Webber: When it comes to energy policy, beggars can't be choosers

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Wednesday, May 28, 2008

Recent news headlines blared, "Saudis reject Bush request to pump more oil." In one simple action, this request and refusal made crystal clear that our energy policy is impotent.

Despite soaring rhetoric about oil addiction, energy security, energy independence, and getting off Middle East oil, our energy policy amounts to nothing more than begging the Saudis to pump more crude. It's particularly fascinating that President Bush, a man whose image is built on muscular militarism and projections of force, would be reduced to groveler in chief. At the same time, presidential candidates John McCain and Hillary Clinton are competing to see who can repeal the gas tax faster and better than the other one. The House of Representatives passed a bill to sue OPEC over its production rates, which takes Bush's begging to a more formal level, but remains just as pathetic.

All of these steps undermine our ability to solve the energy problem, and America deserves better than that.

What happened to proactive leadership? When did we become comfortable with foreign leaders manipulating our energy trade, economy and national security at their whim?

Maybe it's time we recognize the high energy prices as a wake-up call for drastic action.

The way to solve the problem is not to beg the Saudis for more petroleum. If they agreed, it would only propagate our dysfunctional relationship by making oil cheap and halting progress on bringing alternative sources on line. It's time to break the cycle once and for all and regain control of our energy destiny.

The first step in solving the energy problem is to admit we have a problem. And that problem is composed of three converging crises: resource depletion, climate change and violent extremism funded by the energy trade. We must develop energy solutions that balance our three competing priorities for energy that is abundant, clean and domestically produced.

These solutions might include advanced, next-generation biofuels made from algae that we grow in the
United States, reduce CO2 emissions and require much less acreage than traditional energy crops. Or supergrids that are highly efficient, allowing us to couple far-reaching wind and solar resources with hydroelectric reservoirs to store and deliver electricity to urban demand centers. Or better batteries that enable electrified transportation. These are exciting technologies that would create industries and high-paying jobs and solve our energy problem. But all of them will take decades to bring on line unless we expedite the process.

Though conservation will help us bide our time until these solutions come along, begging the Saudis to pump more oil slows us down. The surest way to kill these technologies before they hit maturity is to allow oil prices to drop again, just as the oil glut in the 1980s halted energy research and conservation efforts that began a few years before.

If we really want to solve the energy problem, we need to use these high prices as a market incentive to bring forward alternative fuels and approaches. The higher the prices, the faster the innovation. In other words, the president and congressional leadership have it backward: We should be begging the Saudis to reduce output and drive prices higher, allowing us to solve this problem once and for all.

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