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How the Greens Captured Energy Policy

By J.R. Dunn

U.S. energy policy -- to stretch the meaning of the term - is appalling. It has been thrown together piece by piece over the decades to create a system that is dysfunctional, over complex, and internally contradictory. It is a system that victimizes American citizens, cripples the U.S. economy, makes the government a laughingstock, and empowers our enemies worldwide. While it's conceivable that somebody could actually design a policy that would do worse, they'd really have to work at it.

The only group in American that sees energy policy achieving some of their goals are the ones who oversaw its implementation from the beginning: the environmentalist Greens. It's obvious that our energy policy was intended not for the benefit of the public, or industry, or government, but almost solely to fit the agenda and goals of the Green movement, and not even the public agenda and goals, but the core agenda rarely referred to except through euphemism.

The irony here is that it has done next to nothing to fulfill the actual requirements of the environmentalists. Greens, it appears, are the worst judges of their own true needs.

A glance at the record will give us a clear idea as to how we reached this pass. One thing consistently overlooked is that American energy policy is literally the result of a series of accidents. Each of these incidents set off a blizzard of activity intended to "rationalize" the energy industry and its practices, prevent further mishaps, increase government control, and not the least, usher in the new Green Age. Each thrust American energy policy deeper into stagnation.

The first incident occurred at the very infancy of the modern Green movement (which is distinct from the conservation movement, a far older phenomenon, with no more true relationship between the two than between socialists and communists), and played a large part in defining environmentalism, setting its tactics, and establishing it as a political and social force

Santa Barbara

On January 29, 1969, a blowout occurred at a Union Oil platform six miles off Santa Barbara. The blowout itself was contained, but internal pressure ruptured the pipe, sending 200,000 gallons of crude spewing out in an 800 square-mile slick. Prevailing winds blew the oil directly onto the shore, fouling over 35 miles of coastline. Thousands of birds were threatened along with seals and dolphins.

The public rallied to save the wildlife with some success. Environmentalists rallied alongside them. Within days, an anti-oil activist group, GOO (Get Oil Out) was in operation, calling for boycotts and circulating petitions to end offshore drilling.

Ignored in all the uproar was the fact that Union Oil had been allowed to skimp on heavy-duty protective sheathing by the U.S. Geological Survey. If the piping had been reinforced as called for by standard procedure, the rupture might not have occurred, or might well have been contained. But, the logic of political activism being what it is, with the government having played a crucial role in causing the accident, environmentalists turned to... the government, to prevent them in the future.

The Santa Barbara blowout was critical in transforming environmentalism from a conservationist to an activist movement. It led to the foundation of Earth Day a few months later (an event still celebrated in certain backward communities such as Ann Arbor and Berkeley). The incident also established the Green worldview: industry was the enemy. Oil was not a resource to be utilized under proper safeguards, but a pollutant to be subject to the most stringent controls. Above all, environmentalism was no mere political or social movement, it was a crusade. A crusade to rescue nature and to "save the planet", even if it was at the cost of human civilization. (Or for that matter, human extinction.)

Offshore drilling was a major target. A concerted campaign soon saw the practice all but outlawed within U.S. waters. Less than a decade later, the first "gasoline shortage" occurred in the U.S.

Three Mile Island

Even as cars were lining up for miles at gas stations, a second front opened in the Green crusade. On March 28, 1979, a pumping failure occurred at the Three Mile Island nuclear reactor in south-central Pennsylvania. While the reactor shut down as designed, a relief valve stuck open (legend attributes this to its being put in backwards), allowing coolant water to escape. The ill-designed instrument suite failed to alert the operating crew. All unknown to them, the reactor core began to melt down.

Half the core had melted by the time anyone became aware of it. But the reactor's containment vessel held, and no major breach of radioactivity occurred. All the same, public reaction, nurtured on visions of Hiroshima and stoked by media hysteria (not to mention The China Syndrome, a Jane Fonda anti-nuke drama that had the good fortune to appear almost simultaneously with the accident), amounted to abject panic. A partial evacuation of nearby areas was carried out, amid media speculation that similar action would be required for the entire east coast.

