

End-time for USA upon oil collapse

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
18 June 2005

Culture Change Letter #100 --
A scenario for a sustainable future

It is becoming clear to more and more energy analysts that the United States of America as we know it will not endure for long. However, the U.S. may not last at all, if oil collapse and the birth of a sustainable culture play out freely. Primarily considering the implications of "peak oil," let us explore key unforgiving trends, dispassionately, so as to arrive at a truthful and hopefully constructive vision for the future.

Most scenarios reflect wishful thinking or influence from the mass media, academia and industrial interests. Rather than predictions such as the promise of a technologically green consumer society -- a popular preference -- a clear analysis must include all the main elements however unpalatable. To create a better world we must first deal with hard reality. What is ahead that we cannot change? When that question is faced honestly, the possibility is greater to affect future change in a positive way. And there is hope in the resurgence of community and renewed appreciation of nature.

I am a petroleum-industry analyst, although I last saw any money from the oil industry back in 1988 when I told Exxon and Mobil I was terminating my market research business. My office then became an environmental institute, and I proceeded to get a much clearer picture of oil's place in the world than from my previous sixteen years known for publishing "the bible of the oil industry," the Lundberg Letter. My understanding of oil and energy in the economy and culture has brought me to my present analysis about the end of the United States of America.

Here are my limits on my objectivity: I have no investments other than wanting to see family and friends do especially well in terms of health and happiness in the extremely turbulent phase ahead. I am further biased in wanting the Earth to have maximum biodiversity, but either the web of life holds or it will not. I will shed no tears over the disappearance of General Motors, for example, which is teetering already. Such a corporation -- found guilty for destroying dozens of cities' electric rail trolley service -- is an enemy of the planet and of the people.

The fall of the U.S. may be the swiftest empire collapse in world history. It is obvious that the U.S. population and the nation's infrastructure is heavily petroleum dependent. The U.S. peaked in oil production (extraction) in 1971. The world may be peaking now, as some evidence indicates, or in a few short years. As a severe energy shortage is on tap as soon as the gap between supply and demand is felt by the market, and the Earth gives noticeably less oil than just recently, there will be a cascade of impacts on the economy and people's lives.

So it will not matter how much oil is still in the ground, or if other

ways of obtaining and using energy are more renewable and greener: A massive shut down of petroleum supply brought about by market panic and economic collapse will terminate corporate globalism and the political landscape as well. [As discussed in this essay and in links at the end, production of other forms of energy cannot substitute for petroleum and will not be maximized for readiness anyway.] Many aspects of modern society are at a breaking point already, whether one looks at the Iraq war over oil, the housing market bubble, U.S. debt and deficits, or the prospects of damaging weather from the fast distorting of the planet's climate.

Not only will the sudden oil shortage ahead mean the Final Energy Crisis, the present economy only works on growth: so even a plateau of global petroleum extraction -- what seems to be happening now, although it is being called "insufficient refining capacity for poor quality crude oil" -- would mean the house of economic cards collapses on its own. Recovery from such an event, even if not from oil shortage, would appear impossible because supplies of oil would be among the commodities suddenly scarce, and this would have a terminal effect on much economic activity and people's lives.

With so much local business and self-sufficiency destroyed by Walmartization, costs of urban sprawl, medical costs and the drain of militarism, impacts from oil collapse will be brutally thorough in the U.S. and almost as thorough in all other industrialized societies. Security, leadership and individual self-responsibility we have almost none: "We have met the terrorist and the terrorist is us," to paraphrase Walt Kelly's Pogo.

I decided to outline my scenario of the end of the United States after co-hosting a talk show on San Francisco radio with Martin Matthews. We got a call in on the air from a lady wanting to know if there were any relevant politicians to deal with peak oil. I came close to suggesting Congressman Roscoe Bartlett, who quoted me on the effects of peak oil before Congress on C-SPAN television. But the Congressman's office had told me he would not be seeking higher office. Martin and I continued our conversation over some Arab food and I outlined my end-of-the-USA outlook. Later that same day, June 16, 2005, I conferred with Lonnie Maxfield of Jivan Institute in Olympia, Washington by telephone. He asked me if I thought the U.S.A. would survive long beyond this time in history. We agree the U.S. will not last.

