

## **The Oil Drum: Campfire**

### **Discussions about Energy and Our Future**

#### **In Our Hands, Part 1: How We Got What We Have (1950)**

Posted by [JoulesBurn](#) on November 7, 2010 - 10:44am in [The Oil Drum: Campfire](#)

Topic: [Miscellaneous](#)

How economic progress comes from the accumulation of privately owned tools of production; demonstrates the need for tools by showing a young couple with their infant child in a wilderness with nothing but natural resources and their hands.

A Campfire post with an actual campfire!

In the spirit of [Rod Serling](#), the following is submitted for your approval (and discussion):

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Producer: Wilding Picture Productions, Inc.

Sponsor: American Economic Foundation, The (Inland Steel Co. & Borg-Warner Corp.)

### **Some Thoughts**

I found the video (and the other parts linked below) very amusing for its quaintness and cheesy production, but I also found it rather thought-provoking. There are several energy-related issues raised, and dissecting each would require many posts. One particular theme relevant here, though, is that freedom, free markets, and free trade deliver the goods, so to speak. An optimistic view on the future of oil tends to be either that there is plenty of oil as long as we allow ourselves to extract it, or that the market will offer a timely replacement as oil production dwindles. In the video, resources such as oil are assumed to be there for the taking. Having a free market which efficiently allocates those resources is the key to prosperity. This is basically an anti-communist film, painting a black/white view of the world.

This video was produced around 1950, and it speaks to the predominant inward view of the US at that time. The US emerged victorious from World War II, and that outcome is portrayed as being due to the superiority of "the American Way". Oppressive governments with strong and charismatic leaders necessarily lead to war and economic hardship. Communism was gaining ground at the time, though, in China and Korea. The USSR had detonated their own atomic bomb. Also, nature is viewed in an adversarial sense. It's dangerous to be outside (particularly in the hills outside of LA), and survivalism is not for the ill-prepared. In the Twilight Zone vignette, we are introduced to the worth of tools, matches, and the concept of trade. Technological development, particularly in agriculture, gets a big thumbs up. But then the main theme is driven hard: what made America successful?

Something happened in this country to produce a titanic upsurge in human ingenuity and spirit...what was it?

The answer, apparently, is God and the Declaration of Independence. Much is missing from this assessment, of course. Having abundant resources, technology brought from Europe, and geographic isolation during the wars probably helped some. Later, both in the above and in the other segments of the file, the apparent failure of the Native Americans to advance technologically relative to the more recent arrivals is crudely invoked to advance this argument. But while that broader question is interesting (i.e. why did primitive peoples in Eurasia develop technology and not those crossing the Bering Strait), I was struck by a partial explanation for this given in Part 4:

...we make better use of our natural resources.

For over 12,000 years, people lived off the natural resources and in fairly large numbers -- not necessarily comfortable lives, admittedly. But in less than a couple of centuries, the buffalo herds are gone, the salmon are gone, and much topsoil has flowed into the Gulf of Mexico or been covered with pavement. Writing this in a comfortable house stocked with food does make it hard to be completely objective.

But what happens if the oil runs low? In 1950, the US produced about 5.4 million barrels per day and imported about a tenth as much. Today, (after peaking at over eleven MMBPD in 1970) the US produces over seven million - while importing 11.5 million. Most of the productivity gains touted in the videos were it some way due to the burning of petroleum. It's fine to claim credit for the ingenuity of taking it out of the ground, refining it, and burning it. But it will take a different level of ingenuity to replace its use as fast as might be necessary.

Finally, these videos point to the political difficulties ahead trying to address energy issues rationally. You will find the essence of the Tea Party ideology (at least the more rational parts). Championing more government to deal with peak oil, even if it is acknowledged as such, will be a hard sell.

Here are the other segments, if you haven't seen enough yet:

- [Part 2: What We Have](#)  
Noteworthy quote: "...pay the costs all the way back to nature."
- [Part 3: How To Lose What We Have](#)  
"What you yappin' about? You voted for it!"
- [Part 4: How To Keep What We Have](#)  
"Tools shorten our work hours"



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