

The End of Oil, and Government

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The unsustainable U.S. economy and coast-to-coast consumer society that uses more oil than any other nation will keep up its energy gluttony until supplies finally give out.

Because oil is the most critical part of our energy mix, and it supplies critical materials and chemicals besides fuels, a sudden, crippling oil shortage can paralyze most of the work, commerce and law enforcement going on in this country.

Activities such as driving to church or to the beach to clean oil off dying birds will also mostly cease virtually overnight.

How this can happen is simple: the next major geopolitical event in a prime oil-exporting region that cuts off ten per cent or more of the world's oil market will be too great an obstacle to surmount. Strained and fast-dwindling are the reserves of easy-to-extract and light, low-sulfur crude oil. As we have seen since the BP well blowout of April 20, 2010, there are inevitable complications with oil extraction from extreme environments, with unacceptable costs that add great strain to business-as-usual energy production.

No more oil, no more government?

Massive oil dependence, decade after decade -- as environmental, fiscal and military costs mount -- has retarded more than encouraged renewable energy as well as efficient lifestyles. Unchecked oil dependence, along with U.S. imperialism and devastating exploitation of nature, has generated a wide assortment of people inside and outside the U.S. wishing the U.S. government to just go away.

The idea of toppling the U.S. government has much appeal to a small minority of frustrated or rebellious minded people throughout the country, but they have very little power, have no autonomous territory, and are not a military factor. This helps ensure that the U.S. will probably not topple as long as it has more oil than tea. But the government will collapse, probably sooner rather than later due to intensifying global, domestic and ecological pressures. So what will the no-more-oil transformation look like?

Exactly when it will come is unknown, but preparation is already happening on a small scale. Citizens involved in this work are part of a humanitarian movement and are often environmentalists as well. They are up against denial, fear and unstoppable forces of collapse, but these citizens continue to serve their communities and enrich themselves with knowledge and skills. There are and will be some violent, selfish people preparing for post-collapse marauding. That approach has no long-term future simply because community security through cooperation is the historically proven first recourse of societies under internal or external threat.

After the chaos of broken down systems already teetering today -- both infrastructure and social -- reorganizing locally will be the only game in town. Small distances will become great, in effect, as walking, pedal power and sailing take

much more time than oil-driven transport. But we will have more time. Work will become community oriented, or else food and water will not be assured.

To make the case that oil's disappearance means the end of the U.S.A. as we know it, particularly central government in Washington, D.C., let us refer to prior Culture Change articles (referenced below) and consider just a few points:

- Huge bureaucracies are slow enough without political interference from the top.
- Hurricanes Katrina and Rita were strictly regional, but relief came slowly and inefficiently. The positive difference was made largely from grassroots groups such as Common Ground and Food Not Bombs.
- The U.S. is no more prepared for functioning without oil than the average citizen is: hardly at all.
- On the street level, in a riot situation, controlling the populace cannot go on more than a few days if the police, soldiers or firemen are severely stressed. Studies show they must go home to their own families to safeguard essential security. Congressman Roscoe Bartlett brought this up to me in 2005.

Supply-Siders Painted Green

What of "clean energy?" It can be established with certainty only on a decentralized basis, especially as trucks won't be bringing components from far away for much longer. Rare earths from China or lithium from Bolivia will be problematical. Coltan from the Congo, contributing to bloodshed, war and the near extinction of remaining gorillas, may suddenly lose its market.

The supply-siders of today are not just relics of fossil fuel industries exalted by Ronald Reagan, whose legacy is the 1980s' rejection of 1970s' conservation and appropriate-tech development. Many of today's supply-siders wear green hats, and sincerely hate fossil fuels. However, if satisfying demand is the goal, then one is a supply-sider, green or carbon black.

The clean-energy supply-siders respond to the global warming crisis and the Gulf oil gusher disaster with their rallying cry, "Energy can be so clean!" But energy today is basically a totally polluting enterprise, and we live in the present, while greenhouse gases rapidly accumulate. Nevertheless, as the leak in the bottom of our collective boat gets bigger, still the green supply-siders point to future action: "Energy can be so clean!"

What about slashing energy use now to save the planet, without waiting for a technological transformation? Oh no, the priority of almost all funded nonprofit environmental groups is to reach out to the public with an imagined clean-energy economy somewhere down the road. Since when do environmentalists stand for a future economy instead of tackling the present menace? This is the difference between grassroots environmentalism of the 1970s and '80s and what has prevailed since the early '90s onward.

BP = Begin Petrocollapse

What if the reverberations from the Gulf oil gusher kick off socioeconomic troubles in the U.S. beyond the Gulf of Mexico? When the regional economy's falling spending fails to support the surrounding businesses in Louisiana and the Gulf Coast, and the oil slick hurts Florida's economy as the damage moves north along the East Coast, the additional recessionary influence may be stronger than both the stimulus money and consumer spending that many count on.

If oil prices are simultaneously high, and deficit spending reaches its limit, we could well see collapse take hold. Rather than from a geopolitical oil supply crunch, petrocollapse might flow from the BP debacle in the Gulf.

Many changes for the better can result from the terrible dislocations caused by petrocollapse, but to maximize the positive it would help if much more public discussion and planning happened -- whether one is a flag-waving anti-immigration Republican or a pagan member of a Unitarian fellowship. We're all in the same boat, and can see the oil slick and smell the methane escaping.

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Further reading:

End-time for USA upon oil collapse, Culture Change Letter #100, by Jan Lundberg, 18 June 2005

Dissolve the U.S.: an Option for Proactive Change before Collapse, by Jan Lundberg, 18 December 2008