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Carter Tried To Stop Bush's Energy Disasters - 28 Years Ago

by Thom Hartmann

In his recent news conference, George Bush Jr. suggested that our nation's "problem" with high gasoline prices was caused by the lack of a national energy policy, and tried to blame it all on Bill Clinton. First, Junior said, "This is a problem that's been a long time in coming. We haven't had an energy policy in this country."

This was followed by, "That's exactly what I've been saying to the American people -- 10 years ago if we'd had an energy strategy, we would be able to diversify away from foreign dependence. And -- but we haven't done that. And now we find ourselves in the fix we're in." As is so often the case, Bush was lying.

Consider President Jimmy Carter's April 18, 1977 [speech](#). Since it was given nearly three decades ago, when many of the reporters in Bush's White House were children, it's understandable that they don't remember it. But it's inexcusable that Bush and the mainstream media (which, after all, has the ability to do research) would completely ignore it. It was the speech that established the strategic petroleum reserve, birthed the modern solar power industry, led to the insulation of millions of American homes, and established America's first national energy policy. "With the exception of preventing war," said Jimmy Carter, a man of peace, "this is the greatest challenge our country will face during our lifetimes."

He added: "It is a problem we will not solve in the next few years, and it is likely to get progressively worse through the rest of this century. "We must not be selfish or timid if we hope to have a decent world for our children and grandchildren.

"We simply must balance our demand for energy with our rapidly shrinking resources. By acting now, we can control our future instead of letting the future control us." Carter bluntly pointed out that: "The most important thing about these proposals is that the alternative may be a national catastrophe. Further delay can affect our strength and our power as a nation." He called the new energy policy he was proposing, "[T]he 'moral equivalent of war' -- except that we will be uniting our efforts to build and not destroy."

When Carter had become president three months earlier, the nation was still recovering from the "oil shock" of the 1973 Arab oil embargo, and scientists were realizing our nation was just then hitting the point of domestic peak oil production predicted more than a decade earlier by scientist M. King Hubbert. (The rest of the world is hitting the Hubbert Peak right now.) As Carter noted in his speech, "The oil and natural gas we rely on for 75 percent of our energy are running out. In spite of increased effort, domestic production has been dropping steadily at about six percent a year. Imports have doubled in the last five years. Our nation's independence of economic and political action is becoming increasingly constrained." Hubbert had predicted that the peak of oil production for the USA would come in the 1970s, and it did, hitting us with a shock.

"The world has not prepared for the future," said Jimmy Carter. "During the 1950s, people used twice as much oil as during the 1940s. During the 1960s, we used twice as much as during the 1950s. And in each of those decades, more oil was consumed than in all of mankind's previous history." Hubbert said we must begin to conserve. Carter agreed.

"Ours is the most wasteful nation on earth," he said, a point that is still true. "We waste more energy than we import. With about the same standard of living, we use twice as much energy per person as do other countries like Germany, Japan and Sweden." Carter directly challenged the fossil fuel and automobile industries. "One choice," he said, "is to continue doing what we have been doing before. We can drift along for a few more years. "Our consumption of oil would keep going up every year. Our cars would continue to be too large and inefficient.

Three-quarters of them would continue to carry only one person -- the driver -- while our public transportation system continues to decline. We can delay insulating our houses, and they will continue to lose about 50 percent of their heat in waste. "We can continue using scarce oil and natural gas to generate electricity, and continue wasting two-thirds of their fuel value in the process."

But that would be unpatriotic, anti-American, and essentially wrong. Who but a traitor sold out to special interests, or an idiot, would countenance such insanity?

The year 1977 was a turning point for America. If we didn't make clear and rapid progress, we would face painful times ahead. The Saudis would have their fingers around our necks. We'd face war in the Middle East to secure future oil supplies. "Now we have a choice," Carter said. "But if we wait, we will live in fear of embargoes. We could endanger our freedom as a sovereign nation to act in foreign affairs."

Failure to act in the 1970s and 1980s would inevitably lead to a time when the only way to maintain our lifestyle would be to rape our planet and seize control of oil-rich nations in the Middle East. If we didn't begin to develop alternatives like solar power, and dramatically reduce our consumption of fossil fuels, then, Carter said, even our cherished personal freedoms would be at risk. If we continued to simply follow past policies that enriched the oil industry and the Saudis, instead of becoming energy independent, Carter said, "We will feel mounting pressure to plunder the environment."

If we failed to develop alternative sources of renewable energy and conserve what we have, the alternative could be nasty. As Carter pointed out: "We will have a crash program to build more nuclear plants, strip-mine and burn more coal, and drill more offshore wells than we will need if we begin to conserve now. Inflation will soar, production will go down, people will lose their jobs. Intense competition will build up among nations and among the different regions within our own country. "If we fail to act soon, we will face an economic, social and political crisis that will threaten our free institutions."

