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Abstract (Document Summary)

The biggest threat to America and its values today is not communism, authoritarianism or Islamism. It's petrolism. Petrolism is my term for the corrupting, antidemocratic governing practices -- in oil states from Russia to Nigeria and Iran -- that result from a long run of \$60-a-barrel oil. Petrolism is the politics of using oil income to buy off one's citizens with subsidies and government jobs, using oil and gas exports to intimidate or buy off one's enemies, and using oil profits to build up one's internal security forces and army to keep oneself ensconced in power, without any transparency or checks and balances.

In petrolist states like Russia, Iran, Venezuela and Sudan, people get rich by being in government and sucking the treasury dry -- so they never want to cede power. In non-petrolist states, like Taiwan, Singapore and Korea, people get rich by staying outside government and building real businesses.

Our energy gluttony fosters and strengthens various kinds of petrolist regimes. It emboldens authoritarian petrolism in Russia, Venezuela, Nigeria, Sudan and Central Asia. It empowers Islamist petrolism in Sudan, Iran and Saudi Arabia. It even helps sustain communism in Castro's Cuba, which survives today in part thanks to cheap oil from Venezuela. Most of these petrolist regimes would have collapsed long ago, having proved utterly incapable of delivering a modern future for their people, but they have been saved by our energy excesses.

Full Text (738 words)

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As we enter 2006, we find ourselves in trouble, at home and abroad. We are in trouble because we are led by defeatists -- wimps, actually.

What's so disturbing about President Bush and Dick Cheney is that they talk tough about the necessity of invading Iraq, torturing terror suspects and engaging in domestic spying -- all to defend our way of life and promote democracy around the globe.

But when it comes to what is actually the most important issue in U.S. foreign and domestic policy today -- making ourselves energy efficient and independent, and environmentally green -- they ridicule it as something only liberals, tree-huggers and sissies believe is possible or necessary.

Sorry, but being green, focusing the nation on greater energy efficiency and conservation, is not some girlie-man issue. It is

actually the most tough-minded, geostrategic, pro-growth and patriotic thing we can do. Living green is not for sissies. Sticking with oil, and basically saying that a country that can double the speed of microchips every 18 months is somehow incapable of innovating its way to energy independence -- that is for sissies, defeatists and people who are ready to see American values eroded at home and abroad.

Living green is not just a "personal virtue," as Mr. Cheney says. It's a national security imperative.

The biggest threat to America and its values today is not communism, authoritarianism or Islamism. It's petrolism. Petrolism is my term for the corrupting, antidemocratic governing practices -- in oil states from Russia to Nigeria and Iran -- that result from a long run of \$60-a-barrel oil. Petrolism is the politics of using oil income to buy off one's citizens with subsidies and government jobs, using oil and gas exports to intimidate or buy off one's enemies, and using oil profits to build up one's internal security forces and army to keep oneself ensconced in power, without any transparency or checks and balances.

When a nation's leaders can practice petrolism, they never have to tap their people's energy and creativity; they simply have to tap an oil well. And therefore politics in a petrolist state is not about building a society or an educational system that maximizes its people's ability to innovate, export and compete. It is simply about who controls the oil tap.

In petrolist states like Russia, Iran, Venezuela and Sudan, people get rich by being in government and sucking the treasury dry -- so they never want to cede power. In non-petrolist states, like Taiwan, Singapore and Korea, people get rich by staying outside government and building real businesses.

Our energy glutty fosters and strengthens various kinds of petrolist regimes. It emboldens authoritarian petrolism in Russia, Venezuela, Nigeria, Sudan and Central Asia. It empowers Islamist petrolism in Sudan, Iran and Saudi Arabia. It even helps sustain communism in Castro's Cuba, which survives today in part thanks to cheap oil from Venezuela. Most of these petrolist regimes would have collapsed long ago, having proved utterly incapable of delivering a modern future for their people, but they have been saved by our energy excesses.

No matter what happens in Iraq, we cannot dry up the swamps of authoritarianism and violent Islamism in the Middle East without also drying up our consumption of oil -- thereby bringing down the price of crude. A democratization policy in the Middle East without a different energy policy at home is a waste of time, money and, most important, the lives of our young people.

That's because there is a huge difference in what these bad regimes can do with \$20-a-barrel oil compared with the current \$60-a-barrel oil. It is no accident that the reform era in Russia under Boris Yeltsin, and in Iran under Mohammad Khatami, coincided with low oil prices. When prices soared again, petrolist authoritarians in both societies reasserted themselves.

We need a president and a Congress with the guts not just to invade Iraq, but to also impose a gasoline tax and inspire conservation at home. That takes a real energy policy with long-term incentives for renewable energy -- wind, solar, biofuels -- rather than the welfare-for-oil-companies-and-special-interests that masqueraded last year as an energy bill.

Enough of this Bush-Cheney nonsense that conservation, energy efficiency and environmentalism are some hobby we can't afford. I can't think of anything more cowardly or un-American. Real patriots, real advocates of spreading democracy around the world, live green.

Green is the new red, white and blue.

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