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'Remember Me'

The second gasoline war and how we can prevent the third

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War in Iraq is inevitable. That there would be war was decided by North American planners in the mid 1920s. That it would be in Iraq was decided much more recently. The architects of this war were not military planners but town planners. War is inevitable not because of weapons of mass destruction as claimed by the political right, nor Western imperialism as claimed by the left. The cause of this war, and probably the one that will follow, is car dependence. The USA has paved itself into a corner. The physical and economic infrastructure of the USA is so highly car dependent that it is pathologically addicted to oil. Without billions of barrels of precious black sludge being pumped into the veins of the US economy every year, the nation would experience painful and damaging withdrawal.

They paved paradise and put up a parking lot.

The first Model T Ford rolled off the assembly line in 1908 and was a miracle of mass production. In the first decade of the new century, car registrations in the USA increased from 8,000 to almost 500,000. Within the cities buses replaced trams, and then cars replaced buses. In 1932, General Motors bought and then closed down the tram system. But it was the urban planners who really got America hooked. Car ownership offered the possibility of escape from dirty crowded cities to leafy garden suburbs and the urban planners provided the escape routes. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, America 'road built' itself into a nation of home owning suburbanites. Public transport rallied temporarily during World War II, when car makers switched to making munitions and petrol rationing was introduced, but for the last time. At the end of the war, energy conservation turned to consumption. In the words of Joni Mitchell - 'they paved paradise and put up a parking lot.' Cities like Los Angeles, Dallas and Phoenix, were moulded by the private passenger car into vast urban sprawls with such widely dispersed markets that it is now almost impossible to service them economically with public transport. As the cities sprawled, the motor manufacturing industry consolidated. Car making is now the main industrial employer in the world, dominated by five major groups of which General Motors is the largest. Both the livelihood and landscape of North Americans were forged by the car makers.

Gas-guzzling nation

Motor vehicles are responsible for about one third of global oil use, but for over half of oil use in the USA. In the rest of the world, heating and power generation account for most oil use. The large increase in oil prices during the 1973 Arab Oil Embargo encouraged the substitution of oil with other fuels in heating and power generation, but in the transport sector there is little scope for oil substitution in the short term. Due to artificially low oil and gasoline prices that did not reflect the true social costs of their production and use, there was

little incentive to seek alternative energy sources in the transportation sector. The Arab Oil Embargo temporarily stimulated greater fuel efficiency with the introduction of gasoline consumption standards, but the increasing popularity of gas-guzzling sports utility vehicles over the past decade has reduced the average fuel efficiency of the US car fleet. The US transportation sector is now almost totally dependent on oil and supplies are running out. It is estimated that the total amount of oil that can be pumped out of the earth is about 2,000 billion barrels and that world oil production will peak in the next ten to fifteen years. Since even modest decreases in oil production can result in major hikes in the cost of gasoline, the US administration is well aware of the importance of ensuring oil supplies.

The second gasoline war

The Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict identified factors that put states at risk of violent conflict. They include rapid population changes that outstrip the capacity of the state to provide essential services and the control of valuable natural resources by a single group. Both factors are key motivators in the war with Iraq. Suburban America needs oil and Saddam Hussein is sitting on it. The USA economy needs oil like a junkie needs heroin and Iraq has 112 billion barrels, the largest supply in the world outside Saudi Arabia. Even before the first shot has been fired, there have been discussions about how Iraq's oil reserves will be carved up. All five permanent members of the UN Security Council have international oil companies that have an interest in 'regime change' in Baghdad.

The cost of car dependence

Car dependence is a global public health issue of which gasoline wars are only one facet. Every day about 3,000 people die and 30,000 people are seriously injured on the world's roads in traffic crashes. Over 85% of the deaths are in low and middle income countries, with pedestrians, cyclists, and bus passengers bearing most of the burden. Most of the victims will never own a car, and many are children. By 2020, road traffic crashes will have moved from ninth to third place in the world ranking of the burden of disease and will be second place in developing countries. That we accept this carnage as the collateral damage in a car based transportation system indicates the strength and pervasiveness of car dependency. And car travel has decimated walking. One quarter of all car journeys are less than two miles. A three-kilometre walk uses up about half the energy in a small bar of chocolate. The same distance by car expends 10 times as much energy but from the wrong source. We can make chocolate but oil reserves are finite. Car use and the corresponding decline in physical activity is an important cause of the obesity epidemic in the USA and the UK, and physical inactivity increases the risks of heart disease, diabetes, osteoporosis and hypertension. Car based shopping has turned many small towns into ghost towns and has severed the supportive social networks of community interaction.

How to prevent the next gasoline war

The first gasoline war was waged in Kuwait and the second will be waged in Iraq. The world must act now to prevent the third. We must reclaim the streets, promote walking and cycling, strengthen public transport, oppose new road construction and pay the full social cost of car use. We must advocate for land use policies that reduce the need for car travel. We need 'urban villages' clustered around public transport nodes, not sprawling car dependent conurbations. We can all play our part and we must act now.