer.

We must encourage world leaders to make their ethnic minorities equal partners in government, rather than backing rebels who would carve out states within states like a succession

'When minorities see independence on the horizon, their incentives for peaceful coexistence rapidly diminish.'

of Russian dolls. In the long run, America's current inconsistency jeopardizes the possibility of ethnic pluralism becoming a universal ideal and a workable solution for multiethnic societies. When minorities see independence on the horizon, their incentives for peaceful coexistence rapidly diminish.

Because our nation was founded on the principle of self-determination, we are understandably uncomfortable depriving others of that right. But American independence was based on a doctrine of individual rights, whereas the vast majority of self-determination movements today are based on ethnic group rights. Peoples as different as the Kurds and the Tibetans have made repeated appeals for self-governance in the last decade, but the urgency of their calls relies less on any liberal principle than on the

sheer fact of their ethnic preponderance in a region and the violence they have endured.

So what do we do when ethnic minorities such as the South Ossetians, Abkhazians, Kurds, Bosnian Muslims, Kosovo Albanians or Palestinians are forcefully repressed by their host states? The world community has an obligation to protect them, of course. But backing self-determination movements and partitioning existing states is almost never the best policy. Rather, it should be considered an option only when the terms are acceptable to all parties involved.

History shows that host governments — China, India, Serbia and Sudan, for instance — are more likely to crack down on ethnic minorities when an internationally backed movement for a new state emerges within their borders. Partitions have typically produced more violence, caused more interstate conflict and spurred more self-determination movements. Our best bet, therefore, is to work with the borders we have, not the borders we want.

THOMAS MEANEY is a doctoral candidate in history at Columbia University. HARRIS MYLONAS is a doctoral candidate in political science at Yale University.