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The Perils of Hands-On Diplomacy

An ambitious energy-independence campaign would be boldness of a sort that George W. Bush usually loves

By JOE KLEIN

"Are you the jealous type?" Jay Leno asked Laura Bush on the Tonight Show last week, just before he rolled tape of the President walking hand in hand with Crown Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia. The First Lady said she thought it was sweet. Most everyone else this side of Riyadh was appalled. "It was like fingernails scratching on a blackboard, magnified 10 million times," the religious conservative Gary Bauer told me. "You wonder if the folks at the White House have any idea of the impact an image like that has out in Middle America."

Oh, they do. Indeed, the folks at the White House told me that the President and the infirm 80-year-old Crown Prince were walking on an uneven path in Texas, the prince reached out for support and ... anyway, to reject Abdullah's hand would have been ungracious, and the President will always choose courtesy over ungraciousness--even if the image conveys the subconscious message that the oily Saudis are so important to the U.S. economy that President Macho is willing to act in an unmanly fashion in order to keep them happy.

Several days after traveling the uneven path, the President began his prime-time press conference with a few words about high gasoline prices--the same old words: No easy solution, drill more, expand the use of coal and nuclear and figure out ways to conserve. This perfunctory recitation was quickly forgotten as Bush turned to Social Security and proceeded to make some news. He proposed that the system be made solvent by reducing benefits on a sliding scale, according to income. This utterly responsible and progressive proposition was greeted by phony bleats of outrage from leading Democrats, who proved once again that they are more interested in the demagogic exploitation of the issue than they are in the impact of baby boom retirement on their grandchildren. It also brought to the surface a question that has been bubbling in Washington for the past few weeks: Has Bush chosen the wrong issue to burnish his legacy? What if he had reversed these two priorities, gone bold on energy independence--an issue on which compromise with Democrats is possible--instead of Social Security?

"It would have been great," says Bauer. "He could have used the energy issue to actually build more political capital." Bauer has joined with other prominent conservatives to promote energy independence as a hard, dry national-security issue rather than as soft, wet environmentalism. These conservatives support a major federal push to promote alternative fuels--ethanol, biodiesel, liquefied natural gas--and hybrid-auto technologies. "This is not pie in the sky," says Frank Gaffney of the Center for Security Policy, as tough-minded a security hawk as can be found in Washington. "The technology is all there. But you need tax incentives to encourage the automobile companies to produce the hybrid cars and federal support to bring the alternative fuels to the pump. You need a major national campaign to accomplish this, but it may not be as hard as people think. For example, I'm told that since most people drive only 20 miles a day, you can get as much as 500 m.p.g. with a simple modification that would allow hybrid cars to plug into the

electric grid at night. I'm told the electric industry is so excited about this that they might be willing to pay people \$1,000 to buy hybrid plug-in cars."

There is some enthusiasm within the White House for an alternative-energy push, although it doesn't quite match Gaffney's best-case euphoria. Karl Rove has educated himself on issues as arcane as the vagaries of ethanol transport, and there is a drizzle of funds for research into alternative fuels in Bush's big fat energy bill. But the President and Dick Cheney, who has been in charge of energy policy, remain oilmen at heart, skeptical about a major Manhattan Project-style national campaign to redirect the energy market, mindful of the time and expense necessary to build a new infrastructure and the pipelines, refineries and fueling points necessary to exploit alcohol-based fuels.

Bush and Cheney may be nudged forward, though, by pressure from an unlikely political quarter--the Congress. A group of House Republicans and Democrats, national-security hawks and environmentalists, has been meeting quietly for the past month, trying to gin up bipartisan alternative-energy legislation. A leader of the group, Republican Jim Saxton of New Jersey, has met with Speaker Dennis Hastert, who expressed cautious enthusiasm about the idea. "Look, the Federal Government has subsidized every major transportation advance in our nation's history," Saxton told me, "and this is one with national-security implications, given our dependence on oil from the Middle East." Political implications too: an ambitious energy-independence campaign would divert attention from the current congressional tawdriness, the Tom DeLay scandal, the Terri Schiavo intervention, the Social Security stalemate. It is boldness of a sort that George W. Bush usually loves--a patriotic way to simultaneously address high gasoline prices, the war on terrorism and the embarrassment of holding hands in public with the wrong people.

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