Al Gore’s gamble

Contributed by Dan Bednarz
04 August 2008

Editor's note: Dan Bednarz is an astute observer who has again put his nose into an accepted message from a leader, this time our climate-change hero Al Gore. How Gore's approach will "solve" global warming becomes clear from our author's shocking critique of a man who has, no matter what, done as much as anyone to raise awareness of this century's greatest challenge. Dan Bednarz is justifiably worried that Gore is not taking peak oil into account, but that's not Gore's only shortcoming in the "solutions" department. Obviously, we don't go along with Gore's dishonorable right-wing opposition, but we believe it is crucial to question the system's ability to right itself. - Jan Lundberg, August 5, 2008

Setting aside questions of feasibility, Al Gore’s recent “Generational Challenge” to convert the nation to carbon-clean electricity in ten years was skillfully choreographed. It was a timely, beguiling appeal to deepening despair and insecurity about the future.

Although Gore apparently has painted skeptics and critics into a corner, I believe he has entered into a losing gamble -- with himself. He is betting that the effects of peak oil can be skirted -- without ever mentioning it -- as a byproduct of his electrification proposal. Notice that his plan promises simultaneously to “revive” the economy, save the environment, and contribute to national security, without explicitly addressing energy.

One of the consequences of peak oil is that there will be less energy to engage in economic activity. So choices, difficult choices, will have to be made (by whom?), about how energy is allocated for critical economic activities, such as realizing Gore's vision. Gore's plan has no difficult choices, just a rallying call to act now.

People I talk to, from the political left, center, and right, often react with an otherworldly look when I connect energy and economic activity. They came of age in a culture where cheap energy was taken for granted and perpetual economic expansion was apotheosized as a reflection of the cosmos and, therefore, good, inevitable and the path to secular happiness. They are not stupid; rather, they buy into the dominant mythology of their time and, it follows, lack experiential or theoretical knowledge to draw upon to imagine a world with less energy and limited or targeted economic growth -- let alone contraction. So if Gore promises to revive the economy -- a particularly handy bromide these days -- he cannot entertain peak oil.

In fairness, we need to explore where Gore stands, if only to guess, on peak oil. To my knowledge he has never laid out his views, and his (two by my count) vague references to it at Constitution Hall signify a major opportunity foregone. If he was ever to take up the energy topic, this would have been the venue and the moment. This silence suggests that he sees peak oil as a non-issue. On the other hand, he told a questioner two years ago, “We should feel a great sense of urgency about the impending peak oil scenario because it is with climate change the most dangerous crisis we have ever faced, by far.”

It is relevant that Gore spent some time in this “challenge” lecture extolling the need for comprehensive policy analysis. He touted his boldness in this regard while ridiculing the “standard” illusions of politicians that lead to unrelated, often contradictory, self-defeating policies for what in fact is a bundle of crises at whose core is the consumption of fossil fuels. All well and good, but where will Gore's plan take us by shunning this “most dangerous crisis” of peak oil?

I believe he would reply that his plan ingeniously dissolves the peak oil predicament. He said in his lecture, “The answer [to these crises] is to end our reliance on carbon based fuels.” Therefore, I surmise that he thinks his plan automatically diffuses the peak oil threat -- and this may be a second reason for pushing hard for a ten year timetable. So there's no need to bring up the unpleasantness of the depletion of a resource you are planning to stop using. It is a college debate-team gambit and politically clever, two characteristics we associate with Gore.

Dismissal of, or, in Gore's case, avoiding peak oil is common among those fervently committed to halting greenhouse emissions. They focus on the environment, yet peak oil is a geological phenomenon with vast socioeconomic repercussions they rarely consider. Further, one's “take” on peak oil’s severity and significance is connected with collective identity, how we define ourselves in relation to -- please pick a concept you are comfortable with: mythology (J. Campbell); ideology (Marx); episteme (M. Foucault); paradigm (T. Kuhn); culture, or, more concretely, the American Dream, Gaia, etc.

Some who see climate crisis as the greatest threat humanity faces welcome the arrival of peak oil, as if its primary or sole outcome will be to serve their goals by lowering carbon emissions. They do not consider how our house-of-cards economy and our lifestyles rest upon oil. Nor do they come fully to terms with resource depletion, which is related to but not the same as polluting and plundering the earth’s ecosystems. They overlook how business-as-usual thinking will turn to coal and nuclear energy -- probably in desperation -- once we are on the downside of peak oil. This is just a sampling of the dilemmas peak oil poses. Hence, Al Gore has made a bet with himself -- perhaps non-consciously -- that we will be spared all this if we rush to enact his plan.

However, Gore’s gamble is a decade or more too late. Warning signs of peak oil are breaking out all over; and we’re merely entering, as Chris Skrebowski[i] notes, the foothills of cascading and intensifying problems. Indeed, I’d like someone to explain how our economy can revive, that is, grow, out of its latest bubble crisis under the emerging and enveloping constraints introduced by peak oil.

In this sense, Al's silence in light of the extraordinary socioeconomic changes now beginning is, I’m afraid, more of the “status quo” policy analysis he claims to have transcended. Put directly, for all his creativity and thoroughness Al Gore is ignoring a geophysical reality that is empirically worsening and threatening our lives with each passing day. Merely pressing the “Easy Button” to convert the infrastructure of electricity generation in ten years is reckless, no matter how dire our situation or how desirable the target of non-carbon based energy. Let me observe that this time frame alone invites a “haste over judgment and quality” mindset and multiple occurrences of Murphy’s Law. It follows that Gore appears to be overselling the science and technology supporting his plan, a topic others are addressing.[ii]

Indeed, his speech reveals a tension between the two roles he is playing in the climate crisis debate: public servant and private venture capitalist. We know his renowned role as the ultimate and tireless public policy wonk. Accordingly, he was introduced as a Nobel Peace Prize winner and former Vice President of the United States. Fair enough, he is both of these; yet I wonder how the audience would have reacted -- with Gore standing before a backdrop of large American flags -- if the solemn professional voice introducing him had cited his less publicized private role as a venture capitalist.

