

Potted Frogs

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There's an old story about adaptation that concerns a frog and a pot of water. The story goes that if you put a frog into a pot of boiling water, the frog will jump out and scurry away. But if you place the frog into a pot of cold water and raise the heat under it, the frog will adapt to the rising temperature and boil away, yielding frog soup or whatever. I think of this story often when I read the manner in which news is reported. For example, recently the administration trumpeted the fact that tax collections are up this year, so the Federal deficit will only be about \$300 billion. The news reports were virtually breathless at the good news. I never thought I would see the day when we would be glad to see a deficit of only 300 billion! The fiscal conduct of this administration and this Congress has been disgraceful and they have bartered away our children's future. So, we're happy that the deficit is only \$300 billion.

Similarly, we have accepted without significant action the rising price of gasoline. It goes over \$2 a gallon and then we're delighted that it goes back to \$1.75. It rises above \$2.50 a gallon and there's dancing in the streets when it retreats to \$2.25. The \$3 barrier is breached and we smile as we fill up at \$2.80. We ought to be mad as hell about what the petty tyrants who control the world's oil supply—from Vladimir Putin to Hugo Chavez to Exxon-Mobil—are doing to our pocketbooks and demand a real energy policy that weans us off our oil addiction, and in the process reduce the process of global warming. But we're not; we're just enjoying the balmy weather and the soothing warm water.

With global warming, we are literally sitting in a pot that is being brought to a boil. Disappearing glaciers and retreating snowcaps are early warning signs of a worldwide cataclysm that is of our own making. The temperature of the earth is rising, as are sea levels. The body of scientific research suggests that over the next fifty years, the level of the sea will rise by 20 feet. This will eliminate all of the barrier islands and wetlands that currently protect our coasts and flood most coastal cities (as well as half the state of Florida). In the meanwhile, higher water temperatures are contributing to an increase in the intensity of tropical storms, suggesting that Katrina may have been a forerunner of what is to come and not an anomaly.

There is a common thread that runs through our froggy predicament: fossil fuel. The more dependent we are on foreign sources of energy, the more debt we will be forced to sell abroad. This weakens our ability to navigate through diplomatic and military crises simply because we will be trying to change the minds of our own creditors. The more we spend on fossil fuel, the less we have to buy other things. This reduces consumer spending on the very products that create jobs in the United States, while shifting revenues to oil companies. Since consumption is 2/3 of the economy, this will inevitably reduce our growth. The more fossil fuel we burn, the more carbon dioxide is trapped in the atmosphere and the warmer the earth becomes. Increasing temperatures produce an abundance of severe weather and rising ocean levels.

We need an energy policy that will challenge Americans to reduce our dependence, first of all, on foreign energy sources and, second, on fossil fuel, in the same way Americans were challenged

to put a man on the moon in the Sixties. If we do not do this now, we face a future that at the very least will produce a weaker economy, and at the worst, trigger a catastrophe. But for now, though, we seem to be enjoying the warmth of the waters around us. We have no sense of urgency to climb out of the pot or even to turn off the burner underneath it. If we do neither of these, we will surely wind up as frog soup.