

# Kick the Oil Habit

By John Podesta

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President Bush, who has risen so magnificently to the world stage in guiding the war against terrorism, seems stuck in Midland, Tex., when it comes to energy policy.

Instead of marshaling America's national spirit and technical might to reduce dependence on foreign oil, the president remains wedded to the oil companies' longstanding, pre-Sept. 11 wish list -- one that would enrich the industry and endanger the environment, but would leave the country's Middle East oil habit undiminished.

After wars with Iraq and in Afghanistan in the space of a decade; after ignoring the rise of anti-Americanism in Saudi Arabia, spread by religious extremists and condoned by the monarchy, after repeated warnings that the tension between modern and radical Islam could upend the oil-rich regimes that provide 25 percent of our daily supply, America is still exposed to the economic, military and political dangers attendant on foreign oil.

Yet, this month in New Orleans President Bush called yet again for passage of a bill based on the flawed premise that America can drill its way to energy security.

The truth is different. No matter how much drilling we do at home, we cannot change one fundamental fact: 65 percent of world oil reserves lie under the Persian Gulf countries, compared with 3 percent in the United States and less than one-third of 1 percent in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

The fastest, cheapest, most effective solution is a comprehensive energy security strategy combining near-term fuel economy improvements with longer-term measures to develop oil-free fuels.

A plan just released by the Natural Resources Defense Council and the Union of Concerned Scientists challenges both Congress and the administration to choose this fundamentally different approach.

For starters, we'd raise the fuel economy standards for the combined fleet of cars and light trucks to 40 miles per gallon by 2012, and 55 mpg in 2020.

The first target can be achieved with conventional engine technologies without compromising safety, performance or vehicle choice. Getting to 55 mpg will likely require gasoline-electric hybrid systems like that in today's Toyota Prius or a version of the Ford Escape SUV appearing in 2003. To accelerate the transition, Congress should provide consumer tax credits to support the shift to new technology.

The next step is hydrogen-powered fuel-cell vehicles, which use one-third the energy of today's cars, none of it from oil. The Bush administration and U.S. automakers touted a new research program recently acknowledging the importance of fuel cells. But the only way to get these vehicles out of the lab and onto the road is with incentives and requirements aimed at producing 100,000 vehicles by 2010, 2.5 million by 2020.

Paralleling these efforts, we should encourage smart growth instead of suburban sprawl to increase our transportation choices and make communities more livable with less traffic.

Compared with business-as-usual projections, these measures would cut passenger vehicle oil use nearly a quarter by 2012, by half in 2020, and by three-quarters over the next three decades.

Higher fuel economy standards alone would save nearly 2 million barrels of oil every day by 2012 -- slightly more than we imported from Saudi Arabia last year.

That translates into big savings at the pump: A person buying a 40-mpg car in 2012 would enjoy net savings of \$2,200 over the life of the vehicle.

These steps would cut global warming pollution by more than a billion tons in 2020, and avoid more than a billion pounds worth of smog-forming emissions each year.

This plan capitalizes on American ingenuity and technological know-how. It saves consumers money. It reduces the burden of oil on the environment.

Why is a pro-consumer, pro-environment, pro-American ingenuity energy plan so hard to pass? Unfortunately, the greatest impediment blocking this plan is the extent to which special interests have hijacked energy policymaking in Washington. It is the deals cut behind closed doors, deals with the Cheney Task Force, and the political contributions from Enron and others, the elimination of clear boundaries between private interests and public policy, exacerbated by the archaic vision that "drilling isn't everything, it's the only thing."

At this moment of national unity, America's national interest must not be thwarted by the special interests. Our nation must not pass through another national security crisis with roots in the Middle East without developing a serious energy policy.

*The writer, who served as President Clinton's chief of staff, is a senior fellow at the Natural Resources Defense Council.*

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