The social fabric has been unraveling for several decades, and the lack of solidarity or social cohesion is one of the reasons there must be a collapse in the U.S. -- after all, do you see community-spirit on the rise and an actual transition underway to a sustainable and ecogocial society? As this series of essays has explored, people are driven apart by materialism and trying to separate themselves from nature.

Susan Meeker-Lowry, author and editorial contributor to Culture Change, points out that people are noticing climate change and the prospect of tighter energy supplies, and are seriously worried about the implications such as heating their homes and paying their taxes. "But we need to be dealing with these issues as a community, not as individual family units. We need to be creating safety nets for ourselves, preparing for the day when the bills won't get paid because there's no more money and we need to defend our homes from the wealthy who will try and take them away for nonpayment of mortgage or taxes,"

she says.

Energy fantasy and reality

What about a "solar economy" or "the Hydrogen Economy"? Won't technology save us, when it's so clear that SUVs are so inefficient and silly? Can't the great American public meet the challenge of dwindling energy supplies and "take back America" by electing at least another Jimmy Carter who's more reasonable about energy?

The problem with renewable energy is that it's not so renewable. The energy production ratio of non-oil energy extraction is comparatively poor. Additionally, the present infrastructure is entirely geared toward petroleum which allows for our vast, consuming population size. Renewable energy will have its niche in local applications, but it will never power a global economy. Renewable energy will not replace a fleet of vehicles, just for the reason that not enough rubber trees can meet the demand of the necessary tires. The existence and claims of renewable energy have mainly served to obscure the urgent need to simply slash consumption of energy -- whatever the production mode. It may be too late to remake the U.S. infrastructure to run commerce and transportation on, say, renewable-energy powered trains, even if they were very energy efficient and were ready to manufacture on a huge scale.

There are short-term signs and indicators that the U.S. has worn out its already slim welcome the world over. That has not stopped the U.S. rapacious military industrial complex and its financial and political juggernaut, as depicted in John Perkins' book *Confessions of an Economic Hit Man*. Another "intelligence" caper and bloody coup or invasion is always in the bag of tricks of the U.S., whether or not the rest of the world wants an end to the interference and rip-offs. The prestige of the U.S. may not be of much concern to the zealot U.S. neo-conservatives or greedy marketeers, but the game is certainly all too clear -- as the Downing Street Memo and other evidence reveals. Climate change is more blood on the U.S.'s hands, as the nation is the biggest greenhouse gas emitter and will not even cut back on the easy waste in energy consumption.

Yet, world opinion and a social movement much stronger than the weak anti-war movement in the U.S. do not comprise a significant opposition to the U.S. There is not even clarity on who the enemies of the U.S. really are, when Osama bin Laden and his group had been U.S. operatives and not seriously targeted by the long arm of the (U.S.) law. So, absent a huge military/terroristic attack on the U.S. that would really bring it to its knees, which may involve nuclear weapons, I examine more certain factors and outcomes: the effects of oil collapse.

An informative analysis, *Last Days of America?*, by Stuart Rodman, is on the Culture Change website. It is a force-of-nature kind of exploration on how today's oil-war mongering society is going to be unsuccessful in sustaining itself, rather than a political analysis of the post-oil-collapse USA. Rodman writes, "We live in an America long since petroformed by the oil industry from a land of independent family farms and businesses, to a nation dependent like serfs on their lord, on the barons of oil for everything from fuel to fertilizer. Today as we watch

without protest, a new Feudalism is being forged worldwide by their mighty armies, our indignation subdued by the prospect of fueling our SUVs with cheap ill begotten oil. And we... kill for them. " Rodman opens his essay with a quote by Jay Hanson, the creator of dieoff.org: "An 'energy-limited economy' is one where more energy cannot be had at any price. The global economy will become 'energy-limited' once global oil production peaks…."

There is no Plan B for coping with a terminal oil shock to the economy. Therefore, a breakdown of society must ensue, starting with "the trucks will not be pulling into Wal-Mart or Safeway," as I was quoted in Congress on May 12, 2005. When people cannot get transportation to their jobs, business stops. People will be panicking first about gasoline, and then about how much food and water they have -- tragically trying to protect those meager supplies in an unforgiving urban environment. Nature has been made to stop offering up the simple essentials of life, when the privatized fortress and paved-over toxic cities rely on money and cheap energy to move everything around the world. The world as we "know" it will end but we'll get to know the world as it really is a lot better.

