

November 11, 2005

COMMENTARY
Supply Side
The War Against the Car
November 11, 2005; Page A10

A few years ago, I made a presentation to my second-grader's social studies class, asking the kids what was the worst invention in history. I was shocked when a number of them answered "the car." When I asked why, they replied that cars destroy the environment. Distressed by the Green indoctrination already visited upon seven-year-olds, I was at least reassured in knowing that once these youngsters got their drivers' licenses, their attitudes would change.

It's one thing for second-graders to hold such childish notions, but quite another for presumably educated adults to argue that automobiles are economically and environmentally unsustainable "axles of evil." But with higher gas prices, as well as Malthusian-sounding warnings about catastrophic global warming and the planet running out of oil, the tirade has taken on a new plausibility. Maybe Al Gore had it right all along when he warned that the car and the combustible engine are "a mortal threat . . . more deadly than any military enemy."


* * *

Welcome to the modern-day Luddite movement, which once raged against the machine, but now targets the automobile. Just last month, environmentalists organized a "world car-free day," celebrated in more than 40 cities in the U.S. and Europe. In the left's vision of utopia, cars have been banished -- replaced by bicycles and mass transit systems. There is no smog or road congestion. And America has been liberated from those sociopathic, gas-guzzling, greenhouse-gas-emitting SUVs and Hummers that Jesus would never drive.

It all sounds idyllic, but in real life this fairy tale has a tragic ending. As Fred Smith, president of the Competitive Enterprise Institute, reminds us, if the "no car garage" had been a reality in New Orleans in August, we wouldn't have suffered 1,000 Katrina fatalities, but 10,000 or more. The automobile, especially those dreaded all-terrain four-wheel drive SUVs (ideal for driving through floodwaters) saved more lives during the Katrina disaster than all the combined relief efforts of FEMA, local police and fire squads, churches, the Salvation Army and the Red Cross. If every poor family had had a car and not a transit token, few would have had to be warehoused in the hellhole of the Superdome.

This month we paid honor to the heroism of Rosa Parks for fighting racism through the bus boycott in

DOW JONES REPRINTS

 This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers, use the Order Reprints tool at the bottom of any article or visit: www.djreprints.com.

- [See a sample reprint in PDF format.](#)
- [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

Montgomery. What helped sustain that historic freedom cause was that hundreds of blacks owned cars and trucks that they used to carpool others around the city.

A strong argument could be made that the automobile is one of the two most liberating inventions of the past century, ranking only behind the microchip. The car allowed even the common working man total freedom of mobility -- the means to go anywhere, anytime, for any reason. In many ways, the automobile is the most egalitarian invention in history, dramatically bridging the quality-of-life gap between rich and poor. The car stands for individualism; mass transit for collectivism. Philosopher Waldemar Hanzsz, who grew up in communist Poland, noted in his 1999 essay "Engines of Liberty" that Soviet leaders in the 1940s showed the movie "The Grapes of Wrath" all over the country as propaganda against the evils of U.S. capitalism and the oppression of farmers. The scheme backfired because "far from being appalled, the Soviet viewers were envious; in America, it seemed, even the poorest had cars and trucks."

It's not hard to imagine life in America without cars. If you travel to any Third World Country today, cars are scarce and the city streets are crammed with hundreds of thousands of bicycles, buses and scooters -- and peasant workers all sharing the aspiration of someday owning a car. But in America and other developed nations, the environmental elitists are intent on flipping economic development on its head: Progress is being measured by how many cars can be traded in for mass transit systems and bikes, not vice versa. The recently passed highway bill establishes a first-ever office of bicycle advocacy inside the Transportation Department. The bicycle enthusiasts seem to believe that no one ever has far to go, that it never rains, that families don't have three or more kids to transport, and that mom never needs to bring home three bags of groceries.

Similarly, there is now a nearly maniacal obsession among policy makers and the Greens to conserve energy rather than to produce it. Even many of the oil companies are running ad campaigns on the virtues of using less energy (do the shareholders know about this?) -- which would be like McDonald's advising Americans to eat fewer hamburgers because a cow is a terrible thing to lose. A perverse logic has taken hold among the intelligentsia that progress can be measured by how much of the earth's fuels we save, when in fact the history of human economic advancement, dating back to the invention of the wheel, has been defined by our ability to substitute technology and energy use for the planet's one truly finite resource: human energy.

It is because we have continually found inventive ways to harness the planet's energy sources at ever-declining costs -- through such sinister inventions as the car -- that the average American today produces what 200 men could before the industrial revolution began. Studies confirm that the more, not less, energy a nation uses and the more, not fewer, cars that it has, the more productive the workers, the richer the society, and the healthier the citizens as measured by life expectancy. When Albania abolished cars, it quickly became one of the very poorest nations in Europe.

The simplistic notion taught to our second-graders, that the car is an environmental doomsday machine, reveals an ignorance of history. When Henry Ford first started rolling his Black Model Ts off the assembly line at the start of the 20th century, the auto was hailed as one of the greatest environmental inventions of all time. That's because the horse, which it replaced, was a prodigious polluter, dropping 40 pounds of waste a day. Imagine what a city like St. Louis smelled like on a steamy summer afternoon when the streets were congested with horses and piled with manure.

The good news is that environmental groups and politicians aren't likely to break Americans from their love affair with cars -- big, convenient, safe cars -- no matter how guilty they try to make us feel for driving them.

Instead they are using more subtle forms of coercion. The left is now pining for a \$1-a-gallon gas tax to make driving unaffordable. Washington has also wasted over \$60 billion of federal gas tax money on mass transit systems, yet fewer Americans ride them now than before the deluge of subsidies began. When the voters in car-crazed Los Angeles opted to fund an ill-fated subway system, most drivers who voted "yes" said they did so because they hoped it would compel other people off the crowded highways.

To be sure, if the entire membership of the Sierra Club and Greenpeace surrendered their cars, the world and the highways might very well be a better place. But for the rest of us the car is indispensable -- it is our exoskeleton. There's a perfectly good reason that the roads are crammed with tens of millions of cars and that Americans drive eight billion miles a year while spurning buses, trains, bicycles and subways. Americans are rugged individualists who don't want to cram aboard buses and subways. We want more open roads and highways, and we want energy policies that will make gas cheaper, not more expensive. We want to travel down the road from serfdom and the car is what will take us there.

Mr. Moore is a member of The Wall Street Journal's editorial board.

URL for this article:

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB113167486376794406.html>

Copyright 2006 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our [Subscriber Agreement](#) and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit www.djreprints.com.