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RUMBLE SEAT

## Gauging the furor over Obama's tire pressure remark

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MARY ALTAFFER / ASSOCIATED PRESS

Sen. John McCain's campaign mocked Sen. Barack Obama's suggestion by producing pocket tire pressure gauges labeled "Obama's Energy Plan."

By DAN NEIL, RUMBLE SEAT  
August 8, 2008

Given Barack Obama's bracing summons to civic duty this week, telling the masses to keep their tires properly inflated to save gas, I was surprised and a little disappointed that the tire maintenance section of my local AutoZone was so uninhabited.

Customers, many of whom obviously had been crawling under cars and trucks, lined up at the cash register clutching various petrochemicals -- transmission fluid, gas treatment, oil, ring sealant -- but nobody was buying tire gauges. So I waited.



Photos: A patriot's guide to gauges

At a campaign stop in Springfield, Mo., the Illinois senator suggested that if Americans simply kept their tires inflated to spec, the nation could conserve as much oil as is expected to be pumped out of the ocean with the additional offshore drilling favored by his rival, presumptive Republican nominee John McCain.

Obama's comment touched off a maelstrom of bad arithmetic in the blogosphere, an angels-on-pins debate over how much, exactly, we could

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save by having proper tire inflation, competing estimates of reserves in the outer continental shelf, and fascinating arcana about the amount of gasoline refined from a 42-gallon barrel of sweet crude (about 20 gallons) and the energy extraction costs of offshore oil. All of which was accompanied by the usual partisan furies: Obama's an empty suit, Republicans would raise an oil derrick on Teddy Roosevelt's head at Mt. Rushmore, etc.

The eagerness to put Obama's remark through the meat grinder of literalness, and the glee with which the McCain campaign mocked the suggestion -- staffers whipped up pocket air gauges labeled "Obama's Energy Plan" -- proves only one thing: When it comes to politics, conservation doesn't sell. Many Americans are allergic to the suggestion that they should change behavior or moderate consumption, particularly when it comes to their automobiles.

"Obama is to tire gauages [sic] what Jimmy Carter is to sweaters," fumed "Geevill" on ABC News' Political Radar blog.

I am delighted to have lived to see the humble tire gauge elevated to cultural lightning rod. I own several. If I may, some observations from the valve stem:

It is not easy to maintain optimum tire pressure. Full-service gas stations are largely a memory, which means drivers must do it for themselves. Ordinarily, if they think of it at all, they'll top off their tires with air at one of those coin-operated compressors with the sliding gauge in the nozzle. Two problems arise: First, you shouldn't pressurize your tires when they are warm, but measure the pressure in the morning when the tires are cool then add the appropriate amount of pressure when you get to a station. Second, the gauges in these self-serve air pumps are worthless. They never get calibrated and get kicked around, run over and abused.

But the pen-shaped tire pressure gauges you see in mechanics' pockets aren't much better, offering only a rough guess of pressure. At home I use a precision gauge with a dual-foot chuck, and I keep a digital gauge in the glove box.

All of the above is assuming you can even find a station with an air dispenser. It's worth buying a 12-volt compressor and keeping it in your car for emergencies. You can pick one up for about \$30.

Consumers' trouble maintaining proper tire pressure -- affecting not only fuel economy but tread life, handling and safety -- has not escaped the attention of your benevolent federal government. Tire pressure monitoring systems are now mandatory on all new cars, making the Obama tire gauge flap something of a debate in the rearview mirror.

It's worth considering why this was a story at all. No one would argue that proper tire inflation is not a good thing, though some people nonetheless managed (McCain's camp eventually backtracked a bit on the tire gauge critique). Further, no serious person believes offshore drilling will significantly affect either supply or price: Offshore drilling on the outer continental shelf "would not have a significant impact on domestic crude oil and natural gas production or prices before 2030," according to the government's Energy Information Administration.

The tire gauge vs. offshore drilling debate frames a competition of world views. On one side are those who believe in conservation as a practical matter and, perhaps, a matter of "personal virtue," per Vice President Dick Cheney. On the other are those who find the tire inflation message an insufficiently grand and inspiring idea, weak-wristed, retreatist. Offshore drilling has the romance of heavy industry, with hard-hatted men named "Deke" going after what America needs. What, after all, is more macho: an oil derrick or a tire gauge?

The offshore drilling position also enjoys the stupendous advantage of asking nothing from consumers.

Americans have never been sold on the collective power of numbers, the notion that small, relatively painless gestures of conservation can add up. And so Jimmy Carter will be immortalized as a feckless thermostat-watcher in a cardigan.

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I've been standing in the AutoZone for about an hour now. I've bought a dent puller and some vinyl-restoring compound for my wife's Jeep Cherokee. Then Ken Trenkelbach of Houston comes in to buy -- aha! -- a tire gauge. I ask him if his consciousness has been raised by Obama.

"I just want to make sure I have air in my tires," he says.

Trenkelbach, who says he'll probably vote for Obama, doesn't have much sympathy for the oil and gas industry, even though he's from Houston. But he also thinks Obama's advice will go unheeded. People have known for years that they need to inflate their tires, he says. "What, now they'll listen?"

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