

Railing Over Oil **by Dan Jacoby**

There's an old saying about the weather – everybody complains about it but nobody can do anything about it. As the price of crude oil breaks even inflation-adjusted records, people act as if the price of oil is like the weather. This incredibly stupid attitude may be why the price of oil is breaking records.

Lots of people are at least talking about “alternate energy sources,” such as solar, wind, hydro and, once in a blue moon, geothermal. These clean, renewable energy sources should be tapped, but they will only produce a small percentage of what we need. Biofuels, such as corn-based ethanol, are proving to be far less “clean” than previously believed, and come with far greater costs in both money and other natural resources such as water. Nuclear power, despite the fact that it could actually provide nearly all of our electricity and produces almost no greenhouse gases, has other problems we need not go into here.

America, particularly a few western states, has been called the “Saudi Arabia of coal,” referring to the fact that our proven coal supply is enormous. Of course, getting that coal out of the ground is a filthy mess and produces huge amounts of toxic byproducts. Burning that coal is no real substitute for oil, since it produces just as many greenhouse gases, if not more.

The real solution lies in becoming more energy efficient.

Our homes and offices are incredibly wasteful. In most cases, a few simple and inexpensive fixes can save a great deal of energy – and money. Sealing holes around pipes and wires, fixing leaks, and exchanging old water heaters, boilers, shower and faucet heads and toilets for new ones can pay for themselves in as little as a few months. Replacing incandescent light bulbs with compact fluorescents (and soon, LEDs) can save \$50 or more over the life of each new bulb.

Many office buildings constructed in the last thirty years have centralized air conditioning systems. The result of this remarkably inefficient system is not only tremendous waste of electricity but also discomfort among employees forced to sit in cold offices in light summer clothes. Decentralizing air conditioning systems not only makes workers more comfortable, but also saves money, and lowers demand for electricity at peak times, when our most inefficient, polluting power plants are brought online.

Not long ago, a study was released showing that the average New York City resident produced about 1/3 of the greenhouse gases produced by Americans outside of the city. At first, many believed that this was due to the apartment buildings New Yorkers live in, but that has turned out to be untrue. The real energy savings among New Yorkers is due to mass utilization of mass transit. New Yorkers don't drive many cars; New Yorkers take the bus or the train.

At the 1939 World's Fair (in New York City!), the most popular exhibit was the Futurama exhibit designed by Norman Bel Geddes for General Motors. This exhibit was part of what ended up as a thirty-year lobbying effort led by GM to build a network of superhighways across the country. They finally succeeded in 1956, when three U.S. Senators (including former Vice President Al Gore's father, Al Gore, Sr.) figured out a way to pay for construction and maintenance.

If, instead of building the Interstate Highway System, we had invested in a nationwide rail network, American demand for oil would be much lower. The 1973 Arab oil embargo would never have happened, since American demand for Arab oil would have been nearly, if not completely, nonexistent at the time. The kidnappings of Americans and other westerners during the Reagan administration probably would not have happened, as our policy toward the Middle East would not be based on our demand for oil.

And American soldiers would probably not be dying in Iraq now.

Over the course of the last two centuries, much of America's foreign policy has been run by corporate interests. We started a war with Britain in 1812, invaded Mexico in the 1830s and 40s, and sent armed forces throughout the Caribbean, all over Central and South America, and to the Mediterranean Sea, Samoa (now "American Samoa"), Hawaii, China, and Korea. All of these military actions were for the benefit of some narrow business interest; most of them had nothing to do with our security.

It should come as no surprise, therefore, that much of our post-WWII foreign and military policy (often one and the same) has been for the benefit of American oil companies.

As a central part of a movement toward energy independence, America needs a national effort to create a nationwide rail network. Actually, we need two linked networks, one for passengers and one for cargo. As part of this effort, we need to electrify cargo rail lines; currently they are all diesel-based. By electrifying a cargo rail network, and thereby making it much more efficient, we will save energy on each train. In addition, we can run more cargo trains through tunnels, since the second train doesn't have to wait for the heat and smoke from the first train to be vented before entering the tunnel.

A linked, fully electrified passenger and cargo rail network will take hundreds of thousands, and eventually millions, of cars and trucks off our highways. In the long run, in addition to the energy savings, there may be true cost savings as well, since America will not be spending billions of dollars a year purchasing foreign oil.

The combined effect of a comprehensive effort at energy efficiency will have many significant effects. We will:

- Save money by using less energy;
- Lower our trade deficit by importing less oil;
- Reduce production of greenhouse gases; and
- Increase national security by making America energy independent.

What's holding things up? The oil companies, for one thing. They clearly do not want us to use less oil, since that would be lower profits. The "military-industrial complex" is in the way as well, since greater security at home means less military spending, and the people in charge of the military and their defense contractor friends don't want that.

It will take an enormous effort to overcome these extremely wealthy, extremely powerful special interests. But the effort will certainly be worth it.