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Electrifying Idea From The 'Gang Of 10'

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The recent conflict between Georgia and Russia has once again highlighted the profound danger that oil dependence poses to free nations, including the United States. Our nation's deep reliance on oil, largely imported from unstable and, in some cases, hostile regimes is corrosive to the integrity and effectiveness of American security policy.

The vast oil and natural gas reserves of Russia, combined with vulnerable energy infrastructure located in Georgia and neighboring countries, effectively eliminated the possibility of a principled and robust U.S. and European response to military aggression against a valued ally.

Another crisis in which U.S. oil dependence handcuffs foreign policy options and emboldens adversaries could occur at any moment in any place across the globe. This threat to U.S. security and economic stability is unacceptable.

The U.S. can no longer remain at the mercy of events beyond our control. We can no longer simply react to crises and call it an energy policy. And we can no longer wait. It is time to change the energy equation.

Five Democratic and five Republican Senators — the "Gang of 10" — have presented to the nation a comprehensive energy proposal that would help achieve precisely that goal.

Two-thirds of the oil consumed by the United States is used in the transportation system, which depends on petroleum to provide 96% of its energy needs. The Gang of 10 proposal offers a pathway toward an electrified transportation system that is dramatically less dependent on oil.

It is a balanced, thoughtful and politically courageous plan, and if we are to truly turn away from our current dangerous path, it is crucial that elected officials, business leaders, the national security community, and the public encourage this effort.

The electrification of transportation represents a major transformation of our energy equation.

Electricity is produced from a wide variety of fuels, most of which are domestically produced, thus insulating the U.S. economy from the geopolitical risks that create oil price volatility. Moreover, diversifying our fuel mix reduces the chance that a major event disrupting a single source of fuel could threaten the U.S. economy as an oil shock would today.

Of course, such a change cannot happen overnight. That is why, to address near-term energy challenges, the Gang of 10 plan would reduce oil demand (including through the manufacture and purchase of high efficiency and hybrid cars), and increase supply, primarily through changing the longstanding congressional moratoria to allow environmentally responsible energy production in much of the U.S. Outer Continental Shelf.

These provisions would establish the groundwork for dramatically increased funding for the research, development, production and purchase of alternative fuel vehicles and infrastructure, ultimately leading our transportation system away from oil as its primary fuel source.



The short- and long-term provisions are designed to work in concert. The United States must produce adequate energy resources in the present to generate the economic growth required to finance a long-term transition to an electrified transportation system in the future.

Inevitably, such a dramatic proposal has attracted criticism. Republicans are concerned about tax provisions. Democrats are reluctant to open the U.S. Outer Continental Shelf to oil and natural gas production. And far too many in both parties are concerned about the next election. Whether for political or policy reasons, they may be tempted to hold out for a better — or a perfect — deal.

That, unfortunately, is one of the reasons we find ourselves in this situation in the first place. There is a tendency on the part of the faithful in both political parties to automatically dismiss any compromise as tainted and ineffectual. This is happening today even though the Gang of 10 has yet to unveil its legislative language.

But politics is the art of the possible. Neither a purely Democratic nor a purely Republican energy bill will be possible anytime in the foreseeable future.

If anyone had predicted three months ago that prominent Democrats and Republicans would join together to introduce serious legislation that includes increases in domestic oil production, dramatically expanded funding for alternative and renewable fuels, and ultimately a pathway toward an electrified transportation system, no one would have believed it.

This is an unprecedented opportunity — and there is no guarantee that it will last forever.

The threats to U.S. energy security are severe and growing. It is vital to act today to safeguard our economy and our national security. The Gang of 10 has offered a strong starting point. Now, we must build on it.

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