



Endings aren't always happy

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This was the week that the History Channel aired the “Mega-disasters – Oil” program, which, in the best part of an hour could only briefly skirt all the different arguments that we discuss here, leading, in their case, to the conclusion that we are possibly heading towards the Mega-disaster of the title. But, given the speed of the story, and a little artistic license in dealing with a possible future, it left me wondering over a question. Tom Engelhardt in his [Tom Dispatch](#) of November 15, raises a similar question over the question of the current droughts that are developing about the country. In its simplest form the question is “What happens when it doesn’t get better?”

When the networks have put on the fictionalized reviews of the future oil shocks there has usually been a savior hanging around in the wings. In the first “Oil Shock”, for example, it was the Russians who sent a couple of tankers our way. Somehow I don’t think that scenario is now likely to play out, nor will it solve the problem. And while prayer is being tried in Georgia (as Tom notes) if we are now in a different climate mode than we were fifty years ago, we may, as I noted in [an earlier post](#), be heading for droughts that will last for many decades. But it is the oil future that, despite the beginnings of MSM attention, is still likely to happen faster and more pervasively that I suspect most of us anticipate.

There are a growing number of “canaries in our coal mine,” that are showing the signs of distress that Leanan has caught over this past week; the continuing supply problems in [North Dakota](#), and there may now be possible supply problems for [Scotland](#), though these are merely indicative of problems that the [Michigan notes](#) the rest of the world is starting to see.

The list of countries that are now facing fuel, gasoline, diesel, oil, and other supply problems gets longer by the day. A few countries facing such issues include (in no particular order): Zimbabwe, Jamaica, China, Argentina, Ghana, Malaysia, Uganda, Trinidad & Tobago, Australia, Rwanda, Iraq, Kenya, Burma, India, Bangladesh, Niger, Nepal, Bolivia, and the Philippines. Some of these are simply have rising prices, or trouble getting diesel to needed locations. Others are being priced out of the market.

In discussions of the problems of oil supply fluctuations we read in the discussion of how the odd cargo or two of crude changing its destination from China to California, or back, is starting to have a possible impact beyond just an adjustment to a short-term trade opportunity. We have, I fear, in short, already arrived in the period where the impacts of the supply shortage are going to have an increasing impact on society. And where, as was discussed at the ASPO Meeting in Houston, political considerations have the power and influence that they would lack if oil retained true

fungibility. Saudi Arabia may indeed have a million or more barrels of oil still, as they say, in reserve. But if, as seems likely, this is merely the heavier crudes of Safaniyah and Manifa, that will become available to the market only after 2009, when the KSA refinery to deal with these comes on stream, then there is, perhaps a little smoke over the mirror. The question then arises if, when that supply does become evident, whether there will be an increase in exports that it will possibly allow. The current evidence suggests that the increase may well not appear. And that brings back the question “and what happens then?”

The History Channel followed the Megadisaster story with a Modern Marvels episode dealing with renewable fuels, and extrapolating from current successful projects, into solutions that have the potential to help solve the coming problem. But there is not as much successful progress, or investment to make the answers come quickly, as you might get from the upbeat message of most of the program. Optimistic projections just keep bumping up against current economic realities. (And even my dentist had, un-coached, disparaging things to say about ethanol yesterday as he repaired a more personal problem).

When we read stories, or comments by some of those trying to bring attention to the problem, quotations along the lines of “a shortfall of 10 mbd by 2020” are the ways in which the problem is defined. But we aren't going to roll out of bed, one morning that year, and suddenly find the oil has gone. Much before then the gap between effective supply and the growing demand at an acceptable price will have made its presence felt. It is already happening, but we are palliated by the “answers” that renewable supplies are rushing to our door.

The problem however is that the scales are wrong. New supplies of energy are as much focused on electrical supply and do not recognize that you can't tell millions of your people that they should aspire to the cars and lifestyles of America, and then curtail their supplies of gasoline and diesel, after they have bought the car. Social unrest is a likely consequence of such moves, and yet, where will the oil come from to stop such an action?

In a recent column in the Washington Post, [Robert Samuelson](#) would have you believe that we still have time to solve the problem. All we have to do is:

Raise fuel economy standards for new cars and trucks; gradually increase the gas tax (possibly offset with tax cuts) to induce people to buy those vehicles; expand oil and natural gas production in Alaska, the Gulf of Mexico, and off the Atlantic and Pacific coasts. These steps would, with time, temper the power of oil producers while also checking greenhouse gases. But many liberals, conservatives and environmentalists oppose parts of a sensible compromise. The stalemate hurts mainly us.

. Would that it were that easy or that possible! We still remain enamored of the few favored technologies – despite my dentist corn ethanol remains a favored solution (and despite the ghastly economics, ethanol from switchgrass is still seen in the press to be an imminent answer). We quarrel about how little this answer or that will really help, not wanting to face the fact that we will need them all in as much as they can produce over the next couple decades, and beyond.

It's that vision thing again. Pat folk on the head, tell them that isn't going to be that bad, and they'll go to sleep happy, not feeling the need to plan for the reality of tomorrow.

Richardson Gill's book on [The Great Maya Droughts](#), begins:

Millions of people died, and until now, no one knew why. The devastation is almost

impossible for us today to understand. One by one, and by the millions, the people died of starvation and thirst. They died in their beds, in the plazas, in the streets, and on the roads. Their corpses, for the most part, lay unburied and were eaten by the vultures and varmints who entered the house to eat the bodies of people who didn't die in the open.

There was nothing they could do. There was nowhere they could go. Their whole world, as they knew it, was in the throes of a burning, searing, brutal drought. Their fields and woods were paper dry and on fire. The smell of smoke was everywhere. There was nothing to eat. Their water reservoirs were depleted, and there was nothing to drink.

And from Tom Dispatch::

And then what exactly can we expect? If the southeastern drought is already off the charts in Georgia, then, whether it's 80 days or 800 days, isn't there a possibility that Atlanta may one day in the not-so-distant future be without water? And what then? Okay, they're trucking water into waterless Orme, Tennessee, but the town's mayor, Tony Reames, put the matter well, worrying about Atlanta. "We can survive. We're 145 people but you've got 4.5 million there. What are they going to do?"

And that is the great concern. We will sit too long complacent in our condition, expecting that someone will take care of this. But when, unless things get worse faster than most expect, it will occur in the next Presidential term, rather than this one, then it is far to distant to worry about – I mean it is not as though it is next year is it ? (Sorry! Couldn't resist)

In his well-referenced book, Gill makes the case that, as society advances, so more advanced levels require greater levels of energy per capita. Historically the energy came from access to more food and water, and thus the growth of Empires. But, when that energy supply is cut off due to prolonged drought, then the same correlation leads to the consequent collapse of the society. And this leads to a reply to [Burgundy](#) who asks where to look to find where conditions might predict what may be coming, it makes more sense to look at the beginning of the Medieval Warming Period, rather than the end – so you may want to go back to around 900 AD or so, rather than the 14th Century.



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