

Presidential Climate Action Project:

Climate, Energy, and Security [draft: 4.6.07]

A central truth is dawning on serious U.S. policy makers: climate change is a national security issue. For all but a few, it has taken years for this truth to become self-evident. This is principally so because conventional wisdom has always place environmental concerns in a category characterized by quality of life and aesthetic considerations. And national security was considered almost exclusively a military concern. No longer. Today a number of our nation's most senior military officials are acknowledging that carbon emissions, oil consumption and oil dependence, and military deployments and wars are all interrelated.

In April 2007, a collection of retired senior military officers issued a report that concluded: "Climate change can act as a threat multiplier for instability in some of the most volatile regions of the world." They added that, "The increasing risks from climate change should be addressed now because they will almost certainly get worse if we delay." Their concerns extended across the board. Droughts, crop failures and tropical disease epidemics caused by global warming could destabilize already fragile governments in Asia, Latin America and especially Africa, creating the kinds of "failed states" that harbor Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups. Sea-level rise could scatter refugees by the millions from low-lying countries like Bangladesh and Vietnam, putting stress on both them and their neighbors.

America's consciousness regarding its security is widening. Post-Cold War events now help us understand that the most powerful military in world history cannot

guarantee our security, that we cannot achieve it alone, and that we are members of a global commons. If the commons is threatened, especially by a changing climate, then we are insecure and our security requires cooperation with others.

The further truth is that our oil consumption and dependence on foreign supplies cannot be separated from our climate concerns nor from our foreign and security policies. The United States cannot be secure, nor can it contribute to climate stabilization, if it continues to be dependent on unstable supplies of foreign oil. Oil is now the centerpiece of America's foreign policy, economic policy, defense policy, environmental policy, and energy policy. These major national policy concerns must be liberated from oil dependency if the United States is to address climate change and restore its credibility, moral authority, and integrity in the world.

An extensive poll of American public opinion recently concluded that: "...62% believe that America's moral authority has declined since 2001. A remarkable 93% believe that declining moral authority is a serious challenge to U.S. national security...." (Martilla Communications Group, May 2007)

Total independence from international oil supplies is not a realistic national objective. The United States imports over sixty percent of the oil it consumes from abroad. Some authoritative estimates place that number nearer seventy percent within the next twenty years. A number of major suppliers, such as Mexico and Canada, are stable and predictable. Others, such as Venezuela and Russia, are less dependable and use their oil supplies for political leverage. Our most dangerous dependency is inextricably linked to the Persian Gulf.

Much has been made of our addiction to oil. But the consequences of that addiction have not been sufficiently understood. The addict's behavior is characterized by this: abandonment of principle. Standards of conduct, sober practices, and noble ideals are cast aside under the relentless and demonic urges of addiction. This is true of nations as well as individuals. Our founding principle is that we are a democratic republic. Yet, under the relentless thirst for oil, we are engaged in conduct more characteristic of an empire, and thus we are threatened with sacrifice of our national character.

For almost five years the United States has been embroiled in its second Gulf war. Despite extreme reluctance on the part of our leaders to be candid, few American citizens, and virtually no world citizens, believe oil has nothing to do with two Gulf wars in a decade. The Persian Gulf is the most unstable region of the world. Every diplomatic effort must be made to bring peace to this troubled region, and the good offices of our allies must be sought in this effort. Despite maximum attention and engagement, however, stable governments and stable relations will remain a difficult objective for the United States to achieve. But they will be impossible for us to achieve so long as our every motive is made suspect by our unquenchable thirst for oil.

Therefore, America's security requires that we become sufficiently independent of that portion of our imported oil that comes from the Persian Gulf so that, if our access to it is denied, we are not forced to engage in war to obtain it. Security is not achievable under the conditions of dependency. Dependency, in this case on the oil supplies of others, guarantees vulnerability and it contributes substantially to the downward spiral of our contribution to climate change.

So long as the economy of the United States is held hostage by foreign oil producers, America will remain vulnerable to price rises, interruption of oil supplies by terrorists, overthrow of producing governments, and regional unrest, instability, and conflict. Oil imports are the leading factor in our massive and growing trade deficits. Some of the money we send to oil producers finds its way into the hands of terrorists. We are thus helping finance our own destruction both in terms of terrorism and destruction of the climate of the global commons. Our dependence on Persian Gulf producers for their oil supplies makes us hostage to their political instability.

