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Editor's Notebook

Keeping the Home Fires Burning

by Michael Kryzanek

It's important sometimes to reflect on how we live in the United States compared to the rest of the world, especially those countries of the less developed world. It is not enough to state that we are rich and they are poor or that we are "advanced" and they are "deprived." Being an American in the global economy means that our wealth and power come at a price, particularly an energy and environmental price. A little data may help drive this point across. The United States has about 280 million people, or 5% of the world's population, but we consume 22% of fossil fuels and we generate 24% of carbon dioxide emissions, the key contributor to global warming. Furthermore, an average American uses 185 gallons of water a day, a figure that only means something when compared to the 8 gallons of water a day that are used by a resident of Senegal. And when it comes to plain old overkill, an American consumes about 53 times more goods and services than a resident of China.

One common defense of these excesses and disparities is that the United States is the world's most developed nation and as a result consumes more as it creates wealth, fosters innovation, and provides for the general welfare of its citizens. But there is a contrary view. Becoming the world's most powerful country, the United States has built its wealth upon a foundation of consumer greed and corporate irresponsibility. Americans are not just satisfied with having all the latest consumer "stuff," they have to have all the biggest, energy-draining, environmentally dangerous "stuff." From gigantic SUVs to golf courses on the desert to oversized mansions to throwaway diapers, beer cans and paper plates, the American economic culture is one huge consumer machine with a thirst that is unquenchable.

It should come as no surprise that the United States gobbles up the world's resources in order to enhance its economic standing; after all ours is a market-based system that responds to consumer demand and private wealth accumulation. The United States has not become the wealthiest country in the world because it has been reluctant to transform the resources on this planet into everything from computer chips to potato chips. The defenders of American energy use hold firm to the belief that our future as the world's great superpower depends on a continuation of full-scale energy use.



But the real issue about American wealth and resource utilization is more of a matter of balance and proportionality than of sustaining the current growth pattern. Americans, both consumers and corporate leaders, need to ask themselves whether it is necessary to feed the thirsty machine with ever larger items that suck up energy and destroy the environment? We have forgotten about conservation in this country and we certainly have forgotten about living in a way that is modest and efficient. Madison Avenue advertisers tell us that we need all this "stuff" and we march in lock step to the checkout counter. That Senegalese farmer who gets by on a little water or that Chinese worker who lives a meager existence is not even on our radar screen.

So how do we as a country begin to change our buying and living habits so that there is some balance and proportion to our consumer culture? The realistic answer is that such a task is nearly impossible and may take a generation of buying habits to change. The beginning of bringing balance and proportionality back does, however, begin with national political and economic leadership. Governmental and business heads need to express to the American people that economic growth can be achieved through efficiency rather than through excess. This country needs leaders who talk about fuel efficient cars not gas guzzlers; this country needs leaders who advocate for more housing not eight bathroom mega-homes; and this country certainly needs leaders who accent the importance of conserving all its natural resources rather than expending them in a reckless manner.

The 1990s were the golden years of consumer consumption in the United States. We lived well and enjoyed the benefits of residing in the wealthiest country in the world. But now in the 21st century it is time to think about a consumer diet and stopping the machine from eating away our future.

—Michael Kryzanek is Editor of the Bridgewater Review