



## Freedom from Oil - a review

Posted by [Heading Out](#) on December 13, 2007 - 10:47am

Topic: [Policy/Politics](#)

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This is the time of year when we often spend some time traveling, and at the time that I went down to the ASPO Meeting in Houston, I picked up a book on the oil situation that I read on the way down and back. The book is "[Freedom from Oil](#)", by [David Sandalow](#). Because of the way it is presented the book turned out to be relatively easy to pick up and put down, as trip segments evolved, and so I thought I would briefly review it today. It gives a different view of the situation, illustrating, through the use of memoranda from the different Departments and Secretaries of the Government, how a policy speech and program get assembled. The topic, and sub-title of the book is "How the Next President Can End the United States' Oil Addiction", and that was good enough for me to pluck it from the shelf and onto the airplane.

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For those of you who have followed the discussion of the situation through these pages over the past year or so, much of the early discussion will be familiar. (For those who haven't it does cover a lot of the salient ground). After an initial memo from a future President asking for input for a speech, the book begins with a review from the projected point of view of the Secretary of Energy, which includes information that roughly 69% of our oil is used in transportation, and which concludes with the note that "overwhelming majorities of Americans believe oil dependence is a serious problem. They will reward a political leader who takes serious steps to address it."

Now I suspect that this is still a bit of wishful thinking. Peak Oil still appears to be almost insignificant on the public radar, although this has to be separated from the price of gas, and the price of energy in general. Both of these will probably become more evident over this winter, particularly if it is a little colder than the recent past, and perhaps they will lead to a recognition of the underlying cause, but I am not holding my breath. On the other hand there is the [current Energy Bill](#) so perhaps my doubts are a little less valid than usual. Certainly the book recognizes that the Department of Defense is highly sensitive to the problem, with "every \$10 per barrel adding \$1.3 billion to Pentagon operating costs."

Now obviously the author has his own solution to the problem, and how he builds a case for it occupies the body of the memos from the different departments. He uses the stories from different individuals to make points as the book progresses. One of the first is [Sarah James](#), and he uses her story of the problems of the native tribes, to highlight melting of ice in the Arctic. (Short pause while I note that about a thousand years ago when we were in the last Warming Period, it was tribes such as hers that sailed their [umiaks](#) through the melted waters of the Arctic to Greenland, where, as the Thule, they met the Vikings who were also colonizing at the time. So life in a warmer world may not be all bad for them).

Since one of the others highlighted is [Vinod Khosla](#), whose ideas have been discussed here on The Oil Drum by [Robert Rapier](#), you may gather that cellulosic ethanol is a part of the plan. (And in the book the debate between Robert and Vinod is mentioned – though at [Robert's site](#).) Vinod has co-authored pieces with Senator Lugar, who wrote a foreword to the book.

Since the book deals with only the high-level memos that go to and from the President there is little to indicate the filtration that would occur in getting ideas from those within the Departments to their respective Secretaries, and so one gets only this somewhat narrow view of how a policy is developed. Yet it is instructive, and given that this is only one of many topics that must flow to and from the White House, it also illustrates how little detailed knowledge may lie behind some of the decisions that are made. Although, from that point of view, since the book only deals with memos and not discussion, it is not clear how much better informed the relevant parties would be before the policy emerges.

The longest memos come from the Department of Transportation, since at least part of the thrust of the book is to suggest at least a partial answer to the oil problem. The memos do discuss some of the options before focusing in on the need to develop, through the path from hybrids, to [plug-in hybrids](#) with the ultimate goal moving towards the electric car. And while this is a commendable goal, and likely a useful step forward, I am afraid that this will be the one part of the book that might be considered to be the most fictional. Hopefully shifting funding from highway construction to mass transit is less so, but with due respect for the logic of the argument and the need, I don't think that the public has yet been readied enough to accept the change, and politicians being what they are . .

But, and I purchase probably at least one or two books on the coming crisis each month, this is likely to be one that stays in the front row, rather than joining most of the others towards the back. In part this is because it carries a fair number of useful bits of information in a way that are easy to understand and to access. And I actually finished it, which (guilty look down) I don't always do when some of the others head off into their own projected solutions, which tend to be less practically based than this one.



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