Oil is not an addiction

It's a beneficial nutrution for people and the environment

TORONTO — In his January 2006 State of the Union address, former President George W. Bush famously deplored America's "addiction" to oil. In a caustic column published shortly afterwards, the journalist and publisher James K. Glassman remarked that if this rhetoric was taken seriously, then as a former oilman, Mr. Bush had himself been a "drug dealer," a "pusher," and a "kingpin." Glassman then added that the president's statement was nonsensical because "America is no more addicted to oil than it is addicted to bread, milk, paper, water, computers or, in the immortal words of the late Robert Palmer, to love."

In other words, the key problem in the radical environmentalist rhetoric that was then co-opted by President Bush is that it doesn't distinguish between "addiction" and "sustenance." For instance, consuming heroin on a regular basis is described as an addiction because the practice has adverse consequences. By contrast, consuming bread or milk on a regular basis supports life and good health through necessary nourishment. Bread and milk provide sustenance.

If one takes a broad enough look, especially when compared to the environmentalists' recommended "organic" and "renewable" energy diet, then petroleum (and other carbon fuels) consumption can only be said to provide sustenance rather than being an addiction. After all, for most people, life in the age of biomass, animal, wind and solar power was, at best, comparable to today's less-developed economies where most farmers stand a one-in-three probability of being malnourished and average incomes hover around $1 a day.

Once coal, petroleum and natural gas began to enter the economic picture in the 19th century, however, every indicator of human well-being — from life expectancy, income per capita, hunger to infant mortality, child labor and education — and most environmental indicators began to improve dramatically.

To list only a few inconvenient truths for radical environmentalists:

In 1850, the world population was approximately 1.2 billion individuals. There are now over 7 billion of us.

In 1950, about one of two-and-a-half individuals was malnourished. This proportion is now one in seven.

The life expectancy for white males in the USA was about 38 years in 1850, 47 years in 1900 and 76 years in 2008.

In 1850, the average American adult male was 5 feet, 7.4 inches tall and weighed 146 pounds. In 2000, it was 5-9 1/2 and 191 pounds.

Worldwide, aggregate mortality attributed to all extreme weather events — from extreme heat and droughts to floods and hurricanes — has declined by more than 90 percent since the 1920s.

Between 1990 and 2005, the forest cover increased or improved in virtually all of the world's 50 most-forested countries with a per capita income of at least $4,600 (comparable to Chile), but also in developing economies like China and India.

One-hundred years ago, urban air quality in the United States was worse than it is today in Chinese cities. It has been getting remarkably better ever since.

By Pierre Desrochers
For The Drill

While these advances are not entirely attributable to refined petroleum products, they played a significant part in all of them.

For instance, the percentage of the U.S. working population engaged in agriculture was between 80-90 percent in 1800; 41 percent in 1900, 16 percent in 1945 and about 1.5 percent today. Getting people off the farm to let them engage in other pursuits, from medical research to civil engineering, greatly improved the standards of living. Refined petroleum products made this possible through the development of cost-effective long distance transportation that made it possible to concentrate food production in the world's best locations, and the dramatic increase in the amount of food produced on a piece of land through a wide range of innovations, from tractors and synthetic pesticides to plastic sheeting and veterinary medicine.

Long-distance transportation also improved overall nutrition and made possible the eradication of famines by moving the surplus of regions with good harvests to those that had experienced mediocre ones.

Tractors eliminated the need for millions of horses and mules on American farms. They never got sick, did not require care when not working, and did not consume more than one-fifth of the food they helped to grow.

In 1898, the world's first international urban planning conference broke up after three days instead of the scheduled 10 after its delegates gave up on finding a solution to the horse manure cities were then drowning in. Apart from their stench, horse excrements and carcasses were a source of deadly pathogens such as typhoid fever that claimed numerous lives. Urban horses were also the cause of significant concentrations of pests, from rodents to flies, being in close proximity to human beings and were more likely to kill people in accidents than cars would later be.

Petroleum-derived asphalt paving significantly reduced the concentration of dust particulates in urban areas.

Refined petroleum products eliminated the need for many agricultural productions, such as plants grown to produce fibers, dyes and rubber, and animals raised primarily for their wool and fur. They also reduced harvesting pressures on whales for whale oil and perfume base, trees for lumber and firewood, birds for their feathers, and other wildlife for their ivory, furs or skin.

Kerosene and heavy oil displaced poor-quality domestic fuels such as firewood and dung that filled houses with soot, particles, carbon monoxide and toxic chemicals. These mediocre fuels caused significant mortality through ailments such as chronic pulmonary obstructive diseases and acute respiratory infections. Sadly, indoor air pollution of this kind still kills millions of people worldwide every year.

Petroleum-derived plastics improved daily lives in myriad of other ways, from their multiple uses in modern medicine — from operating room equipment to replacement hearts, valves, limbs and joints — to the displacement of heavy vats made of stone or clay used to carry water by plastic jars, a substitution often described as a minor miracle in less-advanced economies.

Although never perfect, refined petroleum products remain the most sustainable way to lift and maintain billions of humans out of poverty while simultaneously improving the state of our environment. The real energy problem Americans face today is that too many activists and subsidized businesses are addicted to a romantic vision of the past and to government support of costly, impractical and environmentally damaging alternatives.

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