The site was under control before the weekend was out. But the damage to nuclear power had already been done. The nuclear industry joined Big Oil as an enemy of mankind and nature. The Greens set out to shut down the entire industry, including all operational reactors. Although that effort failed, they did succeed in preventing the construction of any new reactors for a period of thirty years.

By the beginning of the 80s, the U.S. energy industry was paralyzed, the oil industry relegated to an ever-shrinking pool of permitted drilling areas, the nuclear industry effectively moribund. This put the U.S. in an excellent position to meet the depredations of OPEC, the rise of Saddam Hussein and the mullahs of Iran, and the manipulations of our Mideast "allies". That situation has prevailed ever since.

Chernobyl

The conclusions drawn from Santa Barbara and TMI were further underlined by two later incidents. On April 25, 1986, technicians at the Chernobyl nuclear plant decided to see what would happen if they shut down all safeguards and ran the reactor at its point of major instability. (This being a Soviet reactor, that point was at its lowest operational level. God forbid if it had been the other way around.) What happened was that the roof blew off, immediately killing several dozen people and irradiating large parts of the Ukraine. Aided by the regime's clumsy attempt at a cover-up, the accident played no small role in the collapse of the USSR.

On March 24, 1989, a captain challenged with alcohol problems allowed the supertanker Exxon Valdez to pile up on a reef in Alaska's Prince William Sound, dumping 11 million gallons of crude oil into the sea. Hysteria peaked at probably the highest level of any such incident. The company's management was threatened with criminal prosecution, and a federal judge hearing the case went so far as to say that the accident was "worse than Hiroshima". All inclinations to adapt more rational energy policies evaporated in the wake of these events.

No reform following failure

An unprejudiced eye will immediately see that the common factor in all these incidents was management failure. Union Oil (a company long vanished into mergers) colluded with government in an effort to cut corners. The nuclear industry -- a combination of government and private enterprise, with the worst aspects of both and the advantages of neither -- insisted on operating on the lowest possible level of execution. (A few months before the TMI breakdown, I met a man who had just accepted a job installing a piping system at the Indian Point reactor. An engineer, I thought. No, he replied -- a plumber. Simply to save a few bucks, the industry was hiring bathroom-and-hot tub plumbers for sensitive work rather than experienced pipe-fitters or engineers. No wonder crucial fittings were going in backwards, upside down, and inside out.)

Chernobyl was merely the ultimate expression of ingrained Soviet incompetence going back to the Revolution. The Exxon Valdez revealed that a critical oil shipping component -- maritime operations -- was completely isolated from any meaningful oversight. (This is in large part due to marine traditions; ship's captains are as close-mouthed as any surgeon or cop concerning ineptitude in the ranks -- and in large part is still the case. Noel Mostert's *Supership*, written in the 1970s, remains the standard work on the shortcomings of the tanker industry.)

The appropriate response in these cases (Chernobyl being the exception: the only solution there was to tear the system down and start over) would have been to convene a panel of experts, send out investigators, hold hearings, issue recommendations, and see to it that reforms went into effect. This is what occurs following aircraft disasters, large-scale fires, building collapses, or any other catastrophic incident where suspicion exists that things were not being handled according to best practice. (Consider the investigation following the Challenger disaster, for one example.)

But this is not what occurred in these cases. Not in any meaningful sense. Under the new Green paradigm, oil and nuclear energy were not industries to be reformed, but "evils" to be either contained or destroyed. The Greens could have served a useful purpose by pushing for serious reform in management of critical energy industries. Instead, we got the religious impulse, distorted into sheer apocalypticism, with the environmentalists fighting oil and fissionables (plutonium in particular) as products of dark sin, placed on earth to tempt humankind from the path that Gaia intended.

The Green Agenda

Through its influence in the media and government (both bureaucracy and congress), the Greens effectively abolished nuclear power, curtailed domestic oil production, and left the American energy industry in the comatose state in which it abides to this day. Nor this was an error or overreaction - it was a deliberate effort to fulfill the Green agenda.

