"Drill, Baby, Drill" debunked as "Burn, Baby, Burn the Planet"

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When Republican Sarah Failin and her titular senior running mate McPain chant "Drill, Baby, Drill," or, for that matter, the wiser and more honest Barack Obama is in favor of more offshore drilling, there is no possibility of energy independence through maximizing domestic petroleum. The main reason is not the many years' lead time for oil-field development:

Consumption would continue (assuming the economy still supports it), and imported oil would keep coming unabated. Why? Because the more efficient wells of such places as the Persian Gulf would keep providing more oil far more cheaply than any new wells the U.S. can drill. This would be true even though Arabs' wells are starting to peak in flow and decline. As long as we're consuming oil big time, the oil will get over to us. World trade is the holiest goal of the Republicans and Democrats.

Here's the clincher: Net energy return, or energy profit ratio, determines greatly the true, full cost (including cost hidden by subsidies) and availability to the "producer" and the more aptly named "consumer." And new wells drilled are approaching on average a net-energy loss. Moreover, the petroleum industry has been seeing fewer and fewer holes that actually pan out.

A program of mild reduction in oil consumption would work the same way as going for maximized drilling: cutting back on oil use will result in the more efficient, high net-energy fields being exploited still, such that the U.S. would continue getting oil from elsewhere at lower cost and comparatively greater profit for the chain of oil industry players.

Therefore, the correct approach to cutting oil imports and stop burning up the atmosphere with this toxic fossil fuel is to have a policy of completely avoiding oil consumption to the extent possible. Eschewing oil in its entirety is not feasible now for many reasons, but if the U.S. adopted a goal of eliminating oil as a main energy source, we would achieve the greatest level of energy independence. This is understandably hard for many of today's lifestyle to imagine calmly.

At the same time, we would have to recognize that alternative energy sources are not nearly as net-energy desirable or profitable as oil was in its heyday. So their maximization will be constrained (for various reasons), and we'll be forced to begin the most meaningful and lasting work of redeveloping our local economies along the Jeffersonian small farmer/citizen model.

"Burn, Baby, Burn" was a 1960s slogan reputedly used by Black Power leader Stokely Carmichael (or was it Rap Brown?), regarding urban ghetto unrest. Riots in major cities were over racial discrimination and material deprivation. A high proportion of black and brown draftees going off to die and kill yellow people in Vietnam probably added fuel to some ghetto fires and looting. Malcolm X called it "The chickens coming home to roost." Such leaders did not want to see more fires or riots, but they were recognizing inevitable consequences of inequality and oppression. It is puzzling why riots are rare nowadays, when conditions did not get better for African Americans (or for whites in general). Could reasons include the well-paying volunteer military, high incarceration rate, the preponderance of illegal and legal drugs, and the weakening family/community structure? At any rate, to borrow from "Burn, Baby, Burn" by chanting "Drill, Baby, Drill," is Sarah Failin's irresponsible reference to inciting -- as most people took it -- riots, fires and looting, unless she has no clue of the origins of an historic phrase. No doubt at least one of her handlers must have.

For the Republicans to adopt a slogan "Drill, Baby, Drill" they are clearly advocating burning -- of oil and of the planet's precious oxygen, even though the goal is idiotically unfeasible. They pay lip service to getting alternatives to petroleum in place. The insane choice of nuclear power is more "burning" than any, if we consider the inevitable radiation burns that could persist for millennia. Back to "Burn, Baby, Burn": we'll see riots and cities in flames soon enough, especially if the foolishness of an energy policy of waste continues, and basic fundamentals of social equity are ignored through more attempts at "growth." We are strung out on "cheap" petroleum for our food supply, and shortages will be devastating on an unprecedented scale. This can happen soon in these volatile post-cheap oil times.

No substitutes for oil are going to keep our consumer economy going. The infrastructure is not about electrical energy from just any (less efficient, mind you) source, but rather about liquid fuels. Nukes, solar panels, coal -- they don't provide the cheap, energy-packed liquid fuels and materials we got from cheap oil. Now that the easily produced oil is clearly drying up, we don't hear from the presidential candidates or the rest of the Establishment that it's peak oil at play. We get phony messages of hope for a continuation of the status quo. It's unraveling, as financial collapse is merely part of general collapse based primarily on petrocollapse. Can you imagine if oil was priced at under $10 a barrel -- reflecting low extraction and distribution and refining costs, as was the case decades ago -- and seeing today's financial collapse? Possibly. But building our way out of the mess would be possible, as happened in the 1940s with advantageously lower population size and most of the farmland intact. Not in today's degraded ecological world.

This is the difference between petroleum-investment banker Matt Simmons' analysis and mine: we both see the potential

for the oil market to bring about chaos such as speedy, widespread famine, as soon as panic-buying of escalating-in-cost oil results in hoarding. And my friend Matt is doing a great job of convincing more audiences than I ever had, concerning the realities of oil dependence in a peak-oil world. But he believes that after collapse there remains the necessary and inevitable job of repairing and rebuilding the whole energy infrastructure again. I do not believe it is possible or desirable. Goodbye to the Age of Oil. That means goodbye to cheap energy and materials that we took for granted as part of technological progress.

One problem in many people's minds is that the price of oil will decline and remain low, for whatever reasons, such that it's truly competitive with any other form of energy -- starting the whole cycle of supply and demand again. The flaw in that assumption is it's lack of understanding of the meaning of peak and peak's effects. With collapse, Humpty Dumpty will not be put back together again. But regardless, we need a policy of getting away from oil and all fossil fuels, and nuclear, now.

The sooner we move on with redesigning society without all that cheap energy, plastics, pesticides, etc., that we guzzled, we will be saving lives and our unraveling climate -- not until then. Let it begin. Redesign, Baby, Redesign. Conserve, Baby, Conserve. Garden, Baby, Garden. Depave, Baby, Depave. Pedal, Baby, Pedal. Sail, Baby, Sail. Peace, Baby, Peace.

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Matt Simmons on Peak Moment TV, from his ASPO-USA presentation Sept. 22, 2008:

wordpress.peakmoment.tv