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The Washington Post
washingtonpost.com

The Washington Post

August 10, 2008 Sunday
Every Edition

The Misdirected Energy Debate

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SECTION: FINANCIAL; Pg. G02

LENGTH: 861 words

DATELINE: NEW YORK

Democracy undermines political thought by appealing to the lowest common denominator. As a result, it encourages politicians to pander rather than to seriously propose solutions for real problems.

Consider the current, ill-reasoned debate over energy.

On the Republican side, we have presidential hopeful John McCain, the senator from Arizona, putting forth the myth that drilling for more oil in Alaska and on the Continental Shelf will result in lower prices at the pump.

From the Democrats, we have presidential hopeful Barack Obama, the senator from Illinois, who wants to grab a portion of the oil industry's record second-quarter profits in a wealth-redistribution scheme that would put \$1,000 "energy rebate" checks in the pockets of Americans who finally are beginning to pay the real costs of gasoline.

Both gentlemen are whistling "Dixie" on their way to the November general election, hoping that an electorate shocked by high fuel prices will find their tune -- in this case, the same tune with different verses -- attractive. Both gentlemen, to use the vernacular, are full of it.

And now for the turnabout:

I want the oil companies to do more drilling in Alaska and on the Continental Shelf. If the oil is there and can be gotten without condemning us to environmental perdition, I want it gotten.

But I have no illusions that getting it will lower consumer prices at the pump. Readers of this column know that I applaud those higher prices and advocate the installation of a federal mechanism to keep them high.

The indisputable fact is that high gasoline prices have done more to bring about energy conservation in this country than any corporate average fuel economy (CAFE) rule ever imagined. It would make little sense at this juncture to reduce consumer pain at the pump and thereby undermine the multibillion-dollar investments car companies are now making in fuel-efficient technologies.

That pain is prompting consumers to think more carefully about their choices in the automotive marketplace, and that change in consumer attitude is forcing car companies to work harder to produce vehicles that get more miles per gallon.

So, why support drilling for more oil? It's simple. Oil still runs the world and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. That world is getting nastier and more dangerous every day. We need to greatly reduce our energy exposure to international insanity. That means we need to develop as many U.S. energy resources -- oil, natural gas, solar, wind power, hydropower, nuclear power -- as possible.

And that means, assuming a post-November-elections Congress approves more Alaskan and offshore drilling, that approval should come with a major stipulation -- that any oil yielded by the additional drilling be kept off the global market and applied solely to America's energy needs. If that additional oil somehow lowers prices at the pump, fine. But if those prices remain high or higher, that's even better.

And now for Mr. Obama:

Sir, I like your idea of siphoning some of those profits from the oil companies. But I think your proposed wealth redistribution scheme via \$1,000 individual rebate checks is totally wacky.

What is it you don't understand about what is happening in America now in the matter of energy conservation? There is an excitement, a genuine rush toward the creation of more fuel-efficient technologies, more alternative fuels and the propulsion systems to use them. That excitement is coming from the consumer pain at the pump that you, sir, are so grandly trying to relieve. Stop it! You are messing things up.

Any money you and your fellow Democrats take from the oil companies should be used more intelligently. General Motors, for example, has several million flex-fuel cars and trucks running around the United States. But most of them are still sucking up regular gasoline because there are too few stations, those pumping Ethanol-85, to fuel them.

How about a federal law mandating that the oil companies use a share of their hefty windfall gasoline profits to build a network, a national infrastructure of flex-fuel stations?

And please, sir, don't let your fellow Democrats beat you down with the whine that using automotive ethanol is trading food for humans for fuel for cars. I have done what you and they can do. I have visited alternative fuels companies all over the United States -- Ceres in Thousand Oaks, Calif.; BlueFire Ethanol Fuels in Irvine, Calif.; Coskata in Warrenville, Ill.; and several others.

Their technologies amply demonstrate our ability to produce huge amounts of alternative fuels, ultimately enough to offset our national use of gasoline by 40 percent, without endangering or unduly driving up the cost of human food sources.

Those companies need federal support. A federal government supposedly interested in energy independence should want to give them that support. Politicians who claim to be acting in the best interest of the voters they are so ardently wooing should understand that the best way to help their fellow Americans is to reduce their dependence on foreign oil as quickly as possible, even if that means maintaining considerable pain at the gas pumps.

LOAD-DATE: August 10, 2008

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

DISTRIBUTION: Every Zone

GRAPHIC: IMAGE; By Judy Patrick -- Associated Press; Drilling for oil in Alaska won't guarantee cheaper gas, but that doesn't mean it shouldn't be done -- with a caveat.

PUBLICATION-TYPE: Newspaper