
The Washington Times

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In search of energy security

By Frank J. Gaffney Jr.

Published June 14, 2005

This week, the American people will get a chance to see if their senators are prepared finally to go beyond mere rhetoric and actually do something consequential about a problem 90 percent of those polled in a recent survey now regard as "serious": U.S. dependence upon imported oil.

The latest confirmation of the correctness of the public's assessment comes in a paper issued by the newly reconstituted Committee on the Present Danger (CPD.) on the eve of Senate action on energy legislation. Its authors, former Reagan Secretary of State George Shultz and former Clinton Director of Central Intelligence James Woolsey, argue:

"The risks of petroleum dependency [are real], particularly the vulnerability of the petroleum infrastructure in the Middle East to terrorist attack ... a single well-designed attack could send oil to well over \$100 [per] barrel and devastate the world's economy. That reality, among other risks, and the fact that our current transportation infrastructure is locked into oil, should be sufficient to convince any objective observer that oil dependence today creates serious and pressing dangers for the U.S. and other oil-importing nations."

The CPD. paper (www.fightingterror.org) is but the most recent, bipartisan effort to raise an alarm about the national security imperatives for reducing current U.S. oil demand principally to power its transportation sector (only about 2 percent of our electricity is generated from oil). Mr. Woolsey has been a prime mover as well behind two others -- the Set America Free Coalition and the Energy Future Coalition -- that have warned about the following:

- Many of the sources of imported oil are nations governed by regimes that are, at best, unstable and at worst actually hostile to this country.
- In a number of these nations, oil revenues are used to support terrorism, much of it directed against the United States, its allies and interests.
- Even if the supplier governments were friendly and their use of the proceeds not inimical to this country, there would be another problem Messrs. Shultz and Woolsey identified: Terrorists have learned the oil infrastructure -- from pipelines to offload facilities to tankers to refineries -- is highly susceptible to attack. They also now know the economic and strategic effects of such attacks extend far beyond their immediate environmental and other local impacts.
- Finally, Communist China and, to a lesser degree at the moment, India are becoming increasingly assertive competitors in the global energy markets. Especially if, as some believe -- including lately several major oil companies -- we are at or nearing "peak oil" (the point at which supply of at least the most valuable and most accessible oil begins declining), these competing demands will surely translate into higher energy costs for this country and perhaps even conflict.

Under these circumstances, it is not enough to simply talk about the need to reduce U.S. consumption of oil and particularly that obtained from overseas. To be sure, there will be

more posturing and empty rhetoric in evidence in the Senate this week. For example, the Democratic leadership will offer a "messaging" amendment requiring a reduction of about 40 percent in our projected oil imports by the year 2025.

This year's energy legislation must do more. Specifically, it should incorporate concrete policy and programmatic initiatives that will enable the United States to wean its transportation sector from the present, irresponsible reliance on foreign oil.

Fortunately, a number of these initiatives were described in a blueprint released last fall (www.setamericafree.org) and are currently being adapted by the Senate's bipartisan Centrist Coalition as an amendment to the energy bill.

Among such initiatives are: incentives for auto manufacturers and suppliers so American factories can build vehicles that get better mileage (for instance, hybrids, advanced diesels and cars built with lightweight but super-strong composite materials); incentives to encourage demonstration and commercialization of hybrids whose batteries can be recharged via the electrical grid ("plug-in hybrids"); a public-private partnership program for cellulosic biomass designed to encourage the construction of biofuel demonstration facilities; a phased-in requirement that 50 percent of new cars be "flexible fuel" vehicles by 2012 -- allowing Americans to have fuel choice and permitting alcohol-based fuels (ethanol and methanol) derived from various renewable sources to compete against each other.

Other provisions in the amendment would require labeling new tires so consumers can choose based on their efficiency, contributing to as much as a 3 percent reduction in fuel consumption, and electrification of truck stops. The latter would enable long-haul truckers to plug in to power their air conditioning systems, TVs, etc., rather than consuming vast quantities of diesel fuel -- and causing unnecessary air pollution -- idling their engines.

Combined with the various coalitions' recommendations already in the House-passed version of the energy legislation and that approved by the Senate Energy Committee last month, these eminently sensible initiatives can make a difference.

Indeed, it seems obvious these are the sorts of steps the nation will be forced to take in the event the vulnerability represented by our oil dependency translates into a calamity. Clearly, it would be far preferable from every perspective -- strategically, economically and politically -- if our leaders can get them under way before that happens and, thereby, mitigate the consequences when, not if, it does.

Frank J. Gaffney Jr. is president of the Center for Security Policy and a columnist for The Washington Times.

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