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Monday, Aug. 04, 2008

## The Tire-Gauge Solution: No Joke

By Michael Grunwald

How out of touch is Barack Obama? He's so out of touch that he suggested that if all Americans inflated their tires properly and took their cars for regular tune-ups, they could save as much oil as new offshore drilling would produce. Gleeful Republicans have made this their daily talking point; Rush Limbaugh is having a field day; and the Republican National Committee is sending tire gauges labeled "Barack Obama's Energy Plan" to Washington reporters.

But who's really out of touch? The Bush Administration estimates that expanded offshore drilling could increase oil production by 200,000 bbl. per day by 2030. We use about 20 million bbl. per day, so that would meet about 1% of our demand two decades from now. Meanwhile, efficiency experts say that keeping tires inflated can improve gas mileage 3%, and regular maintenance can add another 4%. Many drivers already follow their advice, but if everyone did, we could immediately reduce demand several percentage points. In other words: Obama is right.

In fact, Obama's actual energy plan is [much more than a tire gauge](#). But that's not what's so pernicious about the tire-gauge attacks. Politics ain't beanbag, and Obama has defended himself against worse smears. The real problem with the attacks on his tire-gauge plan is that efforts to improve conservation and efficiency happen to be the best approaches to dealing with the energy crisis — the cheapest, cleanest, quickest and easiest ways to ease our addiction to oil, reduce our pain at the pump and address global warming. It's a pretty simple concept: if our use of fossil fuels is increasing our reliance on Middle Eastern dictators while destroying the planet, maybe we ought to use less.

The RNC is trying to make the tire gauge a symbol of unseriousness, as if only the fatuous believed we could reduce our dependence on foreign oil without doing the bidding of Big Oil. But the tire gauge is really a symbol of a very serious piece of good news: we can use significantly less energy without significantly changing our lifestyle. The energy guru Amory Lovins has shown that investment in "nega-watts" — reduced electricity use through efficiency improvements — is much more cost-effective than investment in new megawatts, and the same is clearly true of nega-barrels. It might not fit the worldview of right-wingers who deny the existence of global warming and insist that reducing emissions would destroy our economy, or of left-wing Earth-firsters who insist that maintaining our creature comforts would destroy the world, but there's a lot of simple things we can do on the demand side before we start rushing to ratchet up supply.

We can use those twisty carbon fluorescent lightbulbs. We can unplug our televisions, computers and phone chargers when we're not using them. We can seal our windows, install more insulation and adjust our thermostats so that we waste less heat and air-conditioning. We can use more-efficient appliances, build more-efficient homes and drive more-efficient cars, preferably with government assistance. And, yes, we can inflate our tires and tune our engines, as Republican governors Arnold Schwarzenegger of California and Charlie Crist of Florida have urged, apparently without consulting the RNC. While we're at it, we can cut down on idling, which can improve fuel economy another 5%, and cut down on speeding and unnecessary acceleration, which can increase mileage as much as 20%.

And that's just the low-hanging fruit. There are other ways to reduce demand for oil — more public transportation, more carpooling, more telecommuting, more recycling, less exurban sprawl, fewer unnecessary car trips, buying less stuff and eating less meat — that would require at least some lifestyle changes. But things like tire gauges can reduce gas bills and carbon emissions now, with little pain and at little cost and without the ecological problems and oil-addiction problems associated with offshore drilling. These are the proverbial win-win-win solutions, reducing the pain of \$100 trips to the gas station by reducing trips to the gas station. And Americans are already starting to adopt them, ditching SUVs, buying hybrids, [reducing overall gas consumption](#). It's hard to see why anyone who isn't affiliated with the oil industry would object to them.

Of course, in recent years, the Republican Party has been affiliated with the oil industry. It was the oilman Dick Cheney who dismissed conservation as a mere sign of "personal virtue," not a basis for energy policy. It was the oilman George W. Bush who resisted efforts to regulate carbon emissions. And most congressional Republicans have been even more reliable water carriers for the industry's interests.

John McCain has been a notable exception. He is not an oilman; he has pushed to regulate carbon emissions; and he opposed Bush's pork-stuffed energy bill, which Obama supported. He also opposed efforts to drill in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and until recently opposed new offshore drilling. But now that gas prices have spiked, McCain is running for President on a drill-first platform, and polls suggest that most Americans agree with him. It's sad to see his campaign adopting the politics of the tire gauge, promoting the fallacy that Americans are powerless to address their own energy problems. Because the truth is: Yes, we can. We already are.

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