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U.S. ENERGY POLICY

Editorial | Needle points to security

Call them "hawks for hybrids."

Fearing increased dependence on oil from volatile Middle Eastern countries and greater competition from China and India for scarce resources, 31 national security experts have called on President Bush to rethink his energy policy.

"We do not know today what form a crisis over oil will take, but we know that a crisis is coming - one that could harm the United States," said a letter sent March 28. Signatories include top advisers to former Presidents Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton.

R. James Woolsey, Clinton's CIA director, says that, in the interest of national security, this coalition of "tree huggers, do-gooders, sod-busters and cheap hawks" advocates bolstering existing technology to reduce dependence on foreign oil. It's rare common ground in the divisive energy policy battle - a bipartisan effort worth heeding.

The President has focused on increasing domestic drilling, but this coalition rejects that strategy. There's simply not enough oil under U.S. soil.

Two-thirds of the oil Americans consume goes into cars, trucks and buses. To meet that demand, the United States buys more than half of that oil abroad. In the next 20 years, foreign imports will climb toward 70 percent. To keep America secure, that number needs to drop drastically.

In hawkish language that helps tie the issue to military preparedness, the coalition calls for a "major new initiative to curtail U.S. consumption through improved efficiency and rapid development and deployment" of farm-based fuels and flexible-fuel vehicles. Based on the work of the "Set America Free" campaign (www.setamericafree.org), it believes the United States can save billions of barrels of oil a day.

But that would take an investment "proportionate with other priorities for our nation's defense," the letter says, a minimum of \$1 billion over five years.

Better yet, with \$12 billion in incentives - a pittance compared with other defense and farm subsidies - the government could coax auto manufacturers to build more gas-electric hybrid and flexible-fuel vehicles. It could encourage gas stations to install alternative-fuel pumps and motivate consumers to buy these cars of the future. It's an approach likely to attract more supporters than the penalty-driven talk of mandatory fuel-economy standards and pollution emissions caps.

Why act now? Within 15 years, uneven distribution of the world's oil reserves will mean that a handful of Middle Eastern suppliers, who may or may not be friendly to the United States, will regain the influence over the oil market they had in the 1970s. Further, China and India's growing economies will generate an "arms race" for fuel.

"We're stupidly relying on a very volatile part of the world and hoping something doesn't go wrong there," Woolsey said in a news conference.

Terrorists already have targeted oil-production infrastructure. Now, America spends \$49 billion a year to protect Persian Gulf oil interests - the equivalent of \$1.17 per gallon of gasoline, according to the National Defense Council Foundation, a Virginia research firm. With increased dependency on imports, that expense will only go up.

The United States shouldn't sit idly awaiting miracle technologies, including the long-promised hydrogen fuel cell. At best, those vehicles are 15 years from market.

The nation should act now to find alternatives to oil. The potential exists to extract 300 to 500 miles from a gallon of gasoline.

Beyond relieving pocketbooks, that kind of gas mileage is essential to national security.

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