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Energy fuels a peculiar marriage

WASHINGTON - In this town, left is left and right is right, and seldom the twain doth meet.

But every now and then, even in Washington, political foes come together to pursue a common goal.

Newport native Gary Bauer is a partner in the newest of those oddball marriages. The right-winger probably best known as the ambassador of the "moral values" crowd has teamed up with certified lefties like the Natural Resources Defense Council to make the case that America is too dependent on foreign oil.

Even Bauer is amused by the unlikely union. Both sides will probably have to do a lot of explaining to their followers, he says with a laugh.

Yet some things are important enough that ideological boundaries no longer matter. In this case, Bauer said, what's at stake goes far beyond America's obsession with gas-guzzling SUVs. It's a matter of national security.

"It's pretty clear at this point that we have a growing dependence on oil from a very bad part of the world, where there are a surplus of thugs, dictators and self-anointed kings," said Bauer, who ran for president five years ago and now heads the conservative group American Values.

"From a national security standpoint alone, there is, I think, a much more strong case today than ever before that we need to be pursuing a variety of things."

Bauer and other members of the Set America Free coalition hope to persuade Congress to spend \$12 billion to cut oil use in half by 2015. Specifically, the group would like to see Congress pass a package of tax incentives that would encourage the auto industry to develop more alternative-fuel vehicles.

The thinking is that more Americans will buy vehicles such as gas-electric hybrids if more of them are available and affordable. Thus, the country would no longer be as dependent on foreign oil and would no longer have to pander to oil-rich countries in dangerous parts of the world.

"I, for one, am out of patience in kowtowing to the Saudi royal family because they happen to be sitting on gigantic oil deposits," Bauer said. "I think that has been a problem regardless of who has been sitting in the White House.

"I just think it's healthy, given where the major oil reserves are, for us to look for alternatives - to explore in more places, but also move aggressively to provide incentives so that we can get this new generation of automobiles on the road."

Given the rising cost of gasoline and the instability in the Middle East, Bauer figures Americans are probably more than ready for something different. He doesn't expect drivers to trade in their SUVs. Bauer himself drives a Lexus SUV, one of several large cars he has owned over the years. But new technology means the auto industry is developing big vehicles that are more fuel-efficient. And smaller families and single urbanites have been gravitating for some time toward smaller cars.

"The great value of what happened technologically is that we don't have to get a tremendous mindset change among the American consumer," Bauer said.

"There are real improvements that we can now make in the consumption area that don't present some of the problems they would have 20 years ago, when fuel efficiency meant the kind and size of car that most Americans are not interested in."

The auto industry has the technology to produce SUVs that are hybrids. "What is missing is a little bit of a boost from the federal government that would help make the transition," Bauer said.

Bauer and his left-leaning friends hope to persuade the government to provide that boost. In the next few months, he expects to spend some time on Capitol Hill to begin a dialogue with lawmakers about how they can get the alternative-fuels agenda moving in Congress.

He also hopes to recruit more conservatives to the cause. The left and the right will probably continue to battle over things like drilling for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge or off the nation's shores, Bauer said.

But reducing America's dependence on foreign oil is an issue that people of all political stripes can get behind.

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