

THE OPPENHEIMER REPORT

Good news: Many share hope gas prices will rise

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Well, perhaps there is still hope that Americans will do something about their suicidal love affair with gas-guzzling cars, the country will reduce its addiction to foreign oil, global warming will slow down and there will be peace on earth.

Judging from the unprecedented reader response to Thursday's column, "Record gasoline prices great news for U.S.," (www.andresoppenheimer.blogspot.com) in which I said that gasoline prices should rise above \$4 a gallon to trigger a nationwide uproar that will force Washington to get serious about reducing America's dependence on foreign oil, there are many more Americans than I thought who share this view.

I argued that unless gasoline prices cross the \$4 a gallon barrier, and Americans get really mad about it, Washington will not get serious about reducing toxic emissions that worsen global warming, and the United States will continue financing Middle Eastern and South American petro-autocrats whose megalomania grows in direct proportion to the rise of oil prices.

I based my argument on the fact that, according to U.S. Energy Information Administration figures, the share of light trucks and SUVs has soared from 19 percent of all U.S. vehicles in 1975, to about 50 percent today, and are projected to reach 52 percent in 2015. If current trends continue, the United States will import 61 percent of the oil it consumes by 2030. And U.S.-funded petro-dictators will grow bolder, and there will be more of them.

READERS RESPOND

The avalanche of e-mails started immediately after the column appeared. The first day, there were an unprecedented 119,908 page hits on The Miami Herald's website page and hundreds of e-mails.

According to The Miami Herald's website editor, Casey Frank, the column had already gotten the second largest number of page views this year on The Miami Herald's website, after a profile of Larry King, and it's likely to surpass it this weekend.

Most amazing, judging from those who sent e-mails or posted comments on my blog, was that most of the responses were positive. There were three groups of comments:

- Those who applauded the idea (more than 40 percent). Said reader Doug Sattler, "I couldn't agree . . . more with your position. As long as we Americans insist on driving these gas hogs, we will never become energy independent." Added reader Barry Creed, "Outstanding article. As to who funds terrorism, all we need to do is look in the rear-view mirror."
- Those who said, "yes, but" (about 30 percent). Said reader Rick Leslie, "Interesting column -- but definitely written by an elitist. I doubt that \$4 a gallon gas will have any more of an uproarious effect than \$3 gas did last summer -- resulting in less than the desired effect you seek on lawmakers. In the meantime, average people, even if they drive Camrys, they will have far less money to spend on clothes and food for their families."
- Those who uttered insults not fit to print (nearly 30 percent). One of the most civilized ones said, "You are a stupid socialist bastard. Global warming, where?" Another one said, "What an idiot you are: Gas prices are high right now because we have a shortage of refineries -- More U.S. offshore drilling will also reduce the price and the need of foreign oil."

A third critic wrote, ``Did it ever occur to you that the environmental movement is responsible for such dependence on foreign oil and propping up of dictators? All that is needed is to abolish the U.S. government restrictions on domestic energy production inspired by the environmentalist movement."

My conclusion: Majority support for the idea that it may take higher gasoline prices for Americans to switch to more fuel-efficient cars -- and stop poisoning the atmosphere and funding petro-dictators. It means that Americans are beginning to realize that many of the country's foreign policy problems are self-inflicted.

POLITICAL MESSAGE

And, judging from the intensity of the responses, it means that presidential candidates for next year's election will have to listen. If gas prices reach \$4 a gallon and stay there through Election Day, it will be one of the top campaign issues, and today's pain will be tomorrow's gain. There's hope!