

# Two Futures, and a Choice

By Tom Athanasiou | March 6, 2003

Whether to invade Iraq, and whether to act aggressively to prevent catastrophic climate change may seem to be two separate decisions, but in fact they represent a single fateful choice about the future.

The war, it seems, is now all but inevitable. The Bush people are committed, and so too, inescapably, are we. For despite all we know about bombings and bitterness, and all we can safely predict about “unintended consequences,” the lock is in. The problem now is to compose a decent protest sign.

The climatic future, for its part, is still open, but it’s closing in significant ways, and more rapidly than most people realize. And this despite the fact that 2002, for all its other grim distinctions, was also the year in which the “greenhouse skeptics” were finally recognized as the spiritual cousins of tobacco company PR men. Let one fact stand for them all: the Arctic ice is melting, fast; before the end of the century, polar bears will be extinct outside of zoos.

Furthermore, the climate negotiations are in trouble. And, frankly, it’s looking less and less likely that we’re going to be able to make it down into the “soft landing corridor,” to arrive, shaken but alive, somewhere this side of climate catastrophe. The problem has a million faces, but the U.S. effort to destroy the Kyoto Protocol certainly looms large among them. It comes to this: we Americans are only 4% of the world’s population, but we emit 25% of its greenhouse gases. Moreover, we claim this vast atmospheric space as if it were our birthright. We won’t pay for it—which is ultimately what the climate negotiations demand—and, indeed, our government seems increasingly willing to use force to protect our “access” to the cheap oil that, burned in the bellies of SUVs, rises again as carbon dioxide, and engenders floods, droughts, famines, and extinctions around the world.

One recent protest sign asked “Just war or just oil?” Alas, we know the answer all too well. The administration’s view, after all, is available for all to read in the May 2001 report of the National Energy Policy Development Group, better known as the “Cheney Report.” Here we learn that the vice president expects U.S. oil imports to rise from 52% of total consumption in 1999 to over 70% percent in 2020, and that because total oil use will also rise, the U.S. will have to import 60% more oil in 2020 than it does today; Cheney’s team sees U.S. oil imports rising from the current 10.4 million barrels per day to an estimated 16.7 million barrels per day in 2020.

These are, of course, badly cooked numbers, relying on strangely low projections of domestic oil production, and linear extrapolations of oil consumption. Cheney didn’t say that oil consumption “will rise,” but rather that it “would have to grow.” As in “To meet U.S. oil demand [in 2020] oil and product imports would have to grow by a combined 7.5 million barrels per day.” It’s a big difference: not a statement of fact, but a choice of a future.

But many analysts, including those at the Department of Energy’s own National Laboratories and Boston’s Tellus Institute, have shown that there is another future, a cleaner but not poorer future in which oil imports can be reduced without drilling in America’s remaining wilderness areas. The DOE’s *Clean Energy Futures* study shows that U.S. oil consumption can remain near 2000 levels through 2020—a 21% reduction below their own “business as usual” projections and more than 30% below Cheney’s inflated numbers—without harming the economy one whit. And Tellus’ 2001 report, *The American Way to the Kyoto Protocol*, goes further, pro-



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jecting even greater reductions in both energy use and greenhouse pollution at a net savings of \$50 billion per year.

None of these scenarios eliminate U.S. oil imports completely; nor do they reduce U.S. greenhouse gas emissions to a long-term, sustainable per capita level. But they show that policies and technologies available today can put us on a new path—a path to both a cleaner environment and real global cooperation.

That path, of course, would be a long one, and full of surprises. But unlike the path that the Cheney team would have us think inevitable, it would open into a future worth having.

And it's there to be taken.

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