Die off will kick in first in terms of riots and killings by armed marauders, and "the police and military will not be able to keep order more than a few days, if at all" [my statement in Congress]. Next will come starvation, and cannibalism can only get people so far -- especially with rampant disease and lack of clean water to drink. Starvation will take care of perhaps 95% (ninety-five per cent) of the petroleum-dependent populations in the U.S. and perhaps elsewhere in modern industrialized countries. Did I mention overpopulation? The simple fact is that population has far overshot the ecological carrying capacity of the whole planet, especially in the fossil fuelish/foolish U.S.A. And petroleum is how food is grown, distributed, packaged and prepared.

After two months, most of the starvation will have had its effect because only the largest and strongest men can fast 50 days perhaps (with good water supply). Malnutrition and poor water quality will take out millions of people afterwards, as was seen in Iraq after the Gulf War during U.S.-imposed U.N. sanctions.

The U.S. and the International Red Cross will be powerless to prevent the disintegration of the food system and the workings of equitable distribution -- already a major problem that undermines faith in the present system and nation. People will be looking to their own immediate geographical areas to secure survival, as travel will be limited to using one's feet, bicycles, horses, and sailboats. Some fuel will exist, but it will be hoarded and killed for (as it is now in an Iraq War). Already, we can see how the U.S. as we know it will be mostly powerless, helpless and irrelevant -- although still dangerous or helpful in its throes. Florida will keep its oranges and Maine its lobsters.

I don't foresee large populations of humans living in cities with large buildings if energy is a problem and food has to be grown by others, on land outside the paved-over portion, and brought in. In any event, after enough time for buildings to age, decay or come down from earthquakes, I don't see the energy and materials available for keeping huge-buildinged cities humming. We are talking about scale: smaller cities with intelligent design for density could endure and thrive. We

may discover the upper limit of green cities, hopefully without again going too far beyond ecological carrying capacity. But It is worth remembering that the Agricultural Revolution that led to today's monumentally unsustainable civilization involved cities that by necessity heavily exploited people and outlying land, despite "the hanging gardens of Babylon." Cities have been romanticized, but they are an abomination compared to pristine nature.

The U.S. has been based on an orgy of resource appropriation and waste, as in a party with no tomorrow. "Party's Over!" - the first two words of my review of Beyond Oil - The Threat to Food and Fuel in the Coming Decades (Gever, Kaufmann, et al) published in Population and Environment: a Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies, Spring 1990. [An excerpt of my review written in 1988-89 is at dieoff.com/page20.htm] The party known as the U.S. is all but over except in the minds of oblivious revelers already being kicked out of the house (of nature and the world community). However, sober heads will start to prevail as the new dawn breaks.

The picture starts to brighten

Before I paint my picture of hope that I believe is based on solid analysis, let us first examine the common assumption that people are going to behave as ruthlessly as ever. Here is the reason I believe we need not expect feudalism, mafia kingdoms and the like: upon oil collapse and the passing of the era of material abundance, people will have learned a lot about the failings of the previous culture. It didn't work, and anything that wants to follow in its footsteps will probably be viewed askance and be questioned and rejected. There may even be the equivalent of a new universal religion that appreciates the Earth and the need to get along in harmony with other species and one another.

After the devastation of the petroleum-powered civilization and its broken, smoldering aftermath, there will not be any other choice than sharing the world. If not, and sustainable models do not become the rule, then humanity will not pull through to keep evolving biologically. We are flirting with extinction in several ways: climate change, nuclear holocaust, and infertility from plastics, pesticides and other threats. Only with careful, respectful "precision living" that corrects all past mistakes of significance, can the human race endure -- given we are not already too far along in bringing about extinction of other species as a prelude to our own extinction.

As soon as people try to rebuild life as working members of a community, because they found right away that they needed each other to grow, gather, hunt and prepare food, a quasi tribal social system will form that looks out for members and maintains armed defense. However, after the rediscovered practices of mutual aid and cooperation bear fruit, there is too much proof of the value of solidarity and sharing resources and skills for there to be a serious threat from the outside. Die off will have taken care of even desperados who scrounged as lone wolves for a while. Life will for a long time not be much better for members of community, as they must eat strangely such as vermin for protein, perhaps cooked over furniture fires.

