Collapse from the inside - or powerdown?

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
18 May 2006

Culture Change Letter #129 - May 18, 2006

Although this column has analyzed repeatedly the implications of global Peak Oil as the main factor in the termination of a culture featuring waste and greed, we can just as easily see the crumbling from within that the heart of the system is undergoing:

Going under fiscally, ecologically, ethically and in other in social ways... Petrocollapse, population crash, no more driving to the shopping mall... A new world to open up right under our noses. Some of us remain optimistic about culture change.

Setting the industrialized world off toward unforgiving petrocollapse could be the politically volatile Middle East or other sources of oil-supply interruption (Venezuela, Iran or Russia), China's bidding up the price of fast-dwindling oil, or haywire "natural" disasters. But these are external manifestations of our deeply flawed culture. This culture both spawned and sprang forth from Western Civilization, and is characterized by domination and exploitation that the Earth never witnessed before – certainly not on any scale resembling this historical period.

The collapse from within is taking place as you read this: dishonesty, fraud and denial seem to prevail among our rulers who increasingly govern without our consent. Most people in the U.S. eligible to vote did not vote for recent presidents. And who rules the presidents? The corruption of elected officials is not limited to newsy scandals, but in the normal way of doing business in legislatures: "campaign contributions" and "horse trading."

On a personal level, anyone who is part of the industrial society's machinery is alienated from nature and isolated from people more than any other culture allows. Community has been replaced by consuming.

The culture that paves over the best farmland - constantly driving species extinct, so it can import food from other continents - cannot endure. Nor should it be sustained for the sake of "growth" or "jobs." A better world is possible.

Anyone can tell a sick economy and nation from a solvent one. It is only a matter of time until the game of deficits & debt is up.

The business of killing people, known as war and the arms trade, enforces on the larger scale the system of exploiting humans forced to work so that wealth can be derived from the ravaged Earth. War is rot from the inside, undeniably poisonous, and serves to create enemies and weaken a (social) structure's integrity and longevity.

People get increasingly tired of the taxes and loss of benefits such as the Bill of Rights and Habeas Corpus. Soon, people will rapidly get tired of expensive petroleum and permanent shortage, and will demand, as author Jim Kunstler regales us, their Cheese Doodles. That is, until they must plant some food in their former lawns.

The idea of society's consciously reducing its energy use due to acknowledging the end of cheap petroleum is an attractive one. Powering down is what we need to do immediately, but instead the world is trying to power up. Global warming, hello? Policy choices for powering down or mitigating petrocollapse are many, but it should be no surprise that they will continue to languish and remain among wonks and activists. Given the decay of the system from within and the addiction of consuming vast quantities of nonrenewable energy in this nation and other large consumers, Dr. Robert Hirsch's prediction must come true: unless infrastructure change takes place two decades ahead of peak oil, there will be "severe economic hardship." The U.S. Dept. of Energy got his report in Feb. 2005, but the Titanic has not yet bothered to adjust the helm.

One could satisfy oneself to an extreme degree in arriving at extensive knowledge of the system's growing weakness, mismanagement, and lunacy, such as by accessing reports on FromTheWilderness.com or even from mainstream sources of criticism such as truthout.org. But it doesn't accomplish much if we get bogged down in blogs or even great books, when we have already passed the point where action and system-replacement – not just "regime change" – was urgently justified.

As the nation's "free press" is bought by car advertisements we aren't going to get the truth. The corporate media are compliant in "keeping a lid on it" (Culture Change Letter #99) as to the true state of both the economy and the ecosystem, although much information does get through for those who pay critical attention. But it's as if all one has to do is wave the flag – no matter what atrocities, rip-offs, dysfunction and hypocrisy prevail as the U.S. leads the way in destroying the world – and a large segment of the population will resound with a bleat. Prior to the current administration's worsening follies, the bleat would have been more of a salute. Next we'll be seeing more the middle-finger salute.

If the above analysis has validity, and we can agree we are in an unprecedented time for our species' survival due to climate change and the demise of the petroleum feast, then we should not mislead ourselves or mislead others. Misleading is justified by those trying to continue to make their bucks, understandably so. There is also a reasonable tendency to downplay the danger and to whitewash or greenwash the two-headed crisis of the environment and an economy that will collapse once the growth bubble bursts.

Lester Brown, founder of Worldwatch Institute, gave a speech in Washington at the Peak Oil and the Environment conference on May 8th which begged this question:

"As cars' becoming cleaner would eliminate air pollution by less than 50%, given the whole 'life cycle' of the car, this is a partial conversion of the infrastructure; and, as wind-energy systems are also part of the oil infrastructure, and this is a partial conversion, and, as the agriculture and distribution systems are entirely dependent on petroleum, is not collapse the inescapable outcome that would be accompanied by your scenario of localized renewable energy?" (the question was submitted but not addressed.)

Brown is great on warning us of ecological collapse, but he has never been able face petrocollapse. He seems to really believe that wind energy will power the present size car-fleet, as if this makes for a sustainable economy. Not to pick on this very bright, exemplary man: there is little funding for those who openly anticipate petrocollapse and system-replacement, so it makes political and economic sense for one to rather support a popular technofix.