The U.S. economy, including our massive trade imbalances, national debts, and inflation rates, is mortgaged to foreign oil producers. U.S. foreign policy, requiring support for undemocratic regimes, repressive societies, and rigid oligarchies, is hostage to their petroleum power. U.S. military forces, the most expensive in world history, are disproportionately dedicated to guaranteeing oil supplies for ourselves primarily but also the rest of the oil consuming world. And, all the while, our energy consumption patterns are a major factor in a warming climate.

Because of our oil dependency, we are the Gulliver of the 21st century, a massive giant tied down by oil oligarchies. Worst of all, the world sees us as a gigantic national hypocrite. We overthrow Saddam Hussein, or so we were told, to bring democracy to Iraq. Yet we support, largely in unseen, covert ways, oil producing oligarchies, distinctly anything but democracy. So our proclaimed crusade to bring democracy to the Middle East and the Arab world is severely compromised. Meantime, we continue to refuse to join international efforts to reverse global warming.

Thus, at the center of America's 21st century search for security is independence from Persian Gulf oil supplies. This dramatic national undertaking will restore the credibility and good faith of the United States and enable us to behave in accordance with the principles our Constitution demands that we adhere to.

To believe that military intervention is the key to security is to badly miss the point. Were we to become sufficiently independent of Persian Gulf oil that our economy could flourish without it, we would liberate our foreign and defense policies, contribute substantially to solving climate change, make our livelihood more secure, liberate resources for education and health, and dramatically increase our sense of genuine security.

Not incidentally, we would also save the lives of future generations of our sons and daughters and thus bequeath greater security for future generations.

America's security requires two major steps: dramatic changes in our energy consumption patterns, and dramatic reductions in carbon emissions. [reference here to the specific recommendations contained in the report]

Climate change cannot be stopped and reversed, the economy of the United States fully transformed, and American security reclaimed without a planned commitment to become sufficiently independent of vulnerable foreign oil supplies so that their probable, possibly inevitable, interruption does not cause major economic dislocation or require American military forces to sacrifice themselves in large numbers to recapture those supplies.

Our national goal does not have to be zero imports or absolute independence from foreign oil supplies. Our goal should be to achieve, as quickly as possible, a sufficient

degree of independence from foreign supplies that interruption of those supplies does not require us to go to war. Additional steps must be taken. There is tremendous waste in United States energy consumption. Most of this waste occurs in the transportation sector and most of this sector's waste is represented by the automobile. We drive wasteful vehicles. Everyone knows, but too few wish to acknowledge, that fuel efficiency improvements in passenger vehicles would save massive amounts of energy—and money. The issue is not one of knowledge; the issue is one of political will of the society and the personal will of individual citizens.

It is repeatedly said these days in the American public square: We need an energy policy. But we already have an energy policy, and it is this: *We will continue to rely on imported oil from the Persian Gulf to fuel inefficient vehicles, and if it is cut off we will sacrifice the lives of our sons and daughters to get that oil.*

In Gulf War I, we sent Secretary of State James Baker around the world collecting money from Japan and Europe to help finance U.S. military operations. There were no presidential acknowledgments of this practice to the American people, quite probably because it marked the first time in American history that we had made the U.S. Army a mercenary army—asking other nations to pay for *our* troops to secure *their* oil supplies.

In Gulf War II, we were told that Iraqi oil production would finance post-war Iraq's reconstruction. We were misled. And so the American people, to the tune of a projected half-trillion tax dollars, are financing this reconstruction. Thus, we are double losers—no oil for them and no oil for us. Before the war, Iraq was one of the top four oil producers in the world.

Foreign policy “realists” and neoconservative “idealists” both acknowledge the same reality: if we are going to continue to rely on Persian Gulf oil we must have the ability to go to war if it is cut off. And going to war is much easier if there are substantial forward bases near the critical supply points. Thus, the bulk of our military might is devoted to the protection of unstable oil supplies. One might simply say this is reality, except for this fact: no political leader has had the courage to say this clearly and directly to the American people.

