

The price of gas in a global economy

Our dependence on fossil fuels is filling Vladimir Putin's war chest.

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As the war against Ukraine continues, the world has presented a perhaps unprecedented united front. Across the globe, economic sanctions were promised and then delivered, even as Vladimir Putin took his sense of embattled entitlement all the way to the threat of global nuclear war.

Meanwhile, here in the United States, public debate has focused on two things: the price of gas and whether or not Republicans support Putin's actions. Both hit close to home. Americans are reeling from a sharp rise in consumer prices in general and gas prices in particular, and our political divides seem ever more extreme.

The perhaps surprising fact is that virtually all of us have supported Putin. Like other despots of oil-producing countries, Putin has a war chest because we use Russian oil to drive to the grocery store and to heat our homes. This is the reality of a global,

fossil fuel-based economy, an economy in which Russia produces one of every ten barrels of oil. Americans consume three times as much oil per capita as Russians do; we also consume almost twice as much oil as we produce. That makes us buyers on the global market, and Russia is selling.

Since the 1970s, US political rhetoric has simplified and translated this problem into “the price of gas at the pump”—and it isn’t a small problem. We rely on low prices for fossil fuels to feed our families, to work, and to avoid freezing in the winter or boiling in the summer. This creates a conundrum, one of many related to our relationship to fossil fuels: we enrich Putin not because we want to but because of the necessities of everyday life.

Some say the answer to this is more domestic drilling for oil and gas. In times like these, this so-called energy independence certainly sounds appealing. But this approach only creates more problems. It puts more of our land and people at risk in the name of keeping gas prices low, and it perpetuates the boom-and-bust nature of the oil and gas industry.

Meanwhile, we create the conditions to enrich oil-producing states like Venezuela, Saudi Arabia, and Russia, which use these riches to oppress their own people and to attack others. This is paid for, sadly enough and time and again, by us and our insatiable need for fossil fuels.

The good news is that there is a way out of this. The technology exists to make it happen, and all that is missing is our own political will. If we Americans were to cut our collective demand for fossil fuels by half or even a third, along with putting us on a path to mitigate the effects of climate change this would dramatically reduce our support for Russia’s war-making capacity. It is time to move from fossil fuels to renewable energy, as quickly and completely as possible. That is the only way to truly end our unspoken support for the Putin regime.

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