

All of the Above: New Directions in Energy Policy

Senator John Bennett Johnston, Jr.

October 16, 2008

Sixteen years ago, as chairman for the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, I proposed a bill that provided for an increase in automobile miles per gallon known as Corporate Average Fuel Economy (CAFE) standards and for drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR). Both provisions were supported by a majority of Senators, but failed by two votes to muster the sixty votes necessary to terminate the filibuster.

Had we properly weighed the relative risks of action and inaction—that is, had we relied on facts, evidence, and experience—we would have passed that legislation and would now be enjoying an increase of up to a million barrels of oil a day (which is 20 percent of domestic production) and a CAFE standard of 37 miles per gallon, saving an additional million barrels of oil a day.

Reaping the results of past inaction, we are now forced to rely upon the Putins and Chavezes of this world for our necessary petroleum supplies. And we are richly funding their nefarious activities. The risks of that reliance dwarf those of making rational energy choices. Today we face the same choices only with a heightened appreciation of the harm that the energy dependence inflicts upon us and the world.

What were the risks of increased CAFE standards? The question answers itself as Detroit struggles to dump its fuel-inefficient vehicles and catch up with the more-efficient worldwide competition.

What are the risks of drilling in ANWR? There is no aquifer to pollute because permafrost underlies the tundra. There is no commercial fishery to be impacted. There is no recreational value to be diminished. The caribou herd which exists on the coastal plain next door in Prudhoe Bay has proved, during the last 30 years, to actually increase in the presence of drilling and pipelines. Technology has vastly improved so that, with horizontal drilling, a single platform can access an area of 150 square miles. The total footprint on the vast refuge would be less than the area of Dulles Airport (less than a fraction of one percent).

The risks of off-shore drilling are similarly minimal. Every country in the world with off-shore resources allows drilling, including some of the most environmentally sensitive of countries. Their safety record is virtually perfect. In the United States, there has not been a significant oil rig spill in three decades. The tens of thousands of wells off the coast of my home state of Louisiana, in over 60 years of production, have never produced a significant spill.

Nuclear energy, in the 50 years of operation in the United States, has never produced a single radiation death. The industrialized nations of the world are proceeding apace with the development of expanded, non-polluting, carbon-free nuclear industries, while the United States talks and delays.

How does one account for this self-destructive inaction? I believe the real answer is that too many Americans, including Members of Congress, believe that they will somehow be rescued by technologies that are affordable, painless, and immediately available. Renewable energy, particularly wind and solar, top this wish list.

I am a strong proponent of wind energy and strongly support a renewal of the Wind Energy Tax Credit. With the subsidy, wind is now competitive in many areas of the country and is now our fastest-growing source of electricity. While we should support it, we should also recognize its limitations which are principally its intermittent nature and the cost and difficulty of siting hundreds of miles of transmission lines.

While the wind blows strong across the Great Plains, it is many hundreds of miles away from the load centers of the Northeast and other urban areas. The transmission lines must cross developed areas, major rivers, and interstate highways. In the best wind areas of the nation, such as the Great Plains, the wind blows up to 40 percent of the time. That means that you must have backup power 60 percent or more of the time. This cost, along with the problems of transmission, is largely responsible for the fact that wind energy is now only one percent or less of electricity supply.

A necessary first step to substantial increases would be to grant the power of eminent domain to those seeking to site transmission lines. No such legislative proposal has been introduced nor even seriously discussed. Photovoltaic technology faces the same problems of transmission and intermittence as does wind.

There are a whole host of other technological advances that can and should be made, including clean coal, ethanol from cellulose, ocean thermal energy, electric cars, and many others. But no single technology is the so-called silver bullet. We have a good chance of achieving energy security if we

honestly face the technical challenges and recognize that these new solutions will take many years to fully develop. To be successful, we have to use every potential clean domestic energy source—along with oil and gas—and we have to be realistic about the complexities and timeframe for changing the way our nation and our economy is powered.

President Richard Nixon proposed “Operation Independence” in 1973, vowing for the United States to be free of oil imports by 1985. President Jimmy Carter, in 1977, set a goal to have twenty percent solar by 2000. Neither goal had a plausible chance of success and, in fact, our energy dependence only increased in the interim.

Mobilizing our national will and resources in pursuit of new and improved technology and setting ambitious goals for its success is a good thing, provided we do not expect quick miracles. Achieving energy security is by no means certain, but in my opinion, it is possible only if we develop all of our resources—both natural and technological. When it comes to energy, the answer is “All of the above.”