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Bush Energy Proposal a Program of Strength through Exhaustion

by *Steven J. Strong*

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With a troubling backdrop of skyrocketing gas prices, and worldwide concerns over energy, President George W. Bush outlined energy proposals last week that he said would help ensure energy independence and national security. Rather, the business-as-usual proposals are nothing more than a program of strength through exhaustion, a recipe for higher prices, and a sure way to increase US dependence on imports of petroleum, natural gas and uranium.

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- Steven J. Strong, RE Insider

Here's a reality check on the President's energy plan, point by point delivered in Washington in a speech on energy last Thursday:

ANWR:

- ANWR will take 10-12 years to develop under the most optimistic plan and will have NO impact on the "price at the pump" in the US.
- There is only one pipeline to market and it is already in use - so no more oil will get to market any faster. And, the majority of "our oil" extracted from Alaska is shipped to Asia (not the US).
- Drilling in ANWR will not help world oil supply or price by anything measurable - now or in the future. At ~1.2% of world supply, there just isn't enough to matter. ANWR will only help further extend oil company profits.
- Investments in conservation will have dramatically better results and will help greatly to facilitate the inevitable transition to the post-petroleum era.

LNG Terminals:

- More LNG terminals will not help the price or supply of oil in the US by anything measurable. LNG terminals bring in natural gas not oil. While we also face future supply issues with natural gas, oil supply is the main problem facing America and the world right now.
- LNG terminals will take many years and large expenditures to construct under the most optimistic plans.
- LNG terminals will further increase the price of energy for Americans as it costs a great deal more to ship liquefied gas long distances in custom, cryogenic tankers (which also will have to be built).
- LNG terminals and storage facilities are very attractive targets for terrorists with massive destructive power.

More Nuclear:

- Nuclear is the most expensive, most dangerous and most toxic energy option and is not a substitute for oil.
- Nuclear plants pose high risks to the American people and to their investors. The liability is so great that no private insurance carrier will insure them. The American people have to carry this risk via the

Price-Anderson act which makes the US Government liable for nuclear accidents.

- Nuclear plants are ideal targets for terrorists. Mock attacks on nuclear plants have succeeded over 50% of the time - even when plant security knew when they were coming.
- Nuclear plants produce weapons-grade materials as spent fuel, much of which is already missing and unaccounted for. Further, with increased nuclear dependence, we will face a world-wide uranium shortage.
- Nuclear waste is the most deadly material on the planet and must be guarded over for 250,000 years.

More Oil refineries:

- More oil refineries will not help the price at the pump or availability of oil in the US by anything measurable.
- US oil (and gas) extraction peaked in 1970 and has been in decline ever since. The US has very little additional oil to develop and what is left is very expensive (as in deep water offshore) and will not even replace existing sources in decline - let alone increase supply volume.
- Oil experts agree that world oil extraction is at or very near peak and is already or will transition into decline very soon (within 5 years at most).
- Refineries are very expensive and take a long time to site and construct. The reason that the oil industry has not and is not interested in building more is that you can't refine what you don't have.
- The best way to free up refinery capacity is to standardize on gasoline blends. There are currently multiple blends - some of which burn much dirtier than others. Standardizing on the cleanest blend for all markets would greatly streamline the refining process.

More Coal:

- Clean coal is an oxymoron. While there are degrees of dirtiness, there is no clean coal.
- Coal in any form is not a substitute for gasoline or jet fuel. It won't help the high "prices at the pump".
- There is near universal scientific consensus that Global Climate Change is the largest threat facing humanity. Coal is the greatest source of greenhouse gasses and other pollutants of all fossil fuels.
- While there are many schemes for carbon sequestering, they are all very expensive in terms of both cost and energy consumption. The very best method for carbon sequestering is to leave the mass of solid carbon (coal) in the ground unburned in the first place.

Hydrogen:

- Hydrogen appears intriguing as a future energy carrier but it will be expensive. It is not a substitute for historically cheap petroleum.
- Hydrogen is not an energy source as it does not exist in usable form naturally. It takes more energy to separate hydrogen into usable form than the hydrogen can then yield.
- It would take decades to put a nuclear-powered hydrogen production system into place. There are faster, cheaper alternatives - such as hydrogen generated from large-scale wind farms. Renewable hydrogen is the lowest-cost and most sustainable foundation for a future hydrogen energy system.
- Infrastructure to produce, distribute and supply hydrogen does not exist and will take decades to develop. Hybrid auto technology now in the showrooms is already approaching the net efficiency of the best hydrogen car now envisioned and should receive much larger incentives.

Ethanol:

- Like hydrogen, Ethanol appears intriguing but has significant limitations. Ethanol is mainly produced from food crops such as corn.
- Population is increasing rapidly while arable land is decreasing rapidly. Quantity ethanol production will compete with feeding the exploding world population.
- Ethanol makes an interesting supplement to gasoline as an additive but it will be expensive and will not make any significant reduction to the high "prices at the pump" anytime soon.
- Incentives for hybrid vehicles and overall conservation will have dramatically better results and will help greatly to facilitate the inevitable coming transition to the post-petroleum era.

This latest energy proposal is a desperate attempt to continue business-as-usual while pretending to address the real energy issues facing our country. Ample evidence exists to show that the end of the fossil fuel era is upon us. The massive additional investments proposed in the status quo will only soak up capital resources essential to building the bridge to the post-petroleum era.

Coal, oil, natural gas and nuclear are mature technologies that have been fully commercial for many decades. The fact that the administration now feels they are in need of additional billions to prop them up should send an obvious signal that these sources and systems are in decline and that our energy future is and should be different from our energy past. When the American public and the free market

are truly given the opportunity to choose, energy efficiency and renewable energy are on the top of nearly everyone's priority list - outside of the Washington beltway.

The President has it right when he says our continued dependence and greater reliance on fossil increases energy imports and seriously undermines our economic and national security. It is important to point out that every president since Richard Nixon has come to this conclusion at some point during his term. The key issue is what have we actually done about it? Not much - regardless of who has been in the White House.

Numerous recent studies from the Energy Information Administration, Environmental Protection Agency, the Union of Concerned Scientists and others, are all in accord that the significantly increased use of "high value" energy efficiency together with accelerating renewable energy is the fastest, least expensive and best option to offset oil imports and cut harmful emissions that are changing the earth's climate while creating millions of new US-based jobs.

Renewable Energy, the Right Direction

Any energy program to move America away from petroleum dependence and forward into the 21st century must include a significant focus on energy efficiency and renewable energies.

"We must begin now to rapidly move renewable technologies into large-scale production and the marketplace", Rep. Roscoe Bartlett, Ph.D. (R-MD) recently told the House of Representative in a Special-order hour-long presentation on Peak Oil, where he called for a new Apollo-scale program to accelerate renewable energy into the main stream."

According to Bartlett's press secretary Lisa Wright, his next Peak Oil one-hour Special order presentation is scheduled for Tues., May 3. The speech should start no later than 10pm Eastern and can be viewed live on C-Span or C-Span.org.

Renewables are ready. They are proven, reliable and off-the-shelf. We have the tools and the technology to begin the transition to the post-petroleum era. We need only the political will to use them.

About the author...

Steven J. Strong is President of Solar Design Associates, Inc., a group of Architects and Engineers dedicated to the design of environmentally responsive buildings, and the engineering and integration of renewable energy systems which incorporate the latest in innovative technology. Strong's firm recently designed and installed a photovoltaic system and two solar thermals systems at the White House.

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