I know he’s already a multi-millionaire; but that never stopped Rockefeller or Vanderbilt. I think Gore believes venture capitalism is the appropriate market mechanism to develop alternatives to fossil fuels. Making a ton of money for his partners and himself is necessary to the incentive package needed to motivate entrepreneurs to get things done. But is this the model to follow with peak oil at hand?

Let’s discuss Gore’s private interest in climate change since it highlights a great deal about the manner in which he is marketing the “generational challenge.” Last November he became a partner in a venture capital firm; to delve into Gore’s financial stakes in this partnership begin with Adam Lashinsky’s “Go West” column.[iii] Writing in Harper’s Magazine, Eric Janszen[iv] caused a stir by sardonically noting:

Improbably, Gore threatens to become the poster boy for the new new new economy: he has joined the legendary venture-capital firm Kleiner Perkins Caufield & Byers…to oversee the “climate change solutions group,” thus providing a massive dose of Nobel Prize–winning credibility that will be most useful when its first alternative-energy investments are

taken public before a credulous mob.

Janszen goes on to wryly insinuate the conflict between Gore's public and private roles, writing, "Luckily, Al Gore will be making principled venture capital investments on our behalf." Again, I do not care if Al Gore suffers from the cardinal sin of greed and, frankly, I would find this "explanation" wanting if he does. Janszen's derision raises, nonetheless, a legitimate question about Gore commingling public -- or utilitarian -- and private (for profit) roles.

Let me close without further commentary by asking my reader to envision two reactions to what I wish Gore had said in his "Generational Challenge" lecture. The first reaction to imagine is that of the public; the second is that of his venture capital partners at Kleiner Perkins, et al. Here is what I wish Gore had included in his speech:

In the spirit of connecting the dots, I've got to say that peak oil -- of which many of you may be only vaguely aware -- is upon us. You see, my friends, it's not 30 years off and therefore our progeny's problem; and it's not a simple matter of throwing a light switch to change energy platforms. For example, do you know that the governor of Vermont recently said he might as well declare a state of emergency right now, in the summer, because many Vermonters will not be able to pay their fuel oil bills this winter? Or that people are now stealing gasoline? And that the airline, trucking, and automobile industries are absolutely teetering on the brink from $120.00 a barrel oil? WalMart and even such seemingly unaffected institutions as healthcare are not far behind. Do you know that right now many municipalities are scrambling to figure out how to save on fuel costs lest they go bankrupt or radically cut essential public services? There are widespread and untold personal misfortunes playing out as well because of peak oil. Most importantly, it is now clear to me that we will not solve our climate crisis if we do not simultaneously confront the socioeconomic destructive potential of peak oil.

To fully appreciate our situation we need to connect a few more dots: we must admit that the economic/financial crisis remains unbounded. Who knows how wide and deep it will go and what effects it will have on our ability to finance our energy conversion? And this has to be said: we must deal with fresh-water scarcities and population pressures. In American the more people you have, the more energy and water is consumed. Above all else, we can agree that our nation's institutions cannot withstand many more 2007s and 2008s without serious damage and possible breakdowns.

So today I'm asking you to do more than listen to me, join our movement, and write your members of Congress. Those are important tasks, but don't involve you enough in shaping and contemplating our collective destiny. We need as a nation, businesses, industries and individuals to drastically reduce our consumption of energy. It's simple to state, but it will not be easy to accomplish. You see, it will take immense amounts of energy to build this carbon free electric system I've laid out today; and with peak oil bearing down on us we will face energy shortages at the very moment in history when we'll need all the energy we can produce to transform and reconfigure our way of life.

This is a lot to put before you all at once; therefore, I plan to elaborate on these themes in a series of discussions about our nation's future…

* * * * *

Dan Bednarz, Ph.D. is a peak oil activist based in Pittsburgh and has published articles on public health and administration. He can be reached at Danbpgh "at"verizon "dot" net.

[i] Skrebowski, Chris. 2008. "Chris Skrebowski on BBC News." Energy Bulletin. May 23. energybulletin.net. "This, if you like, is what I would describe as the "foothills of peak oil." This is the first peak that we've achieved. ... in light, low-sulphur crude... The next peak will be when the producer countries' exports start falling. Because their growth rates are differentially much higher than those in the West.

[ii] Cohen, Dave. 2008. "Clean energy redemption?" ASPO, February 13. aspo-usa.com.

"Al Gore's fantasy energy challenge." ASPO, July 23. aspo-usa.com.

[iii] Lashinsky, Adam. 2007. "Clean energy will make Gore rich." CNN Money.com/Fortune gowest.blogs.fortune.cnn.com. November 20.

[iv] Janszen, Eric. 2008. “The Next Bubble: Priming the markets for tomorrow’s big crash: Priming the markets for tomorrow's big crash.” Harper’s Magazine, February. harpers.org.

* * * * *

Further Reading, also by Dan Bednarz:

"Peak Oil and the health care crisis in America", June 28, 2006:

culturechange.org

"Sicko and the Ecology of Health Care Reform", summer 2007:

culturechange.org

By Jan Lundberg:

"Why Al Gore's Nobel speech rates just a 'B'", Culture Change Letter #176:

culturechange.org

"The inconvenient truth about 'An Inconvenient Truth': Why Al Gore is part dangerous politician", Culture Change Letter #138:

culturechange.org

"Al Gore fires up hearts but oozes myth," Culture Change e-Letter #64:

culturechange.org