

A Naked Energy Gap

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*This column was written by **Frank J. Gaffney Jr.***

The explosion of a BP oil refinery not far from Houston last week left at least 15 dead and over 100 wounded. It also served as the latest, vivid reminder of a truth we have for too long chosen to ignore: This nation is dangerously vulnerable to severe economic dislocation and possibly dire national-security threats as a result of its excessive reliance on imported oil and the infrastructure that transforms most of that oil into fuel for our transportation sector.

Of course, the limited number of aging and, in some cases at least, increasingly dangerous refineries is but one aspect of this vulnerability. It is not a trivial one, however. Even before this mishap in Texas, domestic demand for gasoline was so high and the capacity to meet it so constrained that refineries had to coordinate scheduled maintenance lest supply fall short, resulting in lines at gas stations across the country. We will be very lucky if this as-yet-unexplained incident does not produce such an outcome, as well as still-higher prices at the pump.

Terrorists have certainly figured out that such impacts can be achieved -- and possibly much worse -- with attacks on other parts of the international infrastructure upon which the United States currently relies for more than 50 percent of its oil needs. Under present circumstances, pipelines blown in Iraq and Saudi Arabia have a ripple effect that can extend to America. Ports and loading facilities can be attacked and taken offline for months or years at a time. Oil-laden tankers can be sunk at sea, with both devastating ecological and perhaps strategic consequences.

Even in the absence of our enemies exploiting the vulnerabilities associated with our dependence on foreign oil, we confront another unsavory reality: Many of those benefiting from the West's purchase of such imported energy are regimes that are unstable or hostile, or both. As a result, the tens of billions of petrodollars flowing to terrorist-sponsoring states each year translate into income that is available, in part, to people trying to kill us -- clearly, an untenable situation if we are serious about prevailing in this War on Terror.

Finally, there is the matter of China. As the prospects for sustaining the kind of economic growth necessary to assure the Communist party's future hold on power become more and more dependent upon imports of energy from abroad, the PRC's aggressiveness in securing these resources is likely to grow concomitantly. Dreadful wars have been precipitated by concerns over access to such resources. If our demand or theirs grows even faster than expected, or supply proves to be less -- or less reliable -- than expected, a casus belli could quickly develop between a rapidly arming China and an over-extended United States.

The good news is that there are things we can do now to begin dramatically reducing our reliance on imported oil. A blueprint for energy security has been developed (it can be found at SetAmericaFree.org) to respond to the national security emergency arising from that dependency. It would take advantage of *available* technologies to make widely available vehicles that can utilize indigenously produced alternative fuels.

Vehicles: Stunning reductions in the consumption of imported oil can be achieved by exploiting the following, existing techniques: "Flexible Fuel Vehicles" that can run on gasoline or alcohol-based fuels, either exclusively or in combination; "hybrid" vehicles which can be powered by either an internal combustion engine or a battery, and "plug-in hybrids," a further refinement that enables the vehicle's battery to be recharged at a standard electrical outlet when not in use. Vehicles utilizing all three can achieve the fuel efficiency equivalent of 500 miles per gallon of gasoline.

Fuel Diversification: We currently have the ability to produce alcohol-based fuels (ethanol and methanol) from biomass, dedicated energy crops, waste products and "clean coal." Moreover, diesel fuels can be created from soybean and other vegetable oils, tires and animal byproducts, as well as coal. Such diversity of supply would greatly reduce the danger associated with more of our existing refineries suffering catastrophic failures, either accidentally or by design.

Since scarcely any electricity in this country is generated from oil, utilizing the grid to power the transportation sector can begin to be accomplished at once -- without increasing demand for imported energy. In fact, thanks to the existing grid's excess capacity at night, it should be possible to support up to 30 percent of the nation's vehicles equipped with plug-in batteries of 20-mile range and not have to expand electricity-generation.

Integrating ultralight materials and fuel additives (some of which can enhance combustion efficiency by up to 25 percent) can also materially help diminish our present reliance on foreign oil and our attendant vulnerability, without compromising safety, performance, or cost-effectiveness.

In short, we have a problem at the moment, Houston, arising from our most ill-advised reliance on imported oil. The cost of the blueprint that can help "Set America Free" is estimated to be about \$12 billion over four years. This is but a fraction of what other, ambitious national undertakings have cost. For example, the Manhattan Project in today's dollars would have had a price tag of \$20 billion; the Apollo program, \$100 billion. The return on investment of such a new, visionary endeavor -- both in terms of enhancing our national security and safeguarding our economic well-being -- promise to be immense. And the truth of the matter is, we cannot afford to remain vulnerable to problems that could well make yesterday's refinery explosion pale by comparison.

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