# Addicted To Oil
## by Dan Jacoby

In his 2006 State of the Union address, George W. Bush said, “America is addicted to oil.” Actually, we are addicted to all the fossil fuels – oil, natural gas and coal. Our addiction is growing worse, and we are doing the kinds of things addicts do when supplies are short – we get violent. In a Denver speech on May 2, Republican presidential candidate John McCain said, “I will have an energy policy … which will eliminate our dependence on oil from the Middle East that will prevent us from having ever to send our young men and women into conflict again in the Middle East.” Later, in trying to say that our 2003 invasion and long-term occupation of Iraq is not about oil, he claimed that the “first Gulf War” was. Even if you believe McCain’s attempt to explain his prepared remark, we are clearly killing tens of thousands of people over oil.

The problems stemming from an oil shortage in America date back 35 years, to the post-Yom Kippur war Arab oil embargo. Since then, we’ve had problems with oil price spikes and worse – terrorists kidnapping and killing Americans. If, indeed, the Gulf War was about oil, as John McCain claims, then our addiction is also the primary reason for the 9/11 attacks that cost 3,000 American lives.

Our addiction is killing us. Incredibly, the Bush administration’s only “solution” to our addiction is to drill for more oil. This is akin to telling a heroin addict that the solution is to take more heroin.

In addition to the increasing American violence over oil, there are problems with other fossil fuels.

According to the Central Intelligence Agency, in 2005, the United States imported almost one-fifth of the natural gas we used[1]. All indications are that this percentage will only increase, as consumption is up and production is not rising to meet increased demand.

Then there’s coal. Despite industry claims of “clean coal” and “carbon sequestration,” there is no such thing as clean coal and there are no carbon sequestration plants either in operation or even close to coming online. While switching from oil and natural gas to coal as an energy source could be sold as a short-term national security issue, a full examination of the big picture says otherwise. Switching from oil and natural gas to coal would mean lower imports, less dependence on unfriendly countries, and lower prices for fossil fuels. But there are two detrimental side effects.

The first side effect is well known. Pollution would increase dramatically, since burning coal produces far more dangerous gases and tiny particles that can lead to asthma, bronchitis, and other respiratory illnesses. Even the claims of “clean coal” don’t stand up to examination, since such “clean coal” is still far dirtier than oil and natural gas. In addition coal mining releases huge amounts of toxic mercury into our land and water. The list of diseases that this causes, both directly and indirectly, is far too long to list.

The second side effect is also well known, although some special interest groups are trying desperately to pretend that it isn’t all that bad. The greenhouse gases released when fossil fuels are mined and burned are creating a long-term climate change problem that could soon be disastrous for civilization, and even for human life. Switching from oil and natural gas to coal merely exacerbates our foreign policy problem regarding climate change, as the United States would look even more hypocritical than we have been during the Bush administration.

In short, there is no solution to our addiction to oil that involves fossil fuels.

Unfortunately, the only alternatives being offered by most politicians, and discussed in most major media outlets, involves nothing more than increased use of what are termed “alternate energy sources.” The debate over corn-based ethanol is the largest example.

Thanks to intense, long-term lobbying by representatives of large-scale corn growers and processors such as Archer Daniels Midland, Congress passed a law requiring significantly increased production and use of corn-based ethanol. The result has been a short-term boon to corporate grain producers as prices have risen, but also enormous inflation of food prices at home and rising food shortages around the world.

Meanwhile, all this corn-based ethanol production has not lowered our consumption of oil. The problem is that the amount of oil it takes to grow corn, process it into ethanol, and ship it to distribution centers is greater than the oil saved by burning the ethanol in our cars. In other words, for every mile a car runs on ethanol it takes more than a mile’s worth of oil.

While we are burning more oil, paying more for food, and not solving our problem, the chatter still revolves around other ethanol sources. Cellulose-based ethanol is being touted as an alternative, but we are still far from being able to produce it on anything approaching a commercial scale or at commercially competitive prices. There is also a potential side effect; ethanol production may actually increase global warming as the land used to grow the grain or other ethanol sources is converted from uses that are far more effective in reducing greenhouse gases[2].

Other alternative energy sources, such as hydroelectric plants, wind turbines, solar cells, and geothermal heat exchange systems, are also occasionally mentioned. Investing in these technologies, and research and development to make these technologies more efficient, are good things; the more we use clean, renewable energy sources, the less we use fossil fuels. The problem here is that clean, renewable energy sources can produce only a small percentage of the energy we use.

Some people are touting nuclear power as a solution. Nuclear power is readily available, the technology is mature, and it doesn’t contribute significantly to global warming. Of course, there is the problem of what to do with the nuclear waste – the Democratic presidential candidates had a lot of trouble dancing around this question while campaigning in Nevada, where the proposed dumping ground for nuclear waste lies. While some concerns surrounding both the safety of nuclear power plants and disposal of nuclear waste are higher than necessary, the fact remains that these are problems we haven’t dealt with, and cannot deal with easily.

The real answer, while we look for better ways to produce usable energy, is to use less energy now. Lower energy use can be accomplished partly by reducing waste, and mostly by increasing energy efficiency. Unfortunately, few politicians are talking about this essential ingredient of a comprehensive energy policy. Fortunately, many ways of reducing energy use, without giving up our current standard of living, are both easily available and easily implemented.

Cities and states can require that all new buildings, whether homes, offices or factories, be designed to greater standards of energy efficiency. The savings generated by lower energy use will more than pay for any increased initial cost. In addition, the lower costs can mean keeping manufacturing in the United States, rather than sending the work, and the jobs, overseas.

One example of how this has been accomplished is the Texas Instruments wafer fabrication plant that was built near Dallas in 2006. Rather than build the plant in China or the Philippines, the company approved an energy-efficient design that allowed them to keep the new plant near their corporate headquarters. This not only saved them money and lowered energy use, but also kept about 1,000 jobs in the United States.

Focusing on new buildings is only a small part of the solution; the overwhelming majority of current buildings will still be here generations from now. We need to make these current buildings more energy efficient. Fortunately, that isn't difficult. Many buildings have holes in their walls and leaky water pipes that can be plugged easily. Many buildings also have outdated electrical systems, wiring, appliances and fixtures that can be easily and inexpensively replaced, and tax incentives can be made available (and are available in many cases) to encourage replacement.

In addition, steps can be taken to require more efficient energy use. One example is a bill sitting in the New York City Council that would prohibit businesses from keeping their doors open while the air conditioner is running. It is common practice for storefront businesses to keep their doors open during the hottest summer days in the hope that passersby who feel the cold air as they walk in front of the store will choose to enter the store and buy something. It is an enormous waste of energy. What's worse, the energy is wasted during times of peak demand, when the least efficient and most polluting power plants are in operation.

The real barrier to becoming more energy efficient is that our elected representatives, for the most part, aren't doing anything to push this solution. They seem to find it easier to talk about developing different energy sources than to present real solutions that can be implemented now, create jobs, save consumers as well as home and business owners money, and reduce our addiction to oil.

It is passing strange that politicians don't understand this. One would think that politicians would jump all over the easiest and cheapest solution to a problem, especially if it is also the best short-term solution as well. It makes one wonder if it is politicians, not the American people, who are addicted to oil.



[1] https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/print/us.html

[2] "Use of US croplands for Biofuels Increases Greenhouse Gases Through Emissions for Land Use or Change" published in *Science Express*, February 7, 2008. Abstract available online at: http://www.sciencemag.org/cgi/content/abstract/1151861