What is the nature of this agenda? Greens were much more open about it during the early years of the movement. (As for example in the utopian novel *Ecotopia*.) The end point of all Green efforts is a kind of Edenic state in which humans exist in "partnership" with nature. In which humanity is simply another species. In which the human "footprint" (a purely Green concept with no literal meaning) is reduced to a minimum. A world which has returned in large part to a pre-industrial state, where whatever small amounts of power are needed are provided by solar and wind. Where every last damn item is recycled. A kind of universal Northern California, where all living things from spirochete to grizzly exist in harmony under the cloak of Gaia.

(Such a world could sustain perhaps a hundred million human beings, tops. What happens to the rest is something most Greens have been less than straightforward about.)

Greens have become quieter about this vision as it has grown more distant. Which does not mean that they have ceased working toward it. Like all true believers, the Greens simply grow more fanatical the more unlikely their dreams become. And that is why the long overdue reform of America's energy sector, of the kind supported by John McCain and a few forward-looking GOP politicians (now there's a threatened species), is no certainty, in no way a slam-dunk, and will require a lengthy and hard-fought battle if it's going to happen at all.

Current energy policy -- or non-policy, however you wish -- lies at the very center of the Green agenda. It is the only element in which any progress has been achieved. First, we need to rid ourselves of our "addiction" to nukes and oil. Then we adapt to solar and wind, and.... Here it peters off into silence. Because no such second step has ever, or will ever be made. Solar, wind, alcohol, ethanol... all these are single-digit energy sources. (And the low single digits as well, able to replace perhaps two or three percent of power generation at best.) Replacement of oil and nuclear power is a fantasy. Therefore, the rest of the Green dream is as well.

But the gutting of the American energy sector remains the Green's chief accomplishment, their single achieved step toward paradise. They will defend it tooth and nail. The Green lobby, comprised of organizations such as the Sierra Club and the World Wildlife Federation, is immensely powerful and has deep pockets -- not to overlook the many politicians who are avid converts (e.g., Hudson Valley congressman John Hall, who as leader of the execrable 70s soft-rock band Orleans wrote an anti-nuke anthem, "Plutonium is Forever").

The Green crisis ahead

They'll still lose. Americans are not going to freeze in the dark. Nuclear technology has gone through several revolutions in the past decades. Entire families of reactors exist -- including the CANDU and pebble-bed designs -- that are far safer from kind of catastrophic failure. Evolution in oil drilling and exploitation has followed similar paths. We need to catch up on these technical advances. There are already 30 new nuclear plants proposed in the US and some are even in early stages of licensing. The plants use new designs which make use of passive safety systems that substantially reduce the chance of a major accident.

Other aspects of the Green argument have also collapsed. New discoveries off Brazil and in the Gulf of Mexico have nearly doubled international oil reserves, pushing backwards from the "peak oil" date. And global warming, that notorious by-product of "oil addiction," has faded to the point that its advocates are now reduced to threatening dissenters with prison.

Energy reform is an egg and rock situation for the Democrats. (From the old Irish proverb: "When the rock hits the egg, alas for the egg. When the egg hits the rock, alas for the egg.") The Democrats -- Obama chief among them -- can neither adequately defend it nor abandon it, as is clearly shown by their refusal to even consider loosening

drilling restrictions. The GOP holds all the cards on this one, and all they need to do is keep building the pressure. (Always granted, of course, that they play it better than their last few runs of hands.) No better electoral tool will be found during this cycle. We just can't expect results immediately - this will be a long and drawn-out battle, requiring maximum, sustained effort from all involved.

It has gone almost completely unacknowledged that with oil shale, offshore deposits, and new resources such as the hydrocarbon sludge deposits off B.C. and Alaska, the OPEC of the late 21st century is going to be right here. That's a goal worth working toward. Breaking the power of the Greens is yet another possible benefit.

Environmentalism is a luxury, and like all such, is best taken in moderation. The environment requires protection, but that's all. Primitive pantheism has no place in this millennium. Nature is not an utterly benign continuum, and human beings are not a disease. Pseudo-religious environmentalism has long outlived its welcome. It's time to bring down the curtain.