



The Alcohol Cure. How to break the oil monopoly in this decade

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“We are financing a war against ourselves,” writes Robert Zubrin, nuclear engineer and author of a new book responding to the distressing fact that Americans and Europeans are sending trillions of dollars to militant Islamists whose goal is our destruction.

But in “Energy Victory,” Dr. Zubrin does not just complain. He proposes a way to break free of dependence on a resource controlled by those who have declared themselves our mortal enemies. The technology already exists. It’s not expensive. All that is lacking is for voters to make this a priority -- and to communicate that to the political class.

Right now, 97 percent of the cars on America’s roads run on gasoline.

Only three percent are Flexible Fuel Vehicles (FFVs) – automobiles that can be powered by alternative fuels. The additional cost to make a new car an FFV is only about \$100 per vehicle.

For the sake of individual security, the government mandates that all cars have seat belts. For the sake of national security, Dr. Zubrin proposes, the government should mandate that all new cars be FFVs.

In three years, that would put 50 million FFVs on the road. The free market would then mobilize to do what it does best: Entrepreneurs would compete to produce alternative, non-petroleum fuels for these potential customers.

Dr. Zubrin expects those fuels to be made from alcohol: ethanol and methanol. Ethanol is made from agricultural products, from plants of all kinds. Methanol can be made from biomass – even biodegradable garbage – as well as from natural gas or coal.

Ethanol can be produced right now for \$1.50 a gallon; methanol for 93 cents a gallon. Dr. Zubrin expects the first generation of alternative fuels would be high alcohol-to-gasoline mixtures. These would provide better mileage while still dramatically reducing dependence on petroleum.

The key is you'd be free to choose: You could buy gasoline as you do now or you could buy fuels made mostly of alcohol, giving less money – and hence less power – to Iranian mullahs, Saudi clerics and Venezuelan despots.

As they say in those television ads: Wait! There's more! Substituting alcohol for gasoline also would mean cleaner air and reduced carbon dioxide emissions. Since alcohol fuels are water soluble and biodegradable, a spill would not have the harmful environmental impact that oil spills bring.

Were America to lead, the world would follow. "If all cars sold in the United States had to be flexible-fueled, foreign manufacturers would also mass-produce such units," Dr. Zubrin writes. That would create "a large market in Europe and Asia as well as the United States for methanol and

ethanol – much of which could be produced in America.

"Instead of being the world's largest fuel importer, the United States could become the largest fuel exporter. A larger portion of the money now going to the Middle East would instead go to the United States and Canada," with the rest going to impoverished tropical nations where a wide variety of crops could be raised to produce new alcohol fuels. "This would reverse our trade deficit, improve conditions in the third world, and cause a global shift in world economic power in favor of the West."

So what is holding up progress? Obviously, there are special interests determined to keep oil king. And there are those dogmatically opposed to government mandates for any reason -- even to win a war.

But mandates are required to solve the chicken-and-egg dilemma. Dr. Zubrin writes: "Filling stations don't want to dedicate space to a fuel mix used by only 3 percent of all cars and consumers are not interested in buying vehicles for which the preferred fuel mix is extremely difficult to find." This is one of those very rare problems that actually can be solved just by passing a law. Build the cars. The non-petroleum fuels will come.

Other transportation innovations can and should follow. In particular, it makes sense to encourage the development of FFVs that also are plug-in hybrids – cars that can run on electricity, too. Such cars could

be recharged by plugging into a standard wall socket. (In America today most electricity is not generated from petroleum.)

Someday perhaps there will be automobiles powered by more futuristic means. But right now we can utilize FFVs and alcohol to stem

what has been our growing dependence on a commodity controlled by regimes, movements and individuals waging war against us. Will one -- or both -- of the presidential candidates in 2008 make this a priority? That's up to you and other voters to decide, isn't it?

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