

JIM SAXTON / ELIOT ENGLE

# Energy security and oil dependence

The destruction inflicted by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita provided us a glimpse of what could happen to our nation in a major oil-supply disruption. It has been a jarring reminder of our overreliance on oil, in particular foreign oil. With this in mind, we must strive to ensure continued U.S. prosperity and security is not overly dependent on the availability of oil.

We once thought of bolstering national security, cheap and abundant energy, a clean environment and economic efficiency as separate and, at times, contradictory aims. Many held believed generating more energy created more pollution, and that cheap energy meant depending on the Middle East.

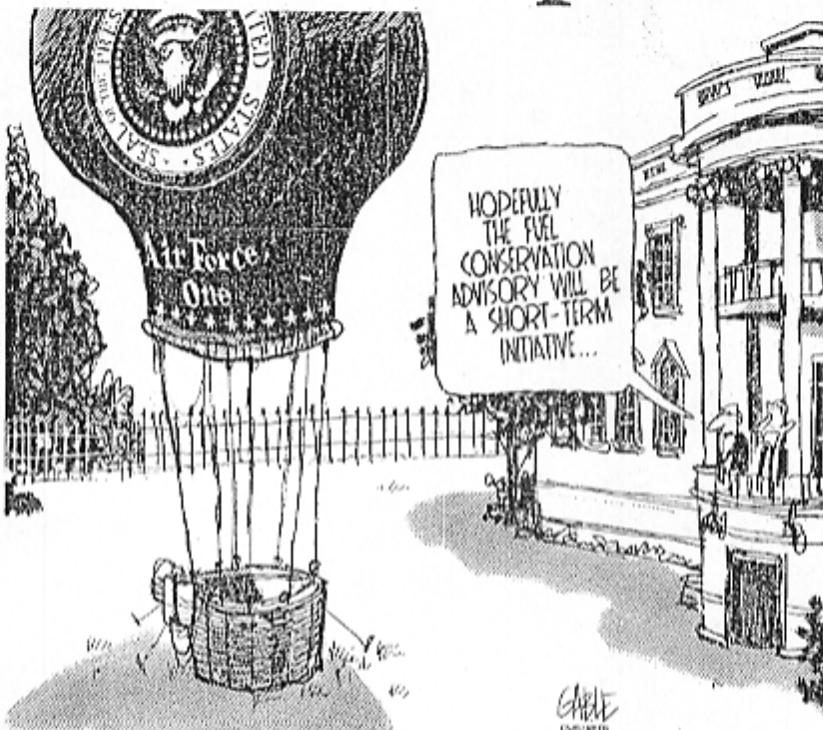
These beliefs are vestiges of the past. Today, it is simply too dangerous for the United States to continue importing increasing amounts of oil from nations that are unstable and anti-American or that have aided terrorists.

By paying billions of dollars to oil-rich nations, we created an addiction to oil while filling the coffers of those who have undermined our interests, or, worse, have sought to destroy the freedoms we hold dear.

America consumes about one-quarter of the world's oil supply but we have only 3 percent of global oil reserves. Thus, we must import more than 60 percent of the oil we use, and as our country grows, so do our imports. Since much of the world's oil is controlled by countries that are unstable or have ties to radical Islamists who foment anti-U.S. hatred, this dependency is a matter of national security.

For years, oil-rich sheikdoms of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries have played us like a fiddle. They raise output when we need a little more oil and cut back when prices get too low. The cartel wants to keep prices in the "sweet spot" so we have no incentive to seek other forms of energy.

OPEC members for years have restrained their output and have also failed to invest in new facilities to develop their oil reserves.



OPEC's bias against expanding oil production has sown the seeds of a serious energy shortage.

Very high oil prices are neither in OPEC's nor the oil industry's long-term interest because they would stimulate research and development of alternative energy sources. They have tried to squeeze the maximum money from consumers without triggering new competitive energy forms that would undermine the oil monopoly in the longer run. However, they miscalculated the magnitude of the recent rise in demand from the Asian economies, especially China. The result has been huge price increases in recent years. Americans now pay nearly \$3 per gallon on average for gasoline.

Yet, our problem is not merely with the dangers of our imported supply. Katrina and Rita have shown us our domestic production facilities are also at risk.

While the effect of Katrina and Rita on the fuel market will be felt for many months, little can be done in the near term. But in the medium to long run, it is critical we act expeditiously to diversify our energy sources, particularly of transportation fuel, beyond petroleum. Vehicles that can run on alternatives or that use gasoline more efficiently must be encouraged.

Outdated policies that only extend our national love affair with oil must end. We have the technology and the resources

to start on the long quest to diversify our energy sources away from oil. Our choices need not include higher prices, diminished energy supplies or increased pollution.

A strong national commitment to oil savings would make America a stronger and more secure nation. With decreased reliance on foreign countries, U.S. manufacturers would go to work building the most energy-efficient cars in the world, and American innovation would design future technologies.

In Congress, we have decided to join together and create the bipartisan Oil and National Security Caucus. Our focus will be on finding ways to ensure our nation can decrease its dependence on oil and utilize instead renewable resources to meet our energy needs. In doing so, we can ensure the United States will continue to prosper and remain secure.

*Jim Saxton, New Jersey Republican, is chairman of the House of Representatives' Armed Services Terrorism and Unconventional Threats Subcommittee and chairman of the Joint Economic Committee. Eliot Engle, New York Democrat, is a member of the House Energy and Commerce Committee and vice chairman of the Democrats' Homeland Security Task Force.*

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