Carter's speech drew a strong reaction from the Saudis and the oil industry. Think tanks soon emerged - many whose names are today familiar - to suggest there was really no energy problem, and they led the charge to establish a permanent right-wing media in the US. Within two years, Saudi citizen and oil baron Salem bin Laden's sole US representative, James Bath, would funnel cash into the failing business of the son of the CIA's former director, political up-and-comer George H. W. Bush. With that money from the representative of Osama Bin Laden's half-brother, George Bush Jr. was able to keep afloat his Arbusto ("shrub" in Spanish) Oil Company. And he would be in the pocket of the bin Laden and Saudi interests for the rest of his life. But Carter was incorruptible.

"We can be sure that all the special interest groups in the country will attack the part of this plan that affects them directly," he said. "They will say that sacrifice is fine, as long as other people do it, but that their sacrifice is unreasonable, or unfair, or harmful to the country. If they succeed, then the burden on the ordinary citizen, who is not organized into an interest group, would be crushing." But that would be wrong. It would be un-American. It would lead to future oil shocks, and the probable death of American soldiers in Middle Eastern oil wars. Instead of caving in to the Saudis and the oil industry, Carter said: "There should be only one test for this program: whether it will help our country."

Two years later, as the bin Laden family's sole US representative was bailing out George Bush Junior's failing oil business, Jimmy Carter gave another speech on energy, further refining his national energy policy. He had already started the national strategic petroleum reserve, birthed the gasohol and solar power industries, and helped insulate millions of homes and offices. But he wanted to go a step further. "I am tonight setting a clear goal for the energy policy of the United States," Carter said on [July 15, 1979](#). "Beginning this moment, this nation will never use more foreign oil than we did in 1977 -- never. From now on, every new addition to our demand for energy will be met from our own production and our own conservation. The generation-long growth in our dependence on foreign oil will be stopped dead in its tracks right now and then reversed as we move through the 1980s..." In addition, we needed to immediately begin to develop a long-range strategy to move beyond fossil fuel.

Therefore, Carter said, "I will soon submit legislation to Congress calling for the creation of this nation's first solar bank, which will help us achieve the crucial goal of 20 percent of our energy coming from solar power by the year 2000." But then came the Iran/Contra October Surprise, when the Reagan/Bush campaign allegedly promised the oil-rich mullahs of Iran that they'd sell them missiles and other weapons if only they'd keep our hostages until after

the 1980 Carter/Reagan presidential election campaign was over. The result was that Carter, who had been leading in the polls over Reagan/Bush, steadily dropped in popularity as the hostage crisis dragged out, and lost the election. The hostages were released the very minute that Reagan put his hand on the Bible to take his oath of office. The hostages freed, the Reagan/Bush administration quickly began illegally delivering missiles to Iran.

And Ronald Reagan's first official acts of office included removing Jimmy Carter's solar panels from the roof of the White House, and reversing most of Carter's conservation and alternative energy policies.

Today, despite the best efforts of the Bushies, the bin Ladens, and the rest of the oil industry, Carter's few surviving initiatives have borne fruit.

It is now more economical to build power generating stations using wind than using coal, oil, gas, or nuclear. When amortized over the life of a typical mortgage, installing solar power in a house in most parts of the US is cheaper than drawing power from the grid. (Shell and British Petroleum are among the world's largest manufacturers of solar photovoltaic panels, which can now even be used as roofing shingles.) And hybrid cars that get 50-70 miles to the gallon are increasingly commonplace on our nation's highways. Instead of taking a strong stand to make America energy independent, Bush kisses a Saudi crown prince, then holds hands with him as they walk into Bush's hobby ranch in Texas. Our young men and women are daily dying in Iraq - a country with the world's second largest store of underground oil. And we live in fear that another 15 Saudis may hijack more planes to fly into our nation's capitol or into nuclear power plants.

Meanwhile, Bush brings us an energy bill that includes eight billion dollars in welfare payments to the oil business, just as the nation's oil companies report the highest profits in the entire history of the industry. Americans struggle to pay for gasoline, while the Bush administration refuses to increase fleet efficiency standards, stop the \$100,000 tax break for buying Hummers, or maintain and build Amtrak. George Bush Jr. is arguably right that gas prices are spiking because we don't have an energy policy. But instead of blaming Clinton, he should be pointing to the Reagan/Bush administration, and to his own abysmal failures over the past four years.

Thom Hartmann's bestselling book on peak oil is titled "[The Last Hours of Ancient Sunlight](#)", published by Random House/Three Rivers Press. His articles archive is at www.thomhartmann.com/commondreams.shtml.

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