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TODAY'S EDITORIAL

America can be free from oil dependence

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Our position: *Cutting reliance on foreign energy is an essential goal for the nation.*

Richard Lugar and Sen. Evan Bayh are not given to hyperbole. When both warn that the nation's security and economic future are at stake in cutting the nation's dependence on foreign oil, Americans should listen.

And when legislation to save 2.5 million barrels of oil a day over the next decade -- 10 million barrels a day by 2031 -- is jointly endorsed by a mainstream Republican and a mainstream Democrat of their stature, it's a measure worthy of serious consideration.

The proposed Vehicle and Fuel Choices for American Security Act they have signed onto uses incentives to encourage the production of gas-electric hybrid vehicles, advanced diesel technology, alternative biomass fuels and lightweight material for cars. It also would promote mass transit. The bill focuses on transportation, which guzzles two-thirds of U.S. oil consumption.

Gasoline prices have dropped considerably since topping \$3 a gallon in the wake of Gulf Coast hurricanes. But increasing global demand for oil and natural gas, coupled with instability in the Middle East and Venezuela, could lead to long-term trouble.

"In the long run," Lugar warns, "this dependence is pushing the United States toward an economic disaster that could mean diminished living standards, increased risks of war and accelerated environmental degradation."

The goal of cutting dependence on foreign oil is achievable. Indiana farmers who grow corn for ethanol could benefit from striving to reach more independence. So could Hoosier autoworkers if domestic car companies gain leadership in fuel-efficient technologies.

Sixty percent of Brazilian automobiles now run on what is essentially ethanol, a cleaner-burning fuel than gasoline. Within a year, Brazil may no longer need to import any oil.

Using more efficient vehicles, the United States could achieve similar independence. A hybrid car -- one that runs on biomass fuels -- could get twice the mileage of conventional cars. One using ultra-light materials could quadruple that mileage.

The national energy bill had it backward in some respects. It provided subsidies to energy companies to encourage more production of gas and oil. What works best are market forces and incentives that encourage consumers to use less.

Lugar, Bayh and other supporters of this new energy measure are on the right path. Others need to follow.