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To give America freedom

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By Frank J. Gaffney Jr. - What do the following recent events have in common? c The president of the United States has prostrated himself for the second time in five months before the king of Saudi Arabia, pleading for more oil. Despite George Bush's inducements — an array of advanced, offensive arms; the promise of nuclear technology with which the Saudis can expect (like the North Koreans, Iranians, Pakistanis, etc.) to acquire the ultimate weapons; and U.S. help securing Saudi Arabia's borders (something the president has declined to do at home) — the American plea was spurned. The contempt felt by the House of Saud was captured in its oil minister's quip, "If you want more oil, buy it."

- The Senate rejected, by a vote of 56-42, an initiative offered by Republicans that called for opening the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) in Alaska and some offshore waters now closed to exploration and exploitation of their substantial oil reserves.
- In addition, that chamber's appropriations committee refused by a similar party-line vote to lift its moratorium on oil-shale production in Colorado. It seems that, if we want more oil, we will have to buy it *at ever increasing prices* from the Saudis and others even more unfriendly to this country's national security and economic interests — like Venezuela's Hugo Chavez or Russia's Vladimir Putin, perhaps even Iran's Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.
- One thing the Senate and House did agree upon, by overwhelmingly bipartisan majorities, was suspending purchases of oil to fill the remaining 3 percent of the capacity of the Strategic Petroleum Reserves. This action will have negligible (if any) impact on energy prices. But it will ensure that less oil will be available to us than would otherwise have been the case in the event, for example, the next terrorist attack on the Saudi oil infrastructure succeeds where others have failed and seriously disrupts world supplies.
- Then there is the newly formed coalition, ostensibly spearheaded by the Grocery Manufacturers' Association, that has launched a multimillion-dollar lobbying effort aimed at discouraging development of one alternative to oil: domestically produced or imported ethanol. Wrongly asserting that producing this transportation fuel from corn is largely responsible for rising food prices and the attendant global shortages, this instant grass-roots (read, "astroturf") coalition appears to want America to remain essentially dependent on oil. Wonder where the money for this campaign is coming from?

Answer: These actions — given soaring energy prices and the attendant hemorrhage of U.S. petrodollars to, among others, people who wish us ill — represent the sort of behavior in which only a nation utterly unserious about energy security could indulge.

In truth, no matter what we do, we will need oil for the foreseeable future. As a result, we should do our utmost to find and exploit it in places either under our control (for example, near where the Cubans and Chinese are getting it off the coast of Florida) or at least friendly to us (notably, Canada, Mexico and Brazil).

It is equally axiomatic that, no matter what we do, we almost certainly will have less oil than we need, certainly at prices we can afford. The question is: Are we going to do something to meet the shortfall? Or are we simply going to allow the economy and security of the United States to bleed out at the hands of the Saudi-led OPEC cartel?

The Set America Free Coalition — an initiative launched several years ago by unlikely array of national security-, environmental- and energy-minded people and organizations from across the political spectrum — is advancing practical, near-term alternatives to that unappetizing and unacceptable prospect.

At the moment, the Coalition is mounting its own campaign aimed at achieving in the immediate future, a simple yet far-reaching goal: Ensuring each of the 17 million new cars added to America's highways each year is capable of being powered by ethanol (from whatever source), methanol (ditto) or gasoline (or some combination thereof).

There are already some 6 million of these Flexible Fuel Vehicles (FFVs) on our roads today. Most of these are American-made (name another technology in which Detroit has a competitive advantage?) It costs less than \$100 per car to equip new cars with this feature.

Ask yourself, and your elected representatives and would-be presidents: As each of these cars will last, on average, roughly 17 years, do we want any more of them built the old way — namely able to use *only* gasoline. Can we responsibly continue for another generation to lock our transportation sector (the principal, and most profligate, consumer of imported oil) into dependence on oil substantially imported from unfriendly places?

Robert Zubrin — a leader of the Set America Free Coalition and author of the terrific new book, "Energy Victory: Winning the War on Terror by Breaking Free of Oil" — notes that, at today's oil prices, we are allowing the Saudis and their friends to impose the equivalent of a 40 percent income tax of about \$3,300 on every man woman and child in this country. We cannot afford to allow such lunacy to continue.

Sooner or later, Congress will adopt an Open Fuel Standard requiring every new car sold in America to be an FFV. The effect will be, in short order, to create an immense and highly competitive market for alternative, "Freedom Fuels" that we can make here or buy from friends. That will, in turn, will set America free by beginning to end its cars' present addiction to oil. Why wait any longer?

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