

# We all use solar energy

It sits in space, spinning on its own axis, a blazing, angry fusion reaction hurling immense quantities of radiant energy in all directions. At 93 million miles away, we are the beneficiaries.

The sun is just an average star in the galaxy. It has finite reserves of hydrogen, the raw material which undergoes fusion through a stepwise process involving conversion to deuterium, an isotope of hydrogen and subsequently several isotopes of helium. Huge quantities of energy are emitted during each step of the reaction.

Life on this planet as we know it would be impossible without our sun. Earth would be a frozen wasteland with a temperature only slightly above absolute zero. Its oceans and atmosphere would be solid. One day, the sun's finite reserves of hydrogen will be used up and it will wink out — cosmically speaking. None of us will be around to witness the event.

We are and always have been dependent on solar energy. But not just the energy that streams into our atmosphere and falls on our continents and oceans in real time.

This process has been going on for a few years. And over these millennia, the sun's energy has been captured, utilized for some very complex biochemistry and the end products stored for a rainy day in the earth's future.

Put in very simple terms: when a photon of sunlight falls on a molecule of chlorophyll in the cell wall of a green plant, biochemistry happens. The earth's forests, prairies and algae-dotted oceans act like huge sponges soaking up atmospheric carbon dioxide. Inside the plant's cell walls, the sun's energy is harnessed to disassemble atmospheric carbon dioxide and combine it with water to produce sugar and molecular oxygen which plants release back into the

atmosphere for you and me to breathe.

When you look at a forest, you are really seeing hundreds of years of solar energy, stored in wooden structures. You can cut down a tree and burn it or send it to a mill and cut it up into lumber for the housing industry. A tree is in reality, a sink of solar radiation that can be used either for the production of heat and light by burning (a process chemists call oxidation) or as a building material to insulate man from the elements—to keep him warm in other words.

But the story even gets better if we extrapolate further back in time.

Earth scientists tell us that long ago, the climate on our planet was mostly tropical. This rain forest-like climate covering our planet was very conducive to the growth of green plants. ExtremeScience.com explains that during the Jurassic and Cretaceous periods a "profusion of plant and animal life left behind generous organic materials from their decay... (which) built up over millions of years undisturbed. They were eventually covered by younger, overlying sediment and compressed, giving us fossil fuels such as coal, petroleum and natural gas."

The reality is this: All of us are using solar energy, not just the techno-geeks with the flat panels on the roofs of their homes. Every time you flip a switch in your home or depress the accelerator in your car, you are using solar energy. Just because you weren't there to witness the biochemistry and the geology behind its creation doesn't negate the fact.

Gregory J. Rummo is a businessman-writer from Butler.



GREG RUMMO

# Turning back the clock to 1972

One time, years ago, the veteran Baltimore newspaperman, H.L. Mencken, was checking copy coming in from the night editor and sighing at the rising number of errors he was noticing, errors of fact but also of syntax, and even some idioms that didn't sound quite right. He shook his head and said, as much to himself as to the editor at his side: "The older I get the more I admire and crave competence, just simple competence, in any field from adultery to zoology."

— Alistair Cooke, "Memories of the Great and the Good"

WASHINGTON — Accepting the 1988 Democratic nomination, Gov Michael Dukakis, a carrier of Massachusetts' political culture, allowed his fervent hope to be the father of his surmise when he said, "this election is not about ideology. It's about competence." His meaning was opaque — how would he decide what to competently achieve? But perhaps today's events — from Iraq to Katrina to the irrationality of immigration policy — have put Americans into Mencken's frame of mind as they shop for a president. Which could explain why two among the parties' front-runners are who they are.

Hillary Clinton is hardly a fresh face. She has been in the nation's face since the I'm-not-Tammy-Wynette expostulation of 1992. She

is not even the most interesting novelty. Barack Obama is, and he is more charming. She is, however, seasoned. Americans hungry for competence seem, so far, to be resisting Obama's request that, for his benefit, they should treat the presidency as a nearly entry-level political office.

One or two persons were going to emerge as Clinton's principal rivals and perhaps she is fortunate that they turned out to be Obama and the almost-as-inexperienced John Edwards, not, say, five-term Sen. Chris Dodd, six-term Sen. Joe Biden or governor and former diplomat Bill Richardson. Clinton's persona as the high-school class grind may be this year's charisma.

Giuliani is crosswise with social conservatives, especially concerning abortion. Yet one reason he is in the top tier of the Republican field is that, according to Pew Research Center polling, he is supported by nearly 30 percent of social conservatives, who are 42 percent of the Republican vote. Perhaps some opponents of abortion are coming to terms with the fact that the party has written itself into a corner regarding that issue.

By 1972, 16 states with 41 percent of the nation's population had liberalized their abortion laws, and the Republican platform did not mention the subject. The next year the Supreme Court ripped the subject away from state legislatures.

