

July 27, 2008

Texas to Tel Aviv

By THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN

What would happen if you cross-bred J. R. Ewing of "Dallas" and Carl Pope, the head of the Sierra Club? You'd get T. Boone Pickens. What would happen if you cross-bred Henry Ford and Yitzhak Rabin? You'd get Shai Agassi. And what would happen if you put together T. Boone Pickens, the green billionaire Texas oilman now obsessed with wind power, and Shai Agassi, the Jewish Henry Ford now obsessed with making Israel the world's leader in electric cars?

You'd have the start of an energy revolution.

The only good thing to come from soaring oil prices is that they have spurred innovator/investors, successful in other fields, to move into clean energy with a mad-as-hell, can-do ambition to replace oil with renewable power. Two of the most interesting of these new clean electron wildcatters are Boone and Shai.

Agassi, age 40, is an Israeli software whiz kid who rose to the senior ranks of the German software giant SAP. He gave it all up in 2007 to help make Israel a model of how an entire country can get off gasoline and onto electric cars. He figured no country has a bigger interest in diminishing the value of Middle Eastern oil than Israel. On a visit to Israel in May, I took a spin in a parking lot on the Tel Aviv beachfront in Agassi's prototype electric car, while his sister watched out for the cops because it is not yet licensed for Israeli roads.

Agassi's plan, backed by Israel's government, is to create a complete electric car "system" that will work much like a mobile-phone service "system," only customers sign up for so many monthly miles, instead of minutes. Every subscriber will get a car, a battery and access to a national network of recharging outlets all across Israel — as well as garages that will swap your dead battery for a fresh one whenever needed.

His company, Better Place, and its impressive team would run the smart grid that charges the cars and is also contracting for enough new solar energy from Israeli companies — 2 gigawatts over 10 years — to power the whole fleet. "Israel will have the world's first virtual oilfield in the Negev Desert," said Agassi. His first 500 electric cars, built by Renault, will hit Israel's roads next year.

Agassi is a passionate salesman for his vision. He could sell camels to Saudi Arabia. "Today in Europe, you pay \$600 a month for gasoline," he explained to me. "We have an electric car that will cost you \$600 a month" — with all the electric fuel you need and when you don't want the car any longer, just give it back. No extra charges and no CO2 emissions.

His goal, said Agassi, is to make his electric car "so cheap, so trivial, that you won't even think of buying a gasoline car." Once that happens, he added, your oil addiction will be over forever. You'll be "off heroin," he says, and "addicted to milk."

T. Boone Pickens is 80. He's already made billions in oil. He was involved in some ugly mischief in funding the "Swift-boating" of John Kerry. But now he's opting for a different legacy: breaking America's oil habit by pushing for a massive buildup of wind power in the U.S. and converting our abundant natural gas supplies — now being used to make electricity — into transportation fuel to replace foreign oil in our cars, buses and trucks. Pickens is motivated by American nationalism. Because of all the money we are shipping abroad to pay for our oil addiction, he says, "we are on the verge of losing our superpower status." His vision is summed up on his Web site: "We import 70 percent of our oil at a cost of \$700 billion a year ... I have been an oil man all my life, but this is one emergency we can't drill our way out of. If we create a renewable energy network, we can break our addiction to foreign oil."

Pickens made clear to me over breakfast last week that he was tired of waiting for Washington to produce a serious energy plan. So his company, Mesa Power, is now building the world's largest wind farm in the Texas Panhandle, where he's spent \$2 billion buying land and 700 wind turbines from General Electric — the largest single turbine order ever. The U.S. could secure 20 percent of its electricity needs from wind alone. But Pickens knows he's unique. Unless, he says, "Congress adopts clear, predictable policies" — with long-term tax incentives and infrastructure — so thousands of investors can jump into clean power, we'll never get the scale we need to break our addiction. For a year, Senate Republicans have been blocking such incentives for wind and solar energy. They vote again next week.

If only we had a Congress and president who, instead of chasing crazy schemes like offshore drilling and releasing oil from our strategic reserve, just sat down with Boone and Shai and asked one question: "What laws do we need to enact to foster 1,000 more like you?" Then just do it, and get out of the way.