

THE PARTY'S OVER: OIL, WAR, AND THE FATE OF INDUSTRIAL SOCIETIES,

by Richard Heinberg (New Society Publishers, April, 2003. 288 pages, paperback, \$17.95)

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"Authoritative data [i.e., from independent experts outside of government and the oil industry] indicate that from about 2009 on, there will be a permanent 3% per year decline of output from the world's now-emptying global oil fields." Because oil provides the basis of our transportation, our agriculture, our industrial mechanization, and much of our home heating and power, we will face a crisis of historic magnitude, yet one which many influential parties today have an interest in not wanting to disclose or address. This dilemma cannot be surmounted by any policies of economics; rather they result from the laws of physics. Moreover, there are no realistic substitutes to adequately provide the full range of power requirements that petroleum has heretofore given us. Even the often touted "renewable" power sources like solar and wind will take enormous investments, and there is simply too little time before the crisis arrives.

How are we - every individual and nation on earth - going to cope with this crisis? Each alternative, argues Professor Richard Heinberg, has so many downsides that we face a future of profoundly lowered sights. He both presents the data and explains why so many in industry and government have refused to face the looming crisis squarely. Many will dismiss this book as just one more Cassandra speaking, but it is incumbent then for such critics to know the arguments and answer them if they can. They will have a difficult time. The thesis goes even further: that the fossil-fuel based economy has allowed world population to soar to over six billion, but as the basis of such food provision becomes exhausted, the number will shrink once again to what it was capable of supporting in the absence of petroleum based fertilizers and cultivation, at best about two billion people, and perhaps by 2050. How that scenario will unfold is beyond the scope of his book except in a limited way, but demonstration of our dependency upon carbon-based power is graphically shown, and outlines of what might happen are referenced for the reader to explore.

The basis of Heinberg's book is three years of a very active listserve begun in February 2000 and moderated by retired Cornell Professor Jay Hansen. It grew out of Hansen's extensive website, www.dieoff.org, which presented his ideas on the subject to energy resources, and two list serves (energyresources@yahoo.com) and (RunningOnEmpty@yahoo.com) to continue the discussion. In the intervening period, there have been nearly 40,000 posts on energyresources alone, contributed by an open membership of over 600 very knowledgeable subscribers. Management of the discussion has now been passed to a colleague who has been able to maintain the discussion at an equally sophisticated level, and the richness of these exchanges are remarkable testimony to the power of the internet.

But who can possibly search through and follow some forty thousand messages, coming at the rate of about thirty a day, often long detailed commentaries and submissions of data

that can overwhelm even experts in the field! It is now fortunate, then, that a book has just been issued that organizes and summarizes much of their message in a form that is comprehensible to the lay reader. It presents a future that will be alarming to many, but the tone of the book is very sober. Fortunately also, Professor Heinberg, in his fourth book, reflects the ideas expressed accurately and concisely for so difficult a subject. He also had the help of some of the leading experts in the world in guiding his effort. Notable among them were Jean Laherrere, Walter Youngquist, Professor Hansen himself, and Colin Campbell, who wrote the forward.

The book's concluding chapter has an upbeat quality by suggesting answers which a citizen can undertake for self protection, even though the fundamental solutions need to be addressed by governments and industry. But the prior chapter provides the core of the argument:

Oil extraction worldwide follows a parabolic curve, the peak year coming on or about 2009. United States peaked in 1970; Saudi Arabia and Iraq are the only two nations that have not reached their peaks. Alarmed about the public's lack of knowledge and concern about what we face, the listserve members collaboratively set up an additional website to present the case: www.oilcrisis.org. Heinberg uses all of these sites and listserve. "Within only a few years," he argues, "OPEC countries will have control over virtually all of the exportable surplus oil in the world (with the exception of Russia's petroleum, the production of which may reach a second peak in 2010, following an initial peak that precipitated the collapse of the USSR). The US - whose global hegemony has seemed so complete for the past decade - will suffer an increasing decline in global influence, which no amount of saber rattling or bombing of "terrorist" countries will be able to reverse. Awash in debt, dependent on imports, mired in corruption, its military increasingly overextended, the US is well into its imperial twilight years." (P.198)

A few pages later (p.230-31), he continues that the outcome is "inevitable." "The US, as the center of the global industrial empire, does not have the choice of whether to decline; it can, however choose how to decline - whether gracefully and peacefully, setting a helpful example for the rest of the world, or petulantly and violently, drawing other nations with it into an accelerating whirlwind of destruction."

"Such a unilateral US relinquishment of global dominance would, it could be argued, open the way for another nation - perhaps China - to take center state. Might Americans wake up one day to find themselves subjects of some alien empire? It may help to remember that the inexorable physics of the energy transition preclude such an occurrence. In the decades ahead, no nation will be able to afford to subdue and rule a large, geographically isolated country like the (continued on page 13)

US. Only small, weak, resource-rich nations will be likely targets for conquest."

Dismissing his arguments as those of a Cassandra is no option. Agree or disagree, it is the responsibility of every citizen to read and understand the implications of Heinberg's message.

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