In 1976, the Republican platform protested the court's decision, recommended "continuance of the public dialogue on abortion" and endorsed a constitutional amendment "to restore protection of the right to life for unborn children."

The 1980 platform was similar, but four years later, and subsequently, the party, while continuing to favor a constitutional amendment, has also advocated "legislation to make clear that the Fourteenth Amendment's protections" — no "person" shall be deprived of life without due process of law — "apply to unborn children." So, the party has repeatedly endorsed a constitutional amendment that it thinks is a redundancy.

The party asserts that one of America's most common surgical procedures is murder. So, last year, perhaps a million women and their doctors committed murder. However much a person deplores abortion and embraces that legal logic, nobody believes that either the legislation or the constitutional amendment that Republican platforms have praised will be passed. Hence the sterility of today's abortion



GEORGE WILL

debate. And hence the inclination of some social conservatives to focus on limiting abortion by changing the culture, and their willingness to evaluate candidates by criteria unrelated to abortion.

Writing in The New Republic, Thomas B. Edsall notes that in the late 1980s voters by a 51-42 margin believed that "school boards ought to have the right to fire teachers who are known homosexuals." Today voters disagree, 66-28. In 1987, voters were evenly divided on the question whether "AIDS might be God's punishment for immoral sexual behavior." Today voters disagree, 72-23.

Recent Pew polling shows that a combined 48 percent of Republican voters say Iraq (31 percent) or terrorism (17 percent) is their principal concern. Abortion? Seven percent. Gay marriage? One percent.

Edsall wonders whether Giuliani, who is appealing to "the Republican longing for managerial competence" with his "idiosyncratic brand of conservatism," might be a transformational Republican figure. But perhaps his conservatism is not idiosyncratic. Perhaps it is, in a way, traditional. Perhaps some conservatives are really serious about turning back the clock. To 1972.

George Will is a syndicated columnist.

## Voices

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dozen colleges have decided that they themselves don't want to be ranked, at least not by U.S. News & World Report. ...

Inevitably, some schools are chagrined at being rated in the third or fourth tier. It's sort of like being placed on the waiting list, or worse, being told you're just not good enough.

The most controversial of the U.S. News and World Reports indicators is peer assessment — how the institutions rank each other.

Now 12 colleges ... say they will no longer rank other colleges and will provide the magazine only with standard, publicly available data. They pledge not to use the rankings in their promotional materials. ...

The attempted revolt ... is probably a doomed effort. The magazine's evaluations may not be the bible of high-school students and their parents scouting colleges, but it ranks right up there with the other guides.

Colleges trying to opt out of the rankings should listen to what their own admissions offices tell applicants they've rejected: Dealing with hurt and disappointment is a part of life. There's a school for everyone, even if it is 145th on a list of 145.

### High price of gas

The Greenwood (Miss.) Commonwealth

With gas prices averaging better than \$3 a gallon in Mississippi, those who sell fuel don't have a whole lot of public sentiment in their corner.

They make an easy target for a headline-seeking politician in an election year.

Sometimes, though, good politics also makes for good policy. Such is the case with Attorney General Jim Hood's crackdown on gasoline distributors accused of price-gouging following Hurricane Katrina.

Hood announced that five Mississippi distributors have agreed to pay the state almost \$300,000 in combined penalties rather than go to court. The five companies did not acknowledge any wrongdoing following the 2005 killer storm, but the implication of the settlement is clear: A company doesn't fork over that kind of money if it thinks there's nothing to the accusations. ...

Pricing gasoline can be a complicated business, but what the state law says about price-gouging after a natural disaster is not. ... The distributors can raise their prices to cover the higher prices being charged to them or other new additional costs, but they can't get greedy and add more than that. ...

### Security problems

The El Paso (Texas) Times

For its part, North Korea is dragging its feet on the agreed shutdown of its Yongbyon nuclear reactor, allowing U.N. nuclear inspectors on site, and stopping its production of nuclear weapons, though no one seems to know for sure how extensive that production is. ...

Then there's Iran which, far from stopping its uranium-enrichment program as demanded by the U.N. Security Council, is actually expanding its nuclear activities.

A report from Mohamed ElBaradei, head of the U.N.'s International Atomic Energy Agency, blamed Tehran for blocking inspection efforts so that the agency could no longer monitor activities and says that they were of a peaceful nature.

Particularly chilling was the IAEA's expression of concern about its "deteriorating" understanding of certain parts of Iran's nuclear program. ... The U.N. is considering increasing sanctions against Iran, which will do absolutely no good. Iran is obviously intent on producing nuclear weapons, and nothing short of force will stop it.

Iran and North Korea pose significant security problems for their areas of the world and for the United States. If their nuclear ambitions aren't checked, the world could pay a high price later on.

### Smoking-related illnesses

The Wichita (Kan.) Eagle

Every year in the United States, 440,000 Americans die from smoking-related illnesses. Another 50,000 people die from inhaling secondhand smoke. ...

