

Oil- A Barrel of Fun!

"Roll out the barrel, roll out a barrel of oil!" While not the lyrics of the good times anthem, they might as well be. Humans are oil addicted and it is getting worse. China alone will most likely double its economy and thirst for oil in 10 years.

Scarcity of rock did not shutter the stone age and fields barren of hay did not vanquish the horse and buggy. The indelible mark of man's progress and petroleum products did. Why? Since the late Roman Empire, seeping and barely subterranean crude was not much more than a lightly used combustible curiosity. By the latter 1800's, kerosene lit world lamps and terra firma's black gold took off like an Uncle Whizbo's medicine show tonic. Easy to tap crude supplies and its uses seemed endless.

Petroleum is a magical elixir; a concoction that can catapult a culture and economy into modernity. The energy in one barrel of crude is enormous. Those 42 gallons equal a year of 12 men at manual labor or 5.8 million BTU's (1.70 mega watt hours); enough to power hundreds of homes for an hour. Seventy percent of a barrel is refined to transportation fuel and 98% of all transportation energy comes from oil. Petroleum spawned and sustained the agricultural green revolution as well as massive advances in plastics, medicine and innumerable useful synthetics as well as the heating of homes and the feeding of families and livestock.

In the go-go Getty and Rockefeller days, the energy returned for energy invested (EROEI) in drilling crude supported opulent homes and harem; invest a dollar and get a hundred out. Most accessible crude is now an EROEI of 10:1, offshore drilling is 5:1 and Canadian Tar Sands and shale oil are 2:1. Ethanol's EROEI is barely 1:1. Crude has gone from unbelievably cheap to flirting with "get the accountants involved"

Although reserve estimates may continue to increase, this black blood of mother earth is a finite resource. In a time not so far away, squeezing shale, seducing tarry sands, tapping deep arctic tundra and energy shopping at our local continental grocery shelf will not meet the worlds desire to "be like Mike". Even if it could, the Kickapoo joy juice that has jump driven mankind will always auger pollution problems, both real and political.

American offshore drilling is worthwhile, but marginally. It supplies 25% of our nations natural gas and oil production but that is a fraction of our energy needs. Rigs may represent aesthetic pollution and their infrastructure may alter ecosystems but only 0.001 percent of the oil produced since 1974 has been spilled. The earth weeping and consumers carelessness account for 96% of oil spills with vessels, pipelines and drilling related incidents sharing the rest. Offshore, and for that matter ANWR drilling, does not equate to ending energy dependence. Although the US will to "drill here and drill now" may meaningfully affect energy markets but not supply. Politics, pollution and pure economics tell us that "roll out the barrel" can't be the only tune in the wise judgment jukebox.

Suggesting miraculous relief at the pump via tapping reserves or dramatic lifestyle changes is as silly as a politician riveted in a radical church pew for two decades claiming amnesia or deafness. Mainlining petroleum heroin might make us giddy and high but by morning we'd be spent, vulnerable and more addicted. There is an enormous benefit from aggressive CAFE (fuel economy) standards, but We the People of the USA are not the world and the world is growing fast and hungry.

We cannot afford to have less stable regimes emerge as the source of the world's " spice mélange". The gushing gold that that fuels politicians is you and I. Drill here and drill now for oil and gas and for comprehensive solutions or the next barrel that rolls out will roll over us all

*Dr. Kevin Ryan is a retired colonel,
physician, musician and author
who lives in Fairfield. Reach him
at ryan_k@comcast.net.*