

Oil dependents: Better to sacrifice oil than blood

From the Editors in the [December 5, 2001](#) issue

The U.S.'s approach to the Middle East frequently seems less policy than fated inevitability. The U.S. requires oil from that region for its survival, therefore it underwrites despotic and corrupt regimes, and bears the consequences of those alliances. Yet neither the need nor the alliances are written in the stars.

U.S. dependency on Middle East oil can be greatly reduced, if not eliminated, through domestic energy conservation. More specifically, the U.S.'s need for Middle East oil would plummet if Americans chose to reduce their consumption of gasoline. Writing in *Foreign Affairs* (hardly an organ of the Green movement), Amory and Hunter Lovins have claimed that if Americans “ had simply bought new cars that got 5 mpg more than they did, [the U.S.] would no longer have needed Persian Gulf oil.”

Energy efficiency has increased in many sectors of American industry and domestic life—from home heating and cooling systems to innovative light bulbs. But fuel economy for vehicles has actually dropped from 26.2 mpg in the 1980s to a current average of 24.7 mpg. Raising federal taxes on gasoline and requiring vehicles to meet higher fuel-efficiency standards would help reverse this trend.

Americans pay some of the lowest gasoline taxes in the Western world. A little over a quarter of the price of gasoline at the pump goes to federal, state and local taxes. In Canada that figure is around 42 percent, and in Europe taxes can account for more than 75 percent of the price paid at the pump. Although gas prices over \$2.00 a gallon are front-page news in the U.S., Europeans have been paying between \$3.00 and \$5.00 per gallon for years.

Increasing the federal tax on gasoline would help pay for big budget items that will continue to emerge from the September 11 crisis and the war on terrorism, and would act as an incentive for Americans to drive less or purchase more energy efficient vehicles, or both.

However, in a country with poor public transportation, in which many workers must drive considerable distances to work, an increased federal gas tax would disproportionately affect lower-income households. For this reason, a bump up in gas taxes must be modest. Greater emphasis must be placed on achieving increased fuel efficiency for the vehicles Americans drive.

Closing the SUV loophole would be a step in the right direction. Starting in 1975, when fuel-efficiency standards were being set for vehicles, light trucks used primarily in agriculture and construction were granted lower targets than automobiles. Those targets now are 27.5 mpg for autos and 20.7 mpg for light trucks. Since 1975, however, the category “light truck” has come to include gas guzzling SUVs and vans that now account for more than half of all new car sales in the U.S. (Currently the average mileage for SUVs, vans and pickups is 18 mpg.) A standard tailored for working trucks now applies to vehicles that haul mainly groceries and soccer balls. Bringing this class of vehicles up to the same standard of efficiency as the one that currently exists for autos (not an unreasonable goal) could save as much as 1 million barrels of oil per day.

High-efficiency hybrid gas-electric cars like the Toyota Prius (49 mpg) and Honda’s Insight (67 mpg) offer alternatives to the behemoths cruising America’s highways. So does the development of light rail systems linking regional urban areas. These and other options for increased energy conservation would benefit the environment that sustains us all, and would free the U.S. from its dependency on Middle East oil. Released from that dependency, the U.S. may become a truly independent and honest broker of general peace in the region.

Americans displayed an immediate willingness to sacrifice their blood to aid fellow citizens following the September 11 attacks. It’s time to sacrifice, for the common good, the profligate use of another viscous liquid.