

>> Comparing Approaches

"AMERICAN ENERGY POLICY IS NOTHING if not shortsighted and self-indulgent," writes columnist Robert Samuelson. "The hallmark of U.S. energy policy is a steadfast refusal to confront choices." The underlying problem is that we don't agree on what the crux of the nation's energy problem is.

But it appears there is growing agreement that it is time to face some of those choices. Many signs now point to a crisis when it comes to energy. At the very least, there are decisions to be made, and made now. More than four hundred separate pieces of energy-related legislation were before Congress in June 2006. The United States Supreme Court is considering a case that would classify carbon dioxide as an air pollutant, subject to regulation. Many nuclear power generation facilities are nearing the end of their life-expectancy, and we need to decide whether to build more.

Right now, more than half of our energy comes from foreign sources. Some say this is a strategic mistake—not all of these foreign sources of energy wish us well. Many are in unstable parts of the world.

Others say that this reliance on foreign energy blinds us to other consequences of dependence on fossil fuel. They say that the signs of human-caused climate change are all around us, and accelerating.

Some say that new technologies will provide the answer, but experts say this is really just wishful thinking.

The choice we face is not as easy as asking what type of energy source we would like to use. The options involve significantly different futures, because they are rooted in different understandings of the problem. All of them mean that fundamental changes are in store. The real question is this: What is the most pressing issue when it comes to energy, both today and in the future?

This is a question on which there is little agreement. Most agree, though, that time is running out. "Everywhere we look, we can see signs of an exhausted system," writes Paul Roberts in *The End of Oil*, "giving way to something new." It is time to ask collectively what kind of future we want for our society and how we will sustain it. This can't be left to experts or political leaders alone. It's too important, and the answers will affect our daily lives too greatly—as well as those of our children and grandchildren. The public must have a voice in such a fundamental issue.

APPROACH ONE

>> Reduce Our Dependence on Foreign Energy

The crux of this nation's energy problem is that we're dependent on energy resources from unstable, unreliable, and often hostile nations and regions. This is a threat to our national security, our way of life, and our independence. The energy crises in the 1970s, 1990s, and today resulted from hostile actions, of one kind or another, by nations who supply us. Meanwhile, there are tens of billions of barrels of oil here in the United States. It's time for us to reduce our dependence on foreign energy by relying more on domestic resources.



What Should Be Done?

- Explore and exploit domestic sources of petroleum, including some wilderness and offshore areas where there are known reserves.
- Explore and exploit domestic sources of other fossil fuels, such as natural gas and coal.
- Use more coal and natural gas in electric power generation.
- Produce more flexible-fuel vehicles that can run on ethanol and natural gas.
- Invest in liquefied coal.
- Build more domestic refining facilities.
- Standardize clean-air restrictions so all parts of the country have one set of standards.

Some Likely Trade-Offs

- Natural habitats may be affected, as may be the pristine views some beachfront property owners enjoy.
- If we expand our use of the nation's abundant coal reserves, the results of coal mining will be unsightly and damaging to the landscape.
- To the extent that we retreat from these environmental gains, we set an environmental policy precedent that will be hard to change in later years.

In Opposition

- The environmental risks represented by large-scale oil and natural gas exploration are too extreme.
- Most of our oil does not come from unstable nations. In fact, it comes from our neighbors Canada and Mexico—hardly regimes of oppression or terrorist states.
- Overreliance on fossil fuels is already producing severe and lasting consequences. More domestic sources of oil and natural gas are the last thing we need.

APPROACH TWO

>>Get Out of the Fossil-Fuel Predicament

According to this view, the real, and increasingly threatening, problem we have to face is that our long-term reliance on fossil fuels will result in severe damage to the environment. Only recently have we begun to understand how widespread and damaging the effects of carbon emissions are—and how serious a threat global warming poses. A new generation of alternative energy sources can lead to a real, long-term solution. But this nation has only taken baby steps in that direction. Until we develop clean energy sources to the point where they provide most of our needs, we'll never solve the problem.



What Should Be Done?

- Substantially increase direct government investment in alternative, renewable sources of energy.
- Sign and abide by the Kyoto Protocol.
- Build and use more nuclear power plants.
- Provide government support to encourage sales of alternative energy technology (such as wind power) by agreeing to purchase a certain amount.
- Seek out zero-emission alternatives in our personal lives, such as using an electric mower to cut grass, taking public transportation, or walking instead of driving.

Some Likely Trade-Offs

- People will need to buy different products, some of which may be more expensive or less convenient than present choices.
- Certain new technologies, such as hydrogen fuel cells or high-efficiency solar power, will have to be supported by large amounts of government funding until they are thriving on their own and can give true competition to fossil fuels.
- We will need to find a place to dispose of nuclear waste safely.

In Opposition

- Renewable technologies, while promising, are not yet fully viable and ready for widespread use. Our energy appetite is so large that a few "alternatives" will not make a dent.
- There is still no adequate answer to what to do about nuclear waste and we should simply stop generating it.
- This approach ignores that there are real-world, simple, and effective steps such as increasing energy efficiency that can be taken right now and that have been proven to work.

APPROACH THREE

>>Reduce Our Demand for Energy

Until we start cutting back on our use of energy, finding ways to get along with less of it, we'll never solve this problem. Using less energy, either by improving energy efficiency or through other means, is a sensible and prudent response that involves neither wishing the problem away nor destroying the countryside. But as a nation, we remain unwilling to accept restrictions on our freedom to continue our "big energy" lifestyle. Even though it will require major changes in how we live, we've got to curb our appetite and learn to live on less energy.



What Should Be Done?

- Create (and enhance) tax incentives for conservation and reduced use of fossil fuels.
- Significantly increase gasoline taxes to reduce demand.
- Give government agencies more enforcement powers to ensure certain levels of energy efficiency and conservation.
- Enhance and increase industry initiatives, such as the Energy Star program, and boost the CAFE standards for the auto industry.
- Pour much more money and effort into public awareness campaigns similar to the ones that have been mounted in opposition to smoking or drunk driving. Make energy consumption a moral issue.

Some Likely Trade-Offs

- We would be obliged to live with new rules and regulations that require people to moderate their energy use—it can't be voluntary.
- Daily life would change as homes are cooled less in the summer, we make fewer trips to the store, and public places reduce their use of energy-intensive amenities.
- Some costs may go up, as new taxes designed to encourage lower consumption go into effect.

In Opposition

- Americans will not stand for the huge price increases that would be necessary to alter energy consumption.
- Any savings we may be able to eke out by turning down our thermostats will be far overshadowed by population growth.
- It is overly optimistic to think that such gains in energy efficiency as were experienced in the 1970s and 1980s are still possible. The easiest and lowest cost efficiency gains have already been achieved.