

A Way Out of Iraq: Relocalize Economic Life

Contributed by Aaron G. Lehmer
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In this guest column, activist Aaron Lehmer makes plain the hopeless game plan of dominating oil supplies in the Middle East, against the backdrop of peak oil. His vision of relocalizing our economies, in ways that bring us all closer to one another and with all life, is as practical as it is spiritual. - JL

Any lingering delusions about the nobility of the Iraq War were shattered in late October with former State Dept. Chief of Staff Lawrence Wilkerson's admission that the Bush team had seriously considered launching military operations to seize oilfields throughout the Middle East. Thankfully, only Iraq has managed to be the test case for such insanity -- at least for now.

Wilkerson has been getting a lot of media buzz in recent months -- along with plenty of pummeling from right-wing pundits -- for calling former boss Colin Powell's WMD speech to the United Nations "the lowest point" in his life. Wilkerson's latest comments reveal just how precarious the White House regards America's present energy situation.

At a recent foreign policy event put on by the New America Foundation in Washington, D.C., the retired colonel stated: "No one ever likes to talk about SUVs and oil and consumption. Well, we have an economy and a society that is built on the consumption of those resources. We better get fast at work changing the foundation -- and I don't see us fast at work on that, by the way, another failure of this administration, in my mind -- or we better be ready to take those assets."

That last statement revealed Wilkerson's kinship with the late George Kennan, a chief foreign policy architect during the Cold War. Acknowledging that the U.S.'s disproportionate control over and access to the world's wealth at the time was without historical parallel, he argued that America's real task was "to maintain this position of disparity," by force if necessary.

Little has changed it seems, since the fall of the Soviet Union. Wilkerson continued: "We had a discussion in policy planning about actually mounting an operation to take the oilfields in the Middle East, internationalize them, put them under some sort of U.N. trusteeship and administer the revenues and the oil accordingly. That's how serious we thought about it."

It would be easy to dismiss such commentary as ludicrous were it not for the ominous energy backdrop against which such dark policy options are being imagined.

Indeed, if the views of an increasing number of energy analysts, geologists, and ecologists hold any merit -- the end of our oil-binging days are coming fast -- perhaps far sooner than we'd like to admit. According to the latest estimates of the Association for the Study of Peak Oil, we have until 2010 before the world reaches maximum global production. That's the point at which we've pumped exactly half of the world's oil out of the ground -- the easy-to-get-at, easy-to-refine stuff -- after which the cost of increasingly scarce oil will continue to rise. Forever.

The idea that the end-game of fossil-fueled industrialization is near is no longer a fringe concept, having been spotlighted recently in National Geographic, The New York Times, Rolling Stone, and USA Today. You can even get bumper stickers!

Environmentalists like me like to think that some combination of efficiency and renewable energy technologies will take us into some post-fossil fuel nirvana where our daily consumerist lives will change very little. We'll just be happily motoring around in hydrogen cars (never mind that hydrogen is just an energy carrier, not a source, and that it presently comes almost entirely from natural gas). We'll continue to power our ever-expanding suburbs with rooftop solar panels and wind mills (never mind that these require energy-intensive mining and large-scale industrial manufacturing). Oh yes, and we'll be eating a comparably diverse range of foodstuffs shipped from around the globe like we do now, only they'll be grown organically!

Of course, all of these hopes and dreams, at bottom, would still require a fossil fuel- or nuclear-powered infrastructure to sustain them. What's worse is that our entire society is built upon this unsteady energy platform, leaving us little time to prepare for an energy-constrained future.

A report commissioned this year by the U.S. Department of Energy analyzed the social and political changes ahead for America as we pass the world oil production peak. The report's principal author Robert L. Hirsch, an energy analyst at Science Applications International Corp., concluded that it will take more than a decade for the U.S. economy to adapt to declining oil production. And that would be if a "crash program" to massively develop alternative fuels and reduce our energy consumption were undertaken right away. Failure to embark upon such a crash program in time would create a "liquid fuels deficit for more than two decades" that would "almost certainly cause major economic upheaval."

The implications for American consumer society are colossal. Given that cheap fossil fuels are dwindling -- even major energy corporations like Chevron are admitting that they're not finding any more major reserves to power our

skyrocketing consumption -- the jig is up.

Needless to say, China and India's hundreds of millions of aspiring car owners won't help alleviate the energy crunch that's coming. Seen in this context, our military misadventures in Iraq are the inevitable, shameful result of our addiction to a way of life with no long-term future.

Some say we're just greedy creatures finally receiving our ecological comeuppance. Sure we're greedy. We've struck black gold. Oil's power and allure was so great that any species would have taken advantage of it. But is that the end-all, be-all of human behavior and destiny?

Thus far, there have been literally thousands of recorded cultures and civilizations during the course of human history. And as Jared Diamond, renowned author of *Collapse*, reminds us, those that survived for millennia did so just fine without all the energy-intensive technological grandeur to which we've grown so accustomed. Some of these societies even lived in relative harmony with one another and with the earth. Most importantly, they lived within their means.

It may be that there's simply no way that we're going to avoid a dramatic reduction of our population in the transition to a post-oil-powered world. At the very least we'll need to dramatically reduce our consumption. In the short term, this probably means more conflict over dwindling resources, more religious fundamentalism, more scapegoating of disempowered groups, and plenty of mass hysteria.

That's the bad news. The upside is that the current group of oil-coated bandits that's now in power won't be able to offer anything positive in terms of real solutions to this unfolding crisis -- affording the rest of us with the opportunity to embark upon a cultural transformation toward socially inclusive, ecologically balanced, and locally-rooted ways of living.

C.J. Campbell, author of *The End of the First Half of the Age of Oil* has remarked: "The World faces a discontinuity of unprecedented magnitude, undermining the very fabric of society and economic wellbeing. In short, it faces a Second Great Depression, triggered not by Peak Production itself but by the perception of the long downward slope that follows… The transition will be a time of great tension and difficult adjustment, with a strong possibility of more resource wars. But as the Century passes, the survivors will come to terms with their new environment. It may herald a new regionalism as world trade declines, and people again come to live within their own resources. It might indeed be a time of happiness giving people a new-found respect for themselves, each other and the environment within which Nature has ordained them to live."

Knowing this offers hope that there can be balance, connection, and genuine peace for humankind -- qualities of being and interaction that we've lost in the rush to get more things at an ever-faster pace. Sooner or later, we were bound to run into the brick wall of eco-reality. David Room, Director of North American Operations for Post Carbon Institute, asks: "Are we but crash test dummies? Will we brace for impact and watch our wasteful lives flash before our eyes? Or will we ditch the aging script that's been written for us by the 'oil-a-garchies' and begin relocalizing?"

Should we choose to accept it, our task now is preparing for energy descent, which will require us to relocalize our lives and economies. We must re-seed our regional landscapes with locally grown (and locally eaten!) food, re-connect work and family life, and re-create strong, enduring communities that honor and affirm everyone's inherent value.

We can begin by producing and distributing more of what we need locally, creating plenty of meaningful vocations and interconnected business opportunities that increase community self-reliance. In time, this re-weaving of locally-centered lifeways will also allow us to retrench from imperial scheming for control of the world's resources and veer us off our dangerous collision course with "economic upheaval."

The eventual rewards to be gained from relocalizing our economies in ways that bring us all closer to one another and with all life on this planet are as yet unfathomable. Indeed, they may be the most exciting, spiritually fulfilling days thus far in human experience.

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