Alternative Energy Is Not Viable

by John Cobin, Ph.D. for *The Times Examiner*
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One strategy that modern liberals have mastered is the use of repetition to condition people into accepting their way of thinking. They do so with homosexuals, for instance, who were only a few decades ago looked upon with scorn and derision. Yet, the liberal media have been continually talking about this group as if they were "normal" people who just happen to practice and "alternative" lifestyle. Now it is no longer so shocking for us when we see two men or two women kissing in public, especially in larger metropolitan areas. It is no longer shocking to see a movie which has a scene in which two bisexual women are dating one man. Repetition works. A generation of children has now grown up thinking that homosexuality and bisexuality are normal.

The same tactic has been working for the liberal ideological environmental movement. For example, consider a few well known "facts".

1. The world has too many people in it and we must slow population growth if humans are to have a prosperous existence in the future.
2. Pollution is a growing problem that continually threatens our quality of life.
3. Since the world is running out of oil and gas reserves, we must do our best to find and utilize alternative forms of energy, giving people incentives (e.g., tax breaks) to do so quickly.

How many times have we heard the liberal media proclaim these three (and many other) alleged facts about our environment? How many on the right believe that they are true? The fact is that all three statements are false. They are lies, based on flawed data and false science. Yet people widely believe they are true because they hear them so often from the media and/or because they have little basis or reference with which to counter the arguments from either their public school training or occupation.

The truth of the matter is that the world is not overpopulated. The ultimate and most scarce resource is the human mind, which continually produces new ideas and technological innovation that create progress in a very dynamic world. The world is bedaubed with pollution, but the world is also cleaner than it has ever been since the beginning of the industrial revolution at the end of the eighteenth century. It is impossible to have production and progress without some pollution, and the level of pollution we have is both tolerable and getting better all the time. Much more could be said about these two issues alone, but for now we will focus on energy resources.

The issue of alternative energy has become so "obvious" in the American mind that many well-meaning conservatives and libertarians have come to accept the tenets of liberalism without serious question. I recently heard a conservative Christian talk show host interviewing a liberal "Christian" scholar who had written a book on George Bush's failures, noting at one point his liberalized view of the biblical stewardship of world resources. At one point, the liberal author said to his host that we must alleviate our reliance on fossil fuels. The conservative Christian consented to the idea without hesitation, rather than challenging it, and then proceeded to try to combat the liberal on his own turf. What a tragedy!

The world is not running out of fossil fuels. Despite the recent rise in the price of oil due to government-sponsored cartelization and collusion, oil is still cheap and abundant. And it would be even cheaper and more abundant if drilling for new reserves were not curtailed by onerous regulation in the United States and Europe. If there were ever an oil or gas shortage, it would be caused by botched government regulation rather than an imagined finiteness in supply.

Even when "known reserves" are truly diminished in the market, entrepreneurs and inventors are given market (profit) incentives to develop new technologies that enable us to create new

oil reserves that were thought of as unreachable just a few years earlier. For instance, oil is being drilled at depths of 6,000 feet today—a feat unthinkable just 30 years ago when the maximum depth was only 500 feet. According to scholars like Julian Simon, Stephen Moore, and many others, there is enough oil in the earth's crust to last many generations, and it is getting cheaper too (relative to wages). As John Jennrich recently said, "Thirty years after the 'energy crisis' of the 1970s, it is now apparent that the United States—and the world, too—is awash in energy resources. This specifically includes an abundance of natural gas" and "the indisputable fact today is that the United States and the world have enough to supply human [energy resource] needs for many more generations" ("Fueling the Future", chapter 9 of Ron Bailey, ed. *Global Warming and Other Eco-Myths*, Prima Publishing, 2002, pp. 249, 250). We have never come close to running out of oil and gas, just out of good ideas to produce more of them (or to circumvent liberal regulation that curtails its optimal exploitation).

Currently, about 62.0% of out energy needs are supplied by petroleum and natural gas. Coal provides 22.0%, hydro provides 7.0%, and nuclear energy provides 6.6%. Renewable energy resources like solar and wind power, provide a measly 0.7% of our energy needs. Why? Renewable energy is not effective or efficient outside of *ad hoc* uses (such as a windmill pump and generator on a remote homestead or a solar panel on a flashing road sign on an obscure desert highway).

In fact, a single gas-fired electrical generating plan situated on just a few acres of land can produce more energy per year than *all* of California's 13,000 windmills can (about 3.5 billion kilowatt-hours of electricity). Those windmills must occupy vast stretches on land—and many of them are now dilapidated or abandoned, having been initially built not so much for economic efficiency but for the tax credits they provided. In sum, wind power requires more than a thousand times as much land as a conventional plant does, and the energy it produces costs two to three times more.

Solar power is no more efficient than wind power. A global solar energy system would occupy a land area greater than three times the size of the state of California and utilize 20% of all currently known iron reserves. At its current stage of development, it is completely preposterous to promote any policy that endeavors to replace fossil fuel generated power with solar power.

So why bother? In terms of public policy, we should not bother. That is not to say that wind power is a bad option for Indians or others who own vast stretches of desert lands with fewer alternative uses. But those uses will be private and only undertaken if they are economically efficient. Individual families and *ad hoc* uses may still utilize solar power, and certainly inventors should continue trying to improve the technology. But there should not be any *national* policy to promote any inefficient alternative form of energy.

The bottom line is that conservatives and libertarians need to snap out of the daze caused by hearing the repetition of false liberal ideas and claims regarding natural resources. They should not fall into the trap of thinking that we are running out of natural resources and somehow we must succumb to the urgency to find alternative energy sources. On the contrary, those of us who understand how markets work realize that the price system will provide us with the information that alternatives need to be sought—if and when the need becomes a reality. Let's challenge the liberals more rigorously by not simply giving in to their lame and false claims about the environment.