



We're Not Addicts! The case for energy abundance and diversity

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People say we're addicted to oil but that's imprecise and unfair. Our automobiles are addicted to oil. And America has been designed around the automobile.

We - the taxpayers -- have built an elaborate interstate highway system. We have constructed sprawling cities (Los Angeles, for example) with neighborhoods connected only by roads. A big slice of our population is housed in suburbs conveniently accessible only by car. We have built thousands of shopping centers with acres of parking.

In our case, is it possible to redesign and reconstruct America to move people into high-density urban areas, to build rail and trolley lines or whatever it would take to shift from

the kind of society we now have to some different model? Sure, but that would require at least a generation of uncomfortable transformation leading to changes that would be profound.

We Americans value the idea and ideal of freedom and, for us, that implies mobility. It makes sense when you think about it: Most Americans are descended from extraordinary individuals who made the risky decision to abandon their ancestral homes and become strangers in a strange land. They did that in pursuit of freedom, opportunity and prosperity.

It should hardly be surprising that the descendants of these bold and independent travelers are drawn to

the autonomy of the personal vehicle and the adventure of the open road. Tell any red-blooded American that Buzz Murdock and Tod Stiles, tooling down Route 66 in their Corvette, were “addicted” to oil or left too large a “carbon footprint” and you’re looking for a fat lip.

But with gasoline suddenly priced at over \$4 a gallon, the hottest controversy in America is over whom to blame and what should be done. It’s a confused and confusing debate but it can be boiled down to this: On one side are those who believe the answer is for us to slash our demand for energy. On the other side are those who believe the answer is to greatly increase our supply.

It’s the demand-siders who are accusing us of being “addicts,” telling us not just to conserve energy and use it more efficiently – such efforts are commendable – but to resign ourselves to diminished mobility, to decreased consumption, to reforming what they see as our profligate “lifestyle.”

The supply-siders vehemently disagree. They say we should be aggressively figuring out how to squeeze more energy from a wider variety of sources – using advanced technology to protect the environment.

Put me in the supply-side camp. It seems obvious to me that energy is indistinguishable from wealth, and that the democratization of wealth – more of it for more people – is good, not bad. Indeed, democratizing

wealth – private homes, refrigerators, televisions, cell phones and cars -- has been among America’s greatest achievements.

Almost anything you might do to improve your life requires energy. It takes an energy source to read a book after the sun goes down, to keep cool on a hot day, to cook a meal, to transport the kids to soccer or music lessons, to surf the web, to visit far-flung friends and relatives or go on vacation with the family.

To those politicians and “activists” who are demanding we do less, have less and learn to like it, we should say: Stuff it. Americans have no reason to feel guilty about living like Americans.

On the contrary, it is the anti-energy politicians and activists who should feel guilty. Their policies will cause pain to the middle classes – and they will crush the poor. Consider the African farmer who wants to fuel his tractor or transport some surplus crops to market so he can earn a little cash with which to buy what in the third world passes for luxuries: a metal roof for his hut, a transistor radio, a wrist watch and a bicycle. You really think he should be told that he’s better off not getting “addicted” to energy and to please keep his carbon footprint small?

Logic and morality – even more than self-interest – should prompt us to pursue energy abundance and diversity, to use fast-advancing technology to derive power not just from petroleum products but also

from the wind and sun, clean coal and nuclear reactors. As soon as possible, our cars, trucks and buses should break their addiction to gasoline; they should be running as well on ethanol, methanol, natural gas, electricity and who knows what other fuels decades down the road.

If we do that, families, farmers, engineers and miners win. Terrorist-sponsoring regimes that currently have us over a barrel – literally -- lose. Shouldn't that be the goal?

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