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Peak oil is coming, and we're unready

By Rod Dreher
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Has the world already reached peak oil, a time of permanently high oil prices and shortages that will profoundly change our way of life? The answer, I think, is likely yes, but the proximity of this catastrophe is not the most important question to ask.

Oil is a finite natural resource; sooner or later, the supply will peak. Jeroen van der Veer, chief of Royal Dutch Shell, earlier this year predicted 2015 as the year the world reaches peak production. John Hess of Hess Corp. said: "An oil crisis is coming in the next 10 years. It's not a matter of demand. It's not a matter of supplies. It's both."

Whether peak oil is already here or on its way, we'll have to deal with it.

The more important question, then, is this: Are we ready for the inevitable? The answer, I'm convinced, is no. And our unreadiness is not for lack of information; it's moral and philosophical. Put plainly, it's because we Americans do not recognize limits. We live in a fantasyland whose borders go far beyond the oilfields, whose psychological geography is critical to map out a future our nation is blindly headed for.

Andrew Bacevich, the retired Army colonel and conservative academic, describes us this way in his forthcoming book *The Limits of Power*:

*If one were to choose a single word to characterize [what it means to be a 21st-century American], it would have to be **more**. For the majority of contemporary Americans, the essence of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness centers on a relentless personal quest to acquire, to consume, to indulge, and to shed whatever constraints might interfere with those endeavors.*

Nowhere in the Bacevich analysis does the phrase "peak oil" appear. But oil dependence is key to our weakness, he argues. America's imperial military overstretch since the 1980 promulgation of the Carter Doctrine – which holds that the U.S. will defend vital interests in the Persian Gulf "by any means necessary" – is a natural consequence of that oil dependency. Our collective refusal to conserve oil, to learn to live more sensibly within our means, requires an ever-growing military commitment to the Middle East.

When the wells begin to peter out, the competition for the remaining petroleum resources will grow even fiercer. Are more than the 0.5 percent of Americans who now serve in the military willing to risk their lives fighting overseas so we can continue to live as we wish? Peak oil will force that question on us.

Our way of life depends not only on cheap, abundant oil but also on a seemingly endless line of credit. Within a single lifetime, the U.S. has gone from creditor nation to debtor nation. The current crisis in the mortgage industry, which threatens to derail the entire economy, derives from the conviction that desire is its own justification. That is, if you want something, you are entitled to it, no matter its cost – and anybody who tells you different is a knave. Politicians of both parties depend on telling this lie.

Technology has aided and abetted our false sense of freedom, leading us to believe that scientists, the sorcerers of a materialist age, will conjure new spells to extend man's mastery of an unruly natural world. The idea that human ingenuity might not be able to save us never seems to cross anybody's mind.

In the current issue of *The New Yorker*, Jerome Groopman writes of new antibiotic-resistant superbugs that defy medical science's abilities to combat. Part of the problem is the way we raise livestock in defiance of natural limits (that troublesome pre-modern concept again) to meet our ravenous appetite for cheap, abundant meat. Jacking up farm animals with antibiotics so they can live in filthy, crowded conditions exacts costs that don't show up in the supermarket line.

"The problem is that we have created the perfect environment in which to breed superbugs that are antibiotic-resistant," journalist Michael Pollan tells Dr. Groopman. "We've created a Petri dish in our factory farms for the evolution of dangerous pathogens."

Maybe we'll come up with a new wonder drug to fight the superbugs. Maybe we'll invent some new way to meet our power needs when oil can't be had cheaply, or at any price. Maybe Wall Street will come up with some new financial instruments that will make us solvent again. It could happen.

But there are no guarantees. The thing is, we're living as if we *are* guaranteed to go onward and upward into a better and brighter future. Our nation's (relatively short) history encourages this fallacious thinking. Like spoiled children, we want freedom without responsibility. But that's impossible. You cannot defy the law of gravity forever.

To be truly free *is* to be responsible. To be responsible is to make choices today that demonstrate wise stewardship of our resources and our liberty. To be responsible is to see the world as it is, not as we would like it to be. To be responsible is to sacrifice now, as previous generations did, so as not to bind future generations to the tyranny of debt, poverty, foreign powers or their own appetites.

A famed U.S. military leader has warned that the fossil-fuel supply on which American civilization depends utterly will run out someday in the 21st century and that our nation cannot afford to place our hope in "the sentimental belief that the things we fear will never really happen."

"I suggest that this is a good time to think soberly about our responsibilities to our descendants – those who will ring out the Fossil Fuel Age," said Adm. Hyman G. Rickover, father of the nuclear Navy.

In 1957.

We've wasted a half-century of precious time, another non-renewable resource. We probably don't have another one to spare.

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