



## **R. James Woolsey**

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### **Turning Oil into Salt**

We must become independent -- not just of imported oil, but of oil itself.

By R. James Woolsey & Anne Korin

**A** determined pack has begun to race its engines and to try to shoulder us off the road toward energy independence. It's time for those determined to stay on the track to drive aggressively.

The energy-independence question is really about oil — the rest of U.S. energy use presents important issues, but not the danger of our being subject to the control of nations that “do not particularly like us,” as the president put it. Some of the engine racers have an economic interest in keeping our transportation system 97-percent oil-dependent. Less understandable are the authors of a recent Council on Foreign Relations report accusing those working for such independence of “doing the nation a disservice.”

The authors of that report and their followers define “independence,” contrary to both Webster’s and common sense, as essentially “autarky” — i.e. complete self-sufficiency, or not importing oil even though we remain dependent on it. Such a Pickwickian definition captures none of the thinking of serious advocates of reducing our oil dependence: The point of independence is not to be an economic hermit, but rather to be a free actor.

It is true that some who promote oil independence spice their remarks by implying that we might substitute oil from domestic sources or from our near neighbors for cheap Middle Eastern imports, and somehow manage to insulate ourselves from the world oil market.

But speechwriters’ tropes shouldn’t be taken as serious policy proposals. Geology will not cooperate in any such fantasy. There is no reasonable way that we can leave oil in place as the near-exclusive fuel for the world’s transportation systems and simultaneously wall ourselves off from the world oil market. If we want to end dependence on the whims of

paying for both sides in the War on Terror, we must define oil “independence” sensibly — as doing whatever is necessary to avoid oil’s being the instrument of despotic leverage and foreign chaos.

Those who won our independence as a nation didn’t just fling imported tea into Boston harbor — they did whatever was necessary to wrest themselves from British control. We need not call out the Minutemen, but to avoid the consequences of dependence we must become independent — not just of imported oil, but of oil itself.

Does this mean that we cannot use oil or import any? Of course not. Oil is a useful commodity that can readily transport energy long distances. It already has competition from natural gas in industry and from gas and electricity for heating. But in transportation it brooks no competition — it is thus not just a commodity but a strategic commodity. Oil’s monopoly on transportation gives intolerable power to OPEC and the nations that dominate oil ownership and production. This monopoly must be broken. To tell us that in following this path we are doing a “disservice to the nation” and should resign ourselves to oil dependence is like telling us we should not urge an alcoholic to stop drinking, but should rather impress upon him the health advantages of red wine.

Not long ago, technology broke the power of another strategic commodity. Until around the end of the nineteenth century salt had such a position because it was the only means of preserving meat. Odd as it seems today, salt mines conferred national power and wars were even fought over control of them.

Today, no nation sways history because it has salt mines. Salt is still a useful commodity for a range of purposes. We import some salt, so if one defines independence as autarky we are not “salt independent”. But to most of us there is no “salt dependence” problem at all — because electricity and refrigeration decisively ended salt’s monopoly of meat preservation, and thus its strategic importance.

We can and must do the same thing to oil. By moving toward utilizing the batteries that have been developed for modern electronics we can rather soon have “plug-in hybrids” that travel 20-40 miles on an inexpensive charge of night-time off-peak electricity at a small fraction of gasoline’s cost. (After driving that distance plug-ins keep going as ordinary hybrids.) Dozens of ordinary hybrids converted to plug-ins now on the road are getting in the range of 100 mpg of gasoline. And millions of flexible-fuel vehicles are also now in the fleet. Producing them adds costs well under \$100 and they can use up to 85-percent ethanol (before long to be made from biomass rather than corn) — methanol, butanol, and other alternative fuels produced from grasses and even waste.

A flex-fuel plug-in hybrid that gets 100 mpg and, when it needs liquid fuel, uses only 15-percent gasoline, is approaching a utility of 500 mpg. Other oil-breaking technologies are coming. When Cornwallis surrendered at Yorktown, the newly-independent Americans asked their band to play “The World Turned Upside Down.” Get ready for a reprise.

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