Yet, if a real tsunami is coming our way and can be seen in the distance, it is not a "maybe" that can blow over as we cling to our positions. Such positions range from moderate reform of energy usage to sweeping policy change. However, megacorporations do run the show today. Some officials and very well-off folks want, in effect, people to keep quiet and to trust the government to do its wondrous New Orleans-style magic. Radical change is resisted until the tsunami of nature's or of social forces crash down and swamp the landscape.

There is room for many analyses and interpretations of our interesting times. But this does not mean that all disciplines are equal, e.g., oil analyst or lawyer, organic farmer or bureaucrat. Nor do our interesting times involving oil mean that just any opinion is equally valid; some things are known. Such as, civilizations tumble and empires do fall, and it's mainly due to resource depletion. At our DC Petrocollapse Conference on May 6, 2006, one speaker unintentionally weakened a common vision of most of the speakers by asserting "No one knows what peak oil outcome will be like." This sounds reasonable on its face, but some things are inescapable: billions of us cannot continue to be fed for many days without endless petroleum. On the positive side, there's the inescapable likelihood: that people will simply have to come together to utilize their local ecosystems on some kind of community level to guarantee survival. Ultimately, a sustainable culture is achieved universally, with all due diversity and difficulties, if the race is to endure and evolve.

Not wanting to see tumultuous change or "severe economic hardship" – as the U.S. Department of Energy has been advised will be the price of not preparing for peak oil (Hirsch, et al 2005 study) – prompts many of us to offer wishful speculation on the experience in store for an oil addicted population.

A gifted Peak Oil activist and chronicler (Peak Oil News daily) is Tom Whipple. His latest column in the Falls Church News-Press is "The Peak Oil Crisis - Powerdown or Collapse?" Although he accurately represented the negative aspect of our position as organizers of the conference, he made a case for an outcome flowing from Peak Oil other than collapse. I was surprised that he seemed to back away from agreeing with me that collapse was our common fate. His reasoning is that "the truth is likely to fall somewhere in between" and that the nation has overcome big challenges before (with the aid of cheap fossil fuels, however).

A tsunami is not automatically a half-tsunami just because there are different opinions. Some opinions are founded more closely on reality than others. And some are often prescriptions for a version of the status quo. One thing for sure, we will be finding out soon.

Our friend Mr. Whipple missed the message of culture change as the real process at hand and also as the answer to living in a future not as dreary as he says we foresee. Additionally, an analysis of the effect of permanent, terminal shortage that is peak oil requires us to anticipate the oil market's role in exacerbating shortage. When people can't get to work or get food – after we have pigged-out on petroleum as long as possible and failed to decrease population in a compassionate, orderly, gradual way – die-off and collapse must hit hard. Mr. Whipple holds out for "explosive growth in mass transit, alternative vehicles and ride sharing," which appears hopeful of minimum disruption. But we basically agree about Peak Oil, as he concludes: "One thing is sure however, the peaking of world oil production is certain to launch a round of social and economic changes comparable to the advent of the industrial age."

Powerdown was written by Richard Heinberg. He believes that there will be a collapse. 'Nuff said. He spoke at our Petrocollapse Conference and news conference, although his book spells out options for a softer landing than hard collapse and wars – if we as society made the effort. There are preparations for a decent "Plan B" here and there. But aside from Post Carbon Institute's growing relocalization network, the effort is not quite being made. In the diplomatic realm, a major hope lies in the international Oil Depletion Protocol, proposed by Dr. Colin Campbell, and spearheaded by

Richard Heinberg.

The Washington Post "kept a lid on" our Petrocollapse Conference even though it was national and in its back yard. We virtually spoon-fed the publicity info to three departments at the Post. The Washington Post, like so many other news organizations, carefully chooses your news. In avoiding the subject of peak oil, the newspaper appears to pretend that the American Empire will keep muddling along as if we are a united people blessed by eternal resources. Simultaneously, the Post's brilliant acquisition of a cartoonist, Tom Toles, lets fly with zingers such as May 16th's cartoon: He compares the capitalist's non-comprehension of why workers don't appreciate the economy to a meat packer's non-comprehension of cattle not appreciating their place in the operation.

People may not rise up, as a casual reader may correctly believe as he or she may dismiss this essay or Tom Tole's message. The point is that whether people rise up or not – and they tend to do it only when physically hungry enough – the system is set to implode from its own contradictions and excesses. Rather than rise up, people may stampede until their final supply of calories gives out. Petroleum addiction is the top item of vulnerability on any given day. As the band Chicago sang in 1969, "I know it's hard for you to change your way of life… but if we don't, my friend, there's no life for you, no world for me."

* * * * *

References online:

Tom Whipple's column in suburban Virginia newspaper:

www.fcnp.com/610/peakoil.htm

Rundown of the Petrocollapse Conference and subsequent Peak Oil and the Environment conference:

www.tompaine.com

The Dept. of Energy's Hirsch report (SAIC):

www.projectcensored.org/newsflash/the_hirsch_report.pdf

The Oil Depletion Protocol:

postcarbon.org/initiatives/oildepletion

From The Wilderness publications:

www.Fromthewilderness.com

Truthout

Truthout.org

Culture Change Letter #128 on peak oil conferences:
culturechange.org

for May 6 DC Petrocollapse Conference and Oct. 5th NYC Petrocollapse Conference:
petrocollapse.org