

## **Heroes for Better Gas Mileage**

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In a global poll conducted last summer by the BBC called "What the World Thinks of America," the majority of respondents said they mistrusted the United States. The survey included citizens from a diverse set of countries, including Canada, Brazil, Russia, Indonesia and South Korea. We are rated more dangerous to world peace and stability than two countries we identify as rogue states: Iran and Syria. Despite our overall economic success, the citizens of planet earth overwhelmingly say that they do not want to adopt our policies.

One easy place to start improving our global image is as a leader in energy conservation. In the BBC poll there was widespread disapproval of our policies on global warming, even among traditional allies like Canada, Australia and the UK. Our transportation industry emits more global warming emissions than most countries in their entirety. The world despises our profligate energy use.

We should be concerned about our image abroad. The American self-concept is that of a benign, just giant, with a heroic role in global affairs. We want to be admired and respected, not feared and loathed. And it is common sense to know that the threat of terrorism is strongly influenced by how we are perceived by the rest of the world.

Huge strides in energy efficiency would in fact require very little sacrifice, but maddeningly we continue to elect public officials who stymie progress. Under the last four presidential administrations fuel economy has been declining through the loophole which allows SUVs to be treated like light commercial trucks.

Just this summer Senate Republicans defeated amendments to an omnibus energy bill requiring cars and trucks to average 40 miles per gallon by 2014. Trent Lott, Republican senator of Mississippi, trotted out a tiny car and said "This is still America, isn't it? Is Congress going to mandate that people drive these things? In the back roads of my state, that will get you killed. Don't make the American people drive this little runt of a car."

Trent's little runt is in fact a red herring. Despite larger vehicles, the number of highway fatalities has been rising, with SUVs actually having a higher death rate than cars. The impediments to fixing this problem are not technological. If required the automobile industry could be mass producing an affordable SUV, safer than some of today's most-popular models, that gets much better gas mileage.

To prove this point the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) has recently designed two safer alternatives to the most-popular SUV, the Ford Explorer, which meet or beat its acceleration and hauling capacity. Using existing technologies, gas mileage increases from 21 mpg for the Explorer to 28-36 mpg for the UCS designs. While the UCS models are between \$600 and \$2300 more expensive than the Explorer, they pay for themselves in 2-5 years through savings at the gas pump. And their clever design and safety features would save more than 5,000 lives per year, if added to all SUVs.

If the world hates our energy policies now, it will only get worse without a course correction. Despite having less than five percent of the earth's population we currently account for over one-fifth of global economic production and energy use. We use almost 40 percent more energy than China and India combined, despite having an eighth as many people. Our imprint will get yet larger in the next fifty years, as the US population continues to grow and that of Europe and Japan shrinks.

US Census Bureau/UN population projections imply that the US economy will almost triple by 2050, while that of continental Europe grows by less than half. And this assumes an equal, somewhat conservative rate of productivity growth across regions. If US productivity per worker continues to accelerate faster than the rest of the rich countries, so will our production and consumption. Eventually some of the larger, poorer countries will begin to catch up, but the US is now on course to be an ever-expanding global polluter.

Mandating safer and more fuel-efficient cars and trucks would be an easy yet powerful step toward demonstrating responsible global citizenship. The American way of life can be about more than mindless spending. It can encompass environmental stewardship and, like the president's program fighting HIV in Africa, more compassion for the poor of this world. Practical, bold steps in this direction will do almost as much to protect us as enhanced homeland security and nuclear non-proliferation.

Yes, Trent, this is still America, where current policies are leading to unneeded traffic deaths and a waste of energy resources right there on the back roads of your own state. It's time to be heroic again and show the world that America stands for something more than unregulated, irresponsible consumerism.