

Over a barrel: We might as well face it; we're addicted to oil

In his last State of the Union Address, President George W. Bush addressed the nation's energy needs, saying among other things, that:

"Keeping America competitive requires affordable energy. And here we have a serious problem: America is addicted to oil, which is often imported from unstable parts of the world."



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I don't think anyone doubts the president's assessment. We are certainly addicted to oil, and it is often (these days, almost always) imported from unstable parts of the world.

But it turns out that's only half the problem, as I learned in great detail while delving into James Howard Kunstler's book, *The Long Emergency*, published in 2005.

It is not bedtime reading, unless you want to lie awake all night. The subtitle of the book elaborates by proclaiming that the reader will learn about "Surviving the End of Oil, Climate Change, and Other Converging Catastrophes of the Twenty-First Century."

At first I was reluctant to buy the book—non-fiction books about future catastrophes are plentiful, many of them poorly researched and even more poorly written. I was pleasantly surprised, however, to find Kunstler writing in a measured, literate and thoughtful tone throughout the book.

Peak oil

Perhaps many of you reading this column have already been paying attention to stories in the national media about predictions that the world is about to reach (or may have already passed) the point of peak oil production.

If the predictions are correct, the consequences are serious, to say the least.

Even as worldwide demand for oil is continuing to rise, worldwide production of oil will inexorably begin to decline, leading to shortages and far more expensive oil, eventually spelling an end to a century-long global economic boom

fuelled by petroleum products.

Kunstler asserts that much of modern life as we know it is dependent on plentiful and affordable oil. And that's even more so in this country as compared to others, given that we consume about 25% of the world's oil with only 5% of its population. He also believes we, and the rest of the world, won't be able to replace oil with alternative energy sources fast enough to avoid an economic meltdown.

Hey Thelma! Hey Louise!

So here we are, rolling along in our SUVs, heating and cooling 4,000-square-foot houses and generally using oil like there's no tomorrow. And guess what?

Maybe there won't be!

It's kind of like the movie *Thelma and Louise*, which ends with the two main characters driving off a cliff together rather than facing the consequences of their past deeds.

Now when I say "our SUVs," I mean that literally because I own one too. As a partial defense, let me add that it's a four-cylinder, two-wheel drive model that gets 20-25 mpg.

But yes, I'm addicted to oil just like the rest of us.

What would sound public policy and private behavior look like if Kunstler's scenario is inevitable?

Well, we could all panic, but that's not too productive.

On the public policy front, we would initiate draconian measures to curtail oil use and provide incentives for energy conservation and the development of alternative energy sources.

On the private side, we'd be making choices in our lifestyles that reduce energy consumption.

Gee, it's hot in here

But what fun is it to contemplate the doom of peak oil production without adding the gloom of global warming?

Yes, despite past efforts by the Bush administration and others to "reframe" global warming into a more benign sounding process of "climate change," global warming is making a comeback, mainly because evidence is mounting that the globe really is warming, just as predicted.

The converts to this view include South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham. Even so, his

position on the issue is still stuck in the zone of those who say we should do something about global warming as long as it doesn't cost jobs. But this is short-term thinking in the face of a looming long-term catastrophe.

How many South Carolina jobs will be lost if the seas rise 20 feet by the end of this century?

From a public policy standpoint, there is now ample evidence to support an aggressive push for a more energy-efficient world to mitigate the twin catastrophes of falling oil production and global warming.

It's a shame that we didn't sign on to the Kyoto Treaty, not because it would have solved the problem of global warming, but because it would have been an act of leadership in the international community where leadership was, and is, sorely needed.

Going forward into an uncertain future, leaders of all countries need to rally around the goal of a worldwide energy policy that puts a premium on conservation and non-polluting energy sources.

Why not establish and invest in a worldwide scientific and industrial consortium to facilitate the transition away from fossil fuels?

This could spur economic growth just as other technological developments have in the past.

At the very least, successful innovation married with intelligent public policy decisions could stave off the frightening possibility of a true economic collapse of industrialized economies, including our own.

For those of you eager to brand this as a "liberal" point of view, don't.

Kunstler's book points out that with the exception of Jimmy Carter decades ago, no president of either party has had the stomach to tell the American public the truth about the hazards of building our future on the shifting (and diminishing) sands of oil production

And for the coup-de-grace on that viewpoint, I offer a December 2005 *Fortune* magazine interview with one of South Carolina's resident billionaires, Richard Rainwater, who according to the article is intensely focused on this issue, both as an investor and someone who doesn't like the idea of witnessing the collapse of Western civilization.

When billionaires speak, I listen. So should you. ☐