

On a Remark by Mikhail Gorbachev about American Consumerism

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A few days ago (March 8, 2003), CNN featured an interview with former Soviet Union President Mikhail Gorbachev. I caught just the last of the interview, when Gorbachev was commenting on the high per-capita energy consumption of the United States. He made the interesting statement that just five percent of the world's population (i.e., the US population is approximately $.05 \times 6 \text{ billion} = 300 \text{ million}$) consumes 42 percent of the world's commercial energy. He characterized the US energy consumption as extreme and unreasonable consumerism.

I agree with Gorbachev that US energy consumption is extreme, from several points of view. The main point of view is that the high level of energy consumption, worldwide, is destroying the environment and causing many species to become extinct, and US energy consumption is a major component of the total. It is not just that the total world consumption is too high for the biosphere – the US consumption alone is too high, even if no other nation consumed a single joule of energy. From another viewpoint, the US consumption is too high because it is being wasted on frivolous activities, i.e., activities that are not only harmful to the biosphere, but do not contribute to solving the environmental problem facing mankind and the other species on the planet.

Some might argue that US consumption is too high from the point of view of envy, or jealousy, or covetousness, or equity – that it is not right for just a few people to enjoy most of the planet's one-time windfall of fossil fuel. That viewpoint is of little interest to me, since it has little to do with solving the problem. Also, since it is Earth's current-era (industrial-age) generations that are consuming all of the fossil fuel and leaving none for future generations, that argument applies to *any and every* nation that would use fossil fuels, not just to the United States or other currently industrialized nation.

Gorbachev's remark reminded me of the fact that all the world's nations aspire to the high standard of living of the US (and other industrialized countries, such as Sweden, France, UK, and Germany), and of what the implications would be of achieving this, or even of seriously attempting to achieve it. If five percent of the world consumes 42 percent of the total energy, then the other 95 percent consumes 58 percent. The ratio of per-capita energy consumption of the US to that of the rest of the world is hence $(42/5)/(58/95) = 13.76$, i.e., an American consumes almost 14 times as much energy as a nonAmerican. In other words, if the rest of the world wishes to catch up to the US in energy consumption (and, it follows, to the US standard of living), it will have to increase its energy consumption by a factor of 13.76, even if the US stands still. But if 95 percent of the world increases its energy consumption by a factor of 13.76, then the total amount of energy consumed worldwide would be increased by a factor of 8.4. If we human beings are already making extinct 30,000 species per year, and heating up the biosphere, and destroying all of the world's natural forests as a result of the energy we are using just now, think how much more destruction there will be if we consume 8.4 times that amount! And these calculations assume that the global population remains constant at six billion. If it increases to nine billion, as the UN and other organizations project it to before the oil runs out, you can add another 50 percent to these calculations!

Most of the world's commercial energy is from fossil fuel. It is generally agreed that it is simply not possible to increase our fossil fuel consumption by an order of magnitude, without the direst of consequences for the environment. The rest of the world, it seems, will never have "a bite at the apple." There are vastly too many people on the planet for this ever to happen.

Some consider it "unfair" that the US and the other currently industrialized nations of the world will realize almost all of the one-time benefits of fossil fuel, and the other (less developed) nations of today's world will not. But even if they did, then all of the future people of the world would not, so there is no avoiding the "unfairness" in the distribution and use of this (or any other) nonrenewable resource. The only "fair" thing to do is either not use fossil fuel at all (this has the tremendous advantage of saving the environment), or use it in a manner that benefits our generation and all future generations of mankind equally. Since the latter choice is clearly impossible, anyone interested in "fairness" must reach the conclusion that the only way to be "fair" with respect to fossil fuel is to not use it at all. Since all oil will be gone anyway within 50 years, and since its use at high levels is causing irreparable damage to the biosphere, and since no one has to date figured out anything useful that really needs to be done with the oil anyway, that option has much to say for itself.

Today is March 18, the day after US President George Bush delivered his ultimatum to Saddam Hussein to leave Iraq or face war. As everyone seems to realize, this war has little to do with "weapons of mass destruction" and everything to do with oil – Iraq is sitting on the world's second-largest oil reserve. Until now, it has been an easy matter for the US and Europe to keep most of the oil to themselves. But now that China and India are industrializing, their voracious thirst for oil will soon far exceed that of the US and Europe, since their massive populations represent over one-third of the Earth's total population, not just five or ten percent of it. If the US does not take over Iraq's oil fields, the oil there will find its way to China and India. And that prospect, more than any other consideration, is why it is so vitally important to the US to take over Iraq's oil fields. Under US control, Iraqi oil will be used mainly by the US, where it can maintain a high standard of living for a few years longer, and not by China and India, where it will never make a significant difference in the overall standard of living, where any significant increase in use will rapidly hasten the demise of the biosphere, and where its use will rapidly hasten the day when global reserves are exhausted. Because of their massive populations and aspirations to increase the standard of living of their people, India and China are, of the world's nations, the greatest potential threats to the biosphere.

It does not matter how high energy consumption per capita is, as long as the global *total* consumption is small. With a large human population, however, the planet's ecosystem cannot tolerate high levels of energy consumption for everyone, or even for many. It cannot tolerate today's high levels of consumption. It certainly cannot tolerate an increase in those levels. In other words, it cannot tolerate an increase in the standard of living of human society (given today's high human population). Many people are calling for the US and other industrialized countries to reduce their energy consumption. But those calls are usually motivated by covetousness, not by a concern for the environment. They want the US to reduce its energy consumption so that they can consume more and thereby share in the material benefits that oil provides, in the few short years before it is gone forever, and in the few short years before global industrialization destroys our biosphere. Anyone calling for more energy consumption has no regard or consideration for all future generations of mankind.

Given the covetous nature of mankind, it is understandable why Gorbachev, or anyone else, might be upset that a small fraction of the human population is realizing most of the benefit from a one-time windfall resource (in this case, petroleum). But calls for the US and other nations to reduce consumption are wasted: no nation is going to do that (as President George Bush once declared, "The American standard of living is not up for negotiation!"). Worse, they take attention away from the real problem. The problem is not too little energy to go around – it is too many people! Fossil fuel will soon be gone, and mankind will return to existing on the current budget of solar energy. The amount of energy available for use by mankind, if it is not to destroy the biosphere, is very limited. Sufficient energy – solar energy – is available to sustain a high quality existence for all humankind, indefinitely, for a global population on the order of ten million.

In summary, Gorbachev's remark, motivated by covetousness (he would probably call it "a concern over *equity*") and not by a concern for the environment, misses the point. The point is that massive consumption of energy is destroying the balance of nature of the biosphere, and that high total level of consumption must be reduced drastically if mankind and the biosphere in which it evolved are to continue to exist. That the US, representing five percent of the world's population, is consuming 42 percent of the total is, in the long run, irrelevant. All that matters in the long run is the total amount that is being consumed at the present time (since that determines whether the biosphere is substantially modified), and not who is consuming it. All that matters is that mankind's current high level of energy consumption is destroying the balance of nature of the biosphere and threatening the extinction of mankind. Given his stature, Gorbachev should be concerned about and talking about the destruction of the biosphere, rather than expressing concern or regret over who is getting to play the biggest part in causing it.