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‘Personal value’ best public policy

It was just five years ago, as California writhed in the grip of an energy crisis caused by corporate manipulation of power production, that Vice President Dick Cheney scoffed at conservation as a “personal virtue” that was inappropriate as public policy.

Californians did some scoffing of their own and quickly reduced their power consumption by about 10 percent. And now, that personal value stands a good chance of becoming smart national energy policy.

A coalition of senators from across the political spectrum — from the liberal Connecticut Democrat Joseph Lieberman to the conservative Kansas Republican Sam Brownback — have introduced the Vehicle and Fuel Choices for American Security Act. As the name of the bill suggests, a large number of influential lawmakers now view energy conservation as the national security issue that it is, rather than the province of left-leaning tree huggers.

The bill calls for specific targets for reduced foreign-oil use, beginning with 2.5 million barrels a day within 10 years and increasing to 10 million barrels a day by 2026 — 25 percent of the projected demand for that time.

To hit those goals, the bill would establish incentives for auto manufacturers to build more hybrid vehicles, and for fleet operators and state governments to buy them in order to ensure a robust market. It also would provide research funds to develop mileage-enhancing tires, promote alternative fuel development and distribution, and establish mileage and idling standards for heavy trucks and school buses.

This bill is a major departure from current energy policy, which focuses primarily on oil production to the point of awarding tax incentives to oil companies that already are generating record profits. It recognizes that oil dependence imperils national security, and also that the United States has the technological prowess that is needed to break that dependency.

Sens. Arlen Specter and Rick Santorum should sign onto the bill, and Reps. Paul Kanjorski and Don Sherwood should back a companion version in the House.

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