



Neocons Driving Priuses

By Jan Frel, AlterNet

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The United States holds 2 percent of world oil reserves, contributes 8 percent of world oil production, and consumes 25 percent of the world's oil production -- more than 60 percent of which is imported. Such facts appear with increasing frequency in mainstream newspapers and on television talk shows, often accompanied by handwringing about lack of sustainability and allegations that the chase after foreign oil is the primary cause of our military misadventures in the Middle East.

Of course, this is not terribly new ground for progressives and liberals. The Apollo Alliance, a coalition of mostly labor and environmental groups, along with some human rights organizations and alternative energy firms has been discussing it for years. The group has successfully pushed its agenda into the talking points of Democrats like Senator Barack Obama, and the Apollo plan was a pillar of Sen. John F. Kerry's failed presidential bid.

But what is new is the emergence of political currents on the right and the Republican Party related to America's energy crises and the policies that uphold them: a fascinating coalition of neoconservatives and the Christian right that sees the multiple dangers of America's reliance on foreign oil, and another that is pressing hard to foster political discussion about the prospect that global oil production is about to peak. If pessimistic estimates on global oil reserves start playing out in the world markets, we can expect a fusion of these two groups.

Setting America free

Leading the energy security front is a coalition called Set America Free. Led by the Institute for the Analysis of Global Security, Set America Free's members include former Republican presidential candidate and "family values" activist Gary Bauer; powerful neoconservative security hawks Frank Gaffney, Daniel Pipes and former CIA director Jim Woolsey; and National Resources Defense Council's (NRDC) Deron Lovaas along with the Apollo Alliance's Bracken Hendricks.

In an open letter signed by its members, Set America Free calls for an end to oil dependency for security purposes and makes the centerpiece of its blueprint a call to improve fuel economy rates for automobiles, diversify auto fuels and increase the number of hybrid electric vehicles sold in America.

It's a fairly stunning reversal to see an Iraq war cheerleader like Frank Gaffney driving a Toyota Prius around Washington and signing on to an energy coalition that boasts membership with progressive groups and broadcasts sentiments like, "We are fighting a war against terror and paying for both sides of the war."

But then, it's proof positive that something pretty serious has shaken the conservative establishment.

NRDC's Deron Lovaas said of the motives that brought conservative coalition together, "The hawks are doing this because they want to forestall a conflict with China, and they see competition for petroleum resources as a likely instigator. Gary Bauer's interest is religious freedom for repressed Christian and Jewish minorities in the Middle East. I care about fuel emissions, our massively wasteful transport system, and our security, of course."

Asked whether he hesitated to sign on with Set America free because of the longstanding reputations of its members (Gaffney's complicity in Bush's missile defense, Iraq, and Israeli policies, or Gary Bauer's strident anti-homosexuality and abortion views), Lovaas said, "Politics is about addition. There are tremendous differences between many of the members in this but we all agree about energy security. The kitchen is still way too hot for other environmental groups to sign on, but these supporters [of energy security] shouldn't be ignored."

Lovaas pointed out that the reach of its membership cast a net that progressive energy independence efforts can't reach, and also touches into media that progressives don't have access to. Frank Gaffney for example, has a regular column in the *Washington Times*. Lovaas also said that because of Set America Free, hawkish and conservative Democrat Joe Lieberman has started pushing hard for policies that produce energy independence, drawing interest from the even more conservative Republican senators Sam Brownback and Jeff Sessions. "This thing is moving really fast; the rate of progress some weeks is quite dizzying," Lovaas said.

Bartlett at the peak

The peak oil discussion has been led by ol' fashioned Maryland Republican Representative Roscoe Bartlett, whose eloquent speeches on dwindling petroleum reserves channel Ben Franklin in calling for each American to invent and innovate in their spare time.

The presentation Bartlett gave on peak oil on the floor of the House of Congress last April is one of the most lucid demonstrations on global energy supply and America's dependence on foreign oil around. In it he explains why *Saudi Arabia's* energy grid is one any industrialized country should be jealous of:

Why would Saudi Arabia, with the most oil in the world, be the biggest purchaser of solar panels in the world? The reasons are very simple. These are not dumb people, and they figured out that solar panels were better for them in producing electricity than oil because they had widely distributed communities that were very small. Electrons in a wire are very different than oil in a pipeline.

Put a gallon of oil in a pipeline up at [Alaska's] Prudhoe Bay, and a gallon will come out where it goes on the ship. If we put electrons in a line, which is long enough, nothing will come out in the other end. It is called line loss. And they knew that in their small communities, widely

distributed, with the enormous line losses they had from big plants, that they would be better off with distributed production.

Bartlett's outspokenness earned him "an extensive discussion" with President Bush last June where he got a chance to vent about coming petroleum shortages. It is interesting that the White House made no mention of it in Bush's schedule, nor has the president spoken of peak oil since.

For an energy conference this September, Bartlett assembled a cast of oil experts such as Matthew Simmons and Richard Heinberg, who have departed from the industry consensus that the world's oil supplies are nowhere near depletion.

Bartlett also led a tiny delegation of six House Republicans this October to demand government attention "to the threats to the U.S. economy and national security posed by global peak oil."

While it's heartening to see Bartlett's willingness to lead on this discussion, Bartlett has been just as outspoken on artificial, industry-manufactured dangers to America, such as Electromagnetic Pulse Attacks (EMPs). This October he addressed the Defense Forum Foundation on the topic of EMPs, which Project on Government Oversight investigator Nick Schwellenbach exposed as the Next Fake Threat to America that defense contractors want \$20-200 billion in federal money for to "harden" critical infrastructure over the next 20 years.

Populists for energy independence

While Gary Bauer, neocons like Frank Gaffney and paleocons like Roscoe Bartlett all have histories that show their motives to be less than altruistic, it's not a bad thing that they are crusading for something environmentalists and energy activists have been working on for decades.

Truth be told, there isn't a popular movement of citizens for energy independence, or much public awareness about peak oil. There's widespread dissatisfaction about the soaring prices of gas costs starting in the summer of 2004, which were further exacerbated by the devastation Hurricanes Katrina and Rita did to our ports and oilrigs in the Gulf of Mexico. As James Howard Kunstler has written, there could be a lot more "awareness" about the frailty of our energy supply this winter as Americans find themselves paying 700 percent more than they did in 2002 to heat their homes, or when Europe stops the shipments of two million barrels of oil and "refined product" a day it's been sending after the hurricanes.

Michael Shellenberger, co-director of the Breakthrough Institute, who co-founded the Apollo Alliance, said of Set America Free that "none of it is very serious about energy independence. They are pushing for the same old fuel economy standards that run right into Detroit and politicians like Michigan Democratic Senator Carl Levin, who has been proposing to bail out the auto industry. A better proposal would be to offer health care for autoworkers in exchange for higher fuel economy standards -- the 'Health Care for Hybrids' idea that Senator Barack Obama and Senator Hillary Clinton are advocating. That proposal demands competitiveness and accountability from the industry.

"The question is this: how do you create a politics that inspires the American people? How do you address their strongest concerns and values? We think addressing the jobs and health crisis of the Midwest -- while demanding that the auto industry be held accountable on fuel economy -- is the right way forward."

Will it take a hard winter and \$5-a-gallon gas for the appearance of an opposition to the status quo, or graver energy crises or shortages that threaten social order? Let's hope the emergence of wider political coalitions to deal with energy independence happens before we find out the hard way.

Jan Frel is an AlterNet staff writer.

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