

The Last Drop (of gasoline)

Alain L. Kornhauser, Sept. 2005

No, this isn't about the running out of oil in some distant future! It's about having ENOUGH, we can't take it any more, it's time to change, our backs just broke!

Profiteering by the oil industry in the wake of Katrina is the last straw!! We all understand economics, but they're socking it to us and placing the bounty in their bloated bellies. By my count they've collecting an extra \$1.5 Billion every two days (They raised the price a buck a gallon, we consume 320 million gallons of gasoline per day, gasoline is 44% of petroleum consumption.) All this while it still costs them practically nothing to get it out of the ground, costs of transport and refining haven't changed and, except in New Jersey, we pump our own. It's not as if it's costing them three bucks a gallon, they've just taken advantage of what is actually a very small, less than 10%, disruption in the supply to whack everyone. Well, its time to fight back! How?...by playing their game; by kicking the habit and creating a much greater reduction in demand.

You're skeptical, but we can do it! We've done it before!

Not long ago everyone smoked, even 13 year olds. It was THE most fashionable thing to do! We'd smoke everywhere, two, three packs a day. It was un-American to not smoke. That was then. At some point we had ENOUGH, we couldn't take it any more. Somehow many of us quit cold-turkey. The rest of us wish we could quit; all at least cut back.

Three martini lunches were the standard; as were road beers, though few of us are willing to admit it. It was an attack on our manhood to suggest we couldn't drive after drinking. We are very different today. Designated drivers are admired. We drink bottled water.

In each of those cases, we reached a point in which we had ENOUGH and through use of carrots (grass roots movements) and sticks (public policy) we kicked the habits against very big entities.

While government and public policy eventually joined in and helped facilitate these major changes, it was the grass roots individuals that fueled these changes. It was ad hoc groups of individuals that got government to see smoking and drinking as "sins". Groups such as Mothers Against Drunk Drivers, the American Medical Association and a multitude of others that changed public opinion at the grass roots level. Pressures of competition, safety of the workplace and litigation concerns began to change public opinion on alcohol consumption. Concerns about individual well-being and common sense finally grabbed hold over the tantalizing pleasures portrayed by Madison Avenue.

Now that our back is broken, we must begin this grass roots movement. There is a great deal that we can do as individuals:

- We can drive slower. Going 65 instead of 75 can save 10% right there

- We can avoid the urge to floor it when the light changes. There again we can save a substantial amount
- We can avoid hurrying up simply to wait at the other end. Going at a constant speed saves a substantial amount rather than going fast and slow.
- We can let our children take the school bus rather than having us drive them. This is simply total waste
- We must not succumb to the ridiculous “cash back” incentives to buy a gas guzzler that is going to burden us and the sucker we sell it to for the ten year life of that hulk. If instead, we buy a fuel efficient vehicle we make a ten year contribution towards kicking the habit. Buying a Honda Civic instead of a Ford Bronco makes a personal 50% reduction in gasoline consumption for the next 10 years!
- For many reasons we should start cooking again instead of running out to “MacDonald’s” for greasy fries.
- We should consider seriously the travel distance when deciding where to go
- When going shopping we should ask our neighbor if they wish to join us.
- We should of course use mass transit,
- We should simply think.

Those are all things that we can easily. If done, they can readily reduce demand substantially more than Katrina reduced supply. More importantly, popularization can begin to change public policy and add some sticks to the carrots. For example:

- We can begin easily by placing all personal vehicles under CAFE (fuel efficiency) standards. There is simply no logical reason why SUVs and pickup trucks are exempt.
- “Sin taxes” can provide the gentle encouragement for the multitudes to change. Forty years ago in 1965, few, if anyone, foresaw current levels of taxation of spirits and cigarettes. That would have been comparable to Communism! We now need for individuals to rise up again, change and have government impose the appropriate “sin taxes” on oil. \$3 a gallon is not too much. It is less gas taxes in many European countries.
- Just like we banned advertising of cigarettes and made the Mets take down the Marlboro Man from the left field wall of Shea Stadium, so should advertising of all kind be banned for gas guzzler. No more Hummer, Lincoln Navigator, Ford F-150, Hemi commercials! Let them advertise fuel efficient cars. We’ll buy just as many and we’ll let them make just as much money, even more. Just don’t burden our backs with the oil monkey.

Let’s also do something about our whole infrastructure and begin to move it away from an automobile dominated society.

- Let’s begin to design and build ubiquitous mass transit systems that are efficient and available to all.
- Let’s become serious about fuel efficient land use.
- Let’s seriously move towards a hydrogen economy.

With the above we, at the grass roots, can easily cut our oil consumption in half and more. We can make oil equivalent to tobacco.