

June 17, 2005

As Toyota Goes ...

By [THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN](#)

So I have a question: If I am rooting for General Motors to go bankrupt and be bought out by Toyota, does that make me a bad person?

It is not that I want any autoworker to lose his or her job, but I certainly would not put on a black tie if the entire management team at G.M. got sacked and was replaced by executives from Toyota. Indeed, I think the only hope for G.M.'s autoworkers, and maybe even our country, is with Toyota. Because let's face it, as Toyota goes, so goes America. Having Toyota take over General Motors - which based its business strategy on building gas-guzzling cars, including the idiot Hummer, scoffing at hybrid technology and fighting Congressional efforts to impose higher mileage standards on U.S. automakers - would not only be in America's economic interest, it would also be in America's geopolitical interest. Because Toyota has pioneered the very hybrid engine technology that can help rescue not only our economy from its oil addiction (how about 500 miles per gallon of gasoline?), but also our foreign policy from dependence on Middle Eastern oil autocrats.

Diffusing Toyota's hybrid technology is one of the keys to what I call "geo-green." Geo-greens seek to combine into a single political movement environmentalists who want to reduce fossil fuels that cause climate change, evangelicals who want to protect God's green earth and all his creations, and geo-strategists who want to reduce our dependence on crude oil because it fuels some of the worst regimes in the world.

The Bush team has been M.I.A. on energy since 9/11. Indeed, the utter indifference of the Bush team to developing a geo-green strategy - which would also strengthen the dollar, reduce our trade deficit, make America the world leader in combating climate change and stimulate U.S. companies to take the lead in producing the green technologies that the world will desperately need as China and India industrialize - is so irresponsible that it takes your breath away. This is especially true when you realize that *the solutions to our problems are already here*.

As Gal Luft, co-chairman of the Set America Free coalition, a bipartisan alliance of national security, labor, environmental and religious groups that believe reducing oil consumption is a national priority, points out: the majority of U.S. oil imports go to fueling the transport sector - primarily cars and trucks. Therefore, the key to reducing our dependence on foreign oil is powering our cars and trucks with less petroleum.

There are two ways we can do that. One is electricity. We don't import electricity. We generate all of our needs with coal, hydropower, nuclear power and natural gas. Toyota's hybrid cars, like the Prius, run on both gasoline and electricity that is generated by braking and then stored in a small battery. But, says Luft, if you had a hybrid that you could plug in at night, the battery could store up 20 miles of driving per day. So your first 20 miles would be covered by the battery. The gasoline would only kick in after that. Since 50 percent of Americans do not drive more than 20 miles a day, the battery power would cover all their driving. Even if they drove more than that, combining the battery power and the gasoline could give them 100 miles per gallon of gasoline used, Luft notes.

Right now Toyota does not sell plug-in hybrids. Some enthusiasts, though, are using kits to convert their hybrids to plug-ins, but that adds several thousand dollars - and you lose your Toyota warranty. Imagine, though, if the government encouraged, through tax policy and other incentives, every automaker to offer plug-in hybrids? We would quickly move down the innovation curve and end up with better and cheaper plug-ins for all.

Then add to that flexible-fuel cars, which have a special chip and fuel line that enable them to burn alcohol (ethanol or methanol), gasoline or any mixture of the two. Some four million U.S. cars already come equipped this way, including from G.M. It costs only about \$100 a car to make it flex-fuel ready. Brazil hopes to have all its new cars flex-fuel ready by 2008. As Luft notes, if you combined a plug-in hybrid system with a flex-fuel system that burns 80 percent alcohol and 20 percent gasoline, you could end up stretching each gallon of gasoline up to 500 miles.

In short, we don't need to reinvent the wheel or wait for sci-fi hydrogen fuel cells. The technologies we need for a stronger, more energy independent America are already here. The only thing we have a shortage of now are leaders with the imagination and will to move the country onto a geo-green path.