

An Unlikely Meeting Of the Minds For Very Different Reasons, Groups Agree on Gas Alternatives

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Environmentalists aren't the only ones applauding the sales stumble of big SUVs and pickups in the face of high gas prices.

Groups of conservative Republicans see an opportunity to step up a campaign to promote alternative-fuel vehicles and wean the nation from dependence on foreign oil. While skeptical about links between autos and global warming, the conservatives have concluded that cutting gasoline consumption is a matter of national security.

A who's who of right-leaning military hawks -- including former CIA director R. James Woolsey and Iraq war advocate Frank J. Gaffney Jr. -- has joined with environmental advocates such as the Natural Resources Defense Council to lobby Congress to spend \$12 billion to cut oil use in half by 2025. The alliance highlights how popular sentiment is turning against the no-worries gas-guzzling culture of the past decade and how alternative technologies such as gas-electric hybrids are finding increasingly widespread support.

"I think there are a number of things converging," said Gary L. Bauer, a former Republican presidential candidate and former head of the Family Research Council who has signed on to a strange-bedfellows coalition of conservatives and environmentalists called Set America Free. "I just think reasonable people are more inclined right now to start thinking about ways our country's future isn't dependent on . . . oil from a region where there are a lot of very bad actors."

The war in Iraq and escalating terrorism in the Middle East have shaken Americans' faith in cheap, plentiful gasoline. The average price of a gallon of regular gasoline reached \$2.153 yesterday, according to the AAA Fuel Gauge report, and benchmark crude oil closed at \$53.99 per barrel, compared with \$36.25 a year ago. Last week a survey sponsored by the nonpartisan Civil Society Institute in Boston found that two-thirds of Americans feel it is "patriotic" to buy a more fuel-efficient vehicle.

At the same time, the success of the Toyota Prius and the Ford Escape Hybrid has demonstrated that drivers don't have to sacrifice fun, performance or status to achieve better gas mileage. The Civil Society survey of more than 1,000 people -- evenly divided between men and women -- found that nearly two-thirds worry that Japanese and other foreign automakers are pulling ahead of their U.S. counterparts in alternative-fuel technology.

Such fears are changing many long-standing positions on the issue of fuel economy. While Democrats have rallied against America's oil dependence -- Sen. John F. Kerry (Mass.) termed the issue a national emergency during last year's presidential campaign -- Republicans have been more likely to advocate further exploration for oil reserves than to sound the alarm about the need for new technologies.

On Monday, 31 national security experts wrote to President Bush on behalf of the Energy Future Coalition, a nonpartisan think tank founded in 2001, calling for action to urge industry to develop alternative-fuel vehicles. The group included prominent Republicans -- such as Robert C. McFarlane, President Ronald Reagan's national security adviser, and C. Boyden Gray, White House counsel for President George H.W. Bush -- as well as Democrats, including former Colorado Sen. Gary Hart.

Environmental advocates at the Natural Resources Defense Council said they were surprised late last year when several conservative groups called about working together to promote alternative-fuel vehicles. The idea of using federal funding to encourage industry to change, instead of just handing out punishment for not meeting fuel-efficiency guidelines, was especially attractive, said David Doniger, policy director for the NRDC Climate Center.

"Our belief is that there is a lot of merit to policies that I guess you'd call 'carrot and stick' policies," he said. "You need the limits on pollution . . . but in addition we recognize that the industry could benefit from some incentives to convert technology more quickly and at lower cost."

Such legislation "may be both more enactable and more successful than focusing only on the limits, or on the stick, so to speak," Doniger said.

The United Auto Workers also has come around to accepting the need for alternative-fuel vehicles. The UAW has long viewed efforts to boost federal gas mileage standards as a threat to Detroit's success with truck and SUV sales and as bad for U.S. jobs. Now the union sees a new threat from the increasing popularity of foreign-produced hybrid and advanced diesel technology, which a recent University of Michigan study said could cost the United States as many as 200,000 jobs.

So the UAW, in cooperation with the nonpartisan National Commission on Energy Policy, has begun promoting a proposal for a federal program to encourage U.S. manufacturers to develop their own alternative-fuel technology and keep those jobs here. "The guts of what we're proposing -- which is really an investment tax credit -- that's not a Republican or Democrat idea. That's sort of motherhood and apple pie to business folks and conservative folks. In theory I do think we have support across the political spectrum to this type of approach," said Alan Reuther, legislative director at the UAW.

Domestic automakers are considering support for the UAW proposal. "We've been engaged in discussions with them to see if there's something we can all agree on," said Dennis Fitzgibbons, a lobbyist for DaimlerChrysler AG.

Set America Free is advocating a combination of manufacturer and consumer tax credits, as well as federal research funding, to help U.S. companies rush to the marketplace with vehicles that run on alternative sources of power. They favor a wide mix of technology including methanol, wider use of ethanol and development of plug-in hybrids that can go long distances on batteries. The Rockville-based Institute for the Analysis of Global Security, an energy policy think tank founded after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, formulated the plan late last year and has sought support from the right and left on the political spectrum.

Now the group is creating unexpected pairings of conservative defense policy wonks and environmental activists to lobby members of Congress for support and last week staged a briefing for Capitol Hill staffers.

Gaffney, who runs the Center for Security Policy think tank, said he had something of an epiphany on the issue last year after attending a conference on the outlook for Saudi Arabian oil reserves. A longtime advocate of nuclear energy and ballistic missile defense, and a member of the neo-conservative movement that pushed for the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, Gaffney said he realized it's no longer tenable to send billions of dollars in oil proceeds to the Middle East.

"It's a recipe for disaster," he said. "Most of the places we import from have regimes that are at best unstable and at worst openly hostile to the United States. . . . What are we doing giving all this money to the people who are trying to kill us?"

The emergence of China as an industrial powerhouse is compounding the problem, he said, creating a huge rival to the United States for the world's dwindling oil reserves. "We have a national security emergency on our hands," Gaffney said.

Rep. Eliot L. Engel (D-N.Y.), a member of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, said last week that he plans to form a bipartisan "Oil and National Security Caucus" to build political support for action. His staff members declined to say which Republican colleagues are being approached about joining the group, but Engel said at a joint appearance with Gaffney on Capitol Hill that there is interest on both sides of the aisle.

"This isn't a Republican or a Democrat issue, or a right-wing or left-wing issue. It's an American issue," Engel said.

Ultimately, though, it's also a consumer issue. And advocates of alternative technology are going to have to make the case that Americans will see tangible benefits from switching to fuels other than gasoline, said Lindsay Brooke of the auto industry consulting firm CSM Worldwide.

"There's a lot of public discourse about energy independence and so on," Brooke said. "But I still think we have a ways to go. The public's concern really is for its own wallet."

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