

Arctic Refuge/energy op-ed for Knight Ridder 2/04/03

WASHINGTON—Americans are right to be concerned about national security, which must continue to be our first priority until the war on terrorism is won. But that security will not be enhanced by looking for it in the wrong places, or by using it as a pretext for partisan gain.

This is exactly what is happening, however, in the long running debate over drilling for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Having failed, year after year, to win the debate on its merits, proponents of drilling have re-wrapped their old arguments in red, white and blue in the belief that the American public can be herded into accepting the destruction of our greatest intact wilderness on national security grounds.

Consistently exaggerating the amount of oil that could be extracted from the refuge, and conveniently neglecting to mention that it would take a decade or more to begin flowing, the drillers would have you believe that the Arctic refuge holds the key to America's energy independence. The more crude we pump from Alaska, the less we'll need to import from the Middle East, which translates into greater energy independence and lower prices at the pump. Hence, more security, right?

Wrong. The hard, simple fact of the matter is that, even using the oil industry's inflated estimates of Arctic crude, the United States has but three percent of the world's known petroleum reserves, while it consumes 25% of the world's annual production. And the price we pay for this consumption is determined not by our level of domestic production, but by the forces of supply and demand in the global market place.

Consider the case of Great Britain, which 20 years ago was energy independent, with virtually all of its oil coming from domestic production in the North Sea. Yet, when prices rose on the world market, Britons paid more like everybody else.

We cannot drill our way to energy independence, but there is a way to get there--through conservation and investment in renewable fuels. Just raising the fuel efficiency standards for new vehicles by three mpg, for instance, would save more oil, in less than 10 years, than all the crude we could pump from the Arctic refuge. And we have not even begun to tap the potential of alternative energies like wind and solar power, which could eventually meet all of our electricity needs.

These technologies are no longer science fiction; they have made great strides over the past two decades and are fact today. But they need more federal support to jump start their competition on a playing field still heavily tilted towards the production of dirty, non-renewable fossil fuels.

And what of the Arctic refuge, the biological heart of an ecosystem so abundant in polar bears, caribou, golden eagles and other vulnerable species that scientists call it "America's Serengeti"? The drillers claim they can extract oil from the refuge without damaging its sensitive environment. But that is just not so.

Because the oil is likely to be dispersed through a number of mid-sized fields, extracting it will require a spider web of pipelines, roads, drill pads and other facilities that would irrevocably scar the landscape. The 126,000-strong caribou herd that migrates to the coastal plain each spring to birth its young would have to pick its way through a vast industrial park to get there.

We don't need to detour through America's last unspoiled wilderness to arrive at energy independence. But we sure could use a better road map--and a vision for the future that looks beyond the next filling station.