This unpleasant scenario is finally becoming obvious: we depend on Persian Gulf oil; we increase our military power and project it into the region to guarantee the supplies of that oil; our search for military bases in the region causes us to engage in preventive war; our invasion is met with local resistance; we remain as an occupying force to quell the insurgent resistance; our presence guarantees the insurgency will continue; the insurgency itself becomes fuel for radical jihadists; the jihadists use our “crusader” presence as grounds for attacks on American.

The president and most members of Congress do not want to tell their constituents that they pay a penalty if they do not buy and drive smaller, lighter, cleaner, and more efficient vehicles. If they had the courage to do so, we could begin immediately to reverse our energy insecurity. The most effective way to demonstrate this courage would be to admit this central fact: our energy policy of lives for oil is unnecessary and, even worse, is massively immoral

We have made a bargain with the devil. And the bargain is compounded by the immediate threat it represents to the global ecosystem.

This statement of our policy will seem harsh to many Americans, but it is nevertheless true. Though our officials refuse to admit it, our two wars in the Persian Gulf have had a very great deal to do with our dependence on foreign oil supplies. Despite our refusal to acknowledge this policy, the rest of the world knows it. So, if anyone is being fooled by our current policy, it is the American people.

Where the conduct of nations is concerned the historian Barbara Tuchman defined folly as the conscious pursuit of a flawed policy knowing that a more plausible alternative exists. There are more plausible alternatives than oil dependence and climate change.

A domestic plan for energy security based on reduction of dependence on unstable foreign oil supplies, conservation, energy efficient transportation including fuel efficiency standards and hybrid cars, development of alternative and renewable resources, sulfur-free coal gasification (using integrated, combined-cycle technologies), acceleration of hydrogen technologies, and other readily available steps, together with an internationally sanctioned plan for protecting Persian Gulf exports, whether a Zone of International Interest or Persian Gulf Treaty Alliance, would restore a much greater degree of security to the United States economy and relieve the U.S. of continuing to be the default guarantor of the security of Persian Gulf oil supplies.

This central fact remains: So long as the United States relies on unstable oil supplies to the degree its economic well-being is held hostage, so long will we not be secure.

In the second half of the 20th century, throughout the Cold War, security meant containing Soviet communism in Eastern Europe and deterring the Soviets from using

nuclear weapons. Today, a revolutionary 21st century world requires us to redefine what we mean by security.

Security in the 21st century must include protection of the world's climate, security of livelihood and economic opportunity, security of our environment and our health, security of our communities from violence and our borders from intrusion, and, most of all, security of energy and energy independence. We require the shield of our standing military forces and the security of our borders. But we also require the security of the cloak that protects our livelihood, our environment, the stability of our communities, and the security of clean energy sources sufficient to provide a sound economy.

Beyond the liberation of our economy, our foreign policy, and our military, achieving energy security from Persian Gulf dependency would liberate our principles. We would once again stand for traditional American principles, constitutional ideals, liberal democracy, and nobler goals than we are at liberty to claim for ourselves today. The widely-perceived hypocrisy of our motives in the Persian Gulf, and elsewhere, would largely be eliminated. As we have at the greatest periods in our history, we could rise above the cynical need to say one thing and do another.

“We go not abroad seeking demons to destroy,” stated Secretary of State, and future president, John Quincy Adams on July 4th, 1823. We are abroad now seeking to destroy the demons that threaten to insert themselves between Persian Gulf oil supplies and us. And we are doing so without the support of the international community of nations. Years will be required to repair the damage to our traditional alliances and

coalitions. Perhaps even more years will be required to convince the world that we act openly and honorably and not always solely in our own selfish interests.

In demonstrable ways, this task is as great as, if not greater than, the tasks we faced in cooperatively defeating imperialism in World War I, fascism in World War II, and communism in the Cold War. Where energy security is concerned, the enemy is not jihadism. It is our own wasteful and unnecessary addiction to other people's oil.

Overriding all these considerations of oil and security, however, is a larger question: Is the United States in the process of abandoning its republican heritage in favor of empire?

Thus, where climate change is concerned at issue are the security of our way of life, our Constitutional duty to posterity, our moral leadership in the world, and our republican heritage. The argument for presidential leadership must be cast in nothing less than these terms.

The next president will have no choice but to take a principled stand on climate change and that stand can and should be cast in national security terms.

Gary Hart