There will be little threat from within the tribes and the emerging bioregional nations, when the past is rejected for its unworkable, inequitable system that brought about ruin. The excesses of

the past brought about the need for a nonmaterialistic culture. Private property as we know it will cease. Those who imagine their "castles" will protect them and insulate them from the human family will find they need help from others once the hoarded supplies are gone. Survivors surrounding the "castles" may be in a position to take what they want without fear of police cars and the national guard showing up. And, with a low population, there will be plenty of land to try to work with, to derive food, shelter, clothing and warmth. New social norms and tribal law will help break from the past and possibly outlaw incipient reversion to the failed system of exploitation of people and nature. In any case, the "new" model of sharing and cooperation will outdo in productivity any vestiges of the old models of selfishness and trying to insulate oneself or one's family from the surrounding changed world.

The U.S. will thus cease to exist, except perhaps in name for a while, as some patriots cling to the dream or illusion of a romanticized nation. But in practical terms, distant capital cities and bureaucracies will have little to offer surviving towns and communes that got no help in erecting a new, workable political entity based on local land possession and utilization. The energy for military action to enforce a reunification, or to subjugate, will be missing. As the spirit of liberation spreads from those who came together as equals to reinvent human society, any hold outs of today's virtual slaves -- who are somehow still being fed -- may quickly abandon their masters in hope of survival and a better life.

The main long-term job for our collective hope for survival will be restoration of the wounded Earth, as in decommissioning roads and allowing streams to embrace spawning fish again. Communities will have to reward those workers engaging in this essential repair of nature. There is little that can undo climate change already launched by decades of emissions, but tree planting will sequester carbon. Another way to reduce atmospheric heating is to cut down on the urban heat island effect: pavement and rooftops raise city temperatures. This mistake of "development" will have to be undone, because painting these urban surfaces white (sunlight-reflective rather than heat-absorbing, as in icecaps versus asphalt) would be impractical. Any available energy will have to be used for jack-hammering roads and bulldozing away the road bed, for example, because depaving with hand tools is hard enough with thinner pavements of driveways and parking lots.

Just as important will be baby-sitting the nukes. Nuclear power stations cannot be neglected or be subject to lack of back-up electricity. An elite of sacrificing members of the human family will have to guard the weapons of mass destruction and the nuclear waste that we have all been saddled with for hundreds of thousands of years into a compromised future.

This is our world, take it or leave it. Most of us will leave it sometime soon, in any country that is heavily petroleum dependent. But the survivors may do well, as in the lower-populated aftermath of the Black Death in the 14th century.

- Love and peace, Jan

Further reading:

The Nature Revolution, short story by Jan Lundberg:

<http://www.culturechange.org/e-letter-6cont.html>

Energy production ratio (or net energy, or return on energy invested:

<http://www.eclipsenow.org/Facts/alternateenergy.htm>

<http://www.abelard.org/briefings/energy-economics.asp#eroe>

Ted Trainer's writings, including The Simpler Way:

<http://www.arts.unsw.edu.au/tsw/>

and Ted Trainer's Thoughts on the Transition to a Sustainable Society

<http://socialwork.arts.unsw.edu.au/tsw/D75.ThoughtsonTrans.html>

Stuart Rodman's "Last Days of America?" on this website:

<http://www.culturechange.org/issue20/Last%20days%20of%20America.htm>

<http://Dieoff.org>

The Long Emergency by James Howard Kunstler, Atlantic Monthly Press, 2005, New York, NY. www.groveatlantic.com

Green Cities and the End of the Age of Oil

<http://www.commongroundmag.com/2005/cg3206/greencities3206.html>

To donate to Culture Change, please visit
<http://www.culturechange.org/funding.htm>

(secure on-line donating)

Or mail any donation to:

CULTURE CHANGE

P.O. Box 4347, Arcata, California 95518 USA

Telephone and fax: 1-215-243-3144

E-mail: info@culturechange.org

Do you need a speaker on peak oil and matters of energy and environment?

Jan Lundberg gives talks and multimedia presentations. To arrange an appearance, please email him at [jan @ culturechange.org](mailto:jan@culturechange.org) (close up spaces) or phone 1-215-243-3144.

Previous Culture Change Letters:

<http://www.culturechange.org/e-letter-archive.html>

To recommend Culturechange mailing list to a friend, send him or her this link:

<http://lists.mutualaid.org/mailman/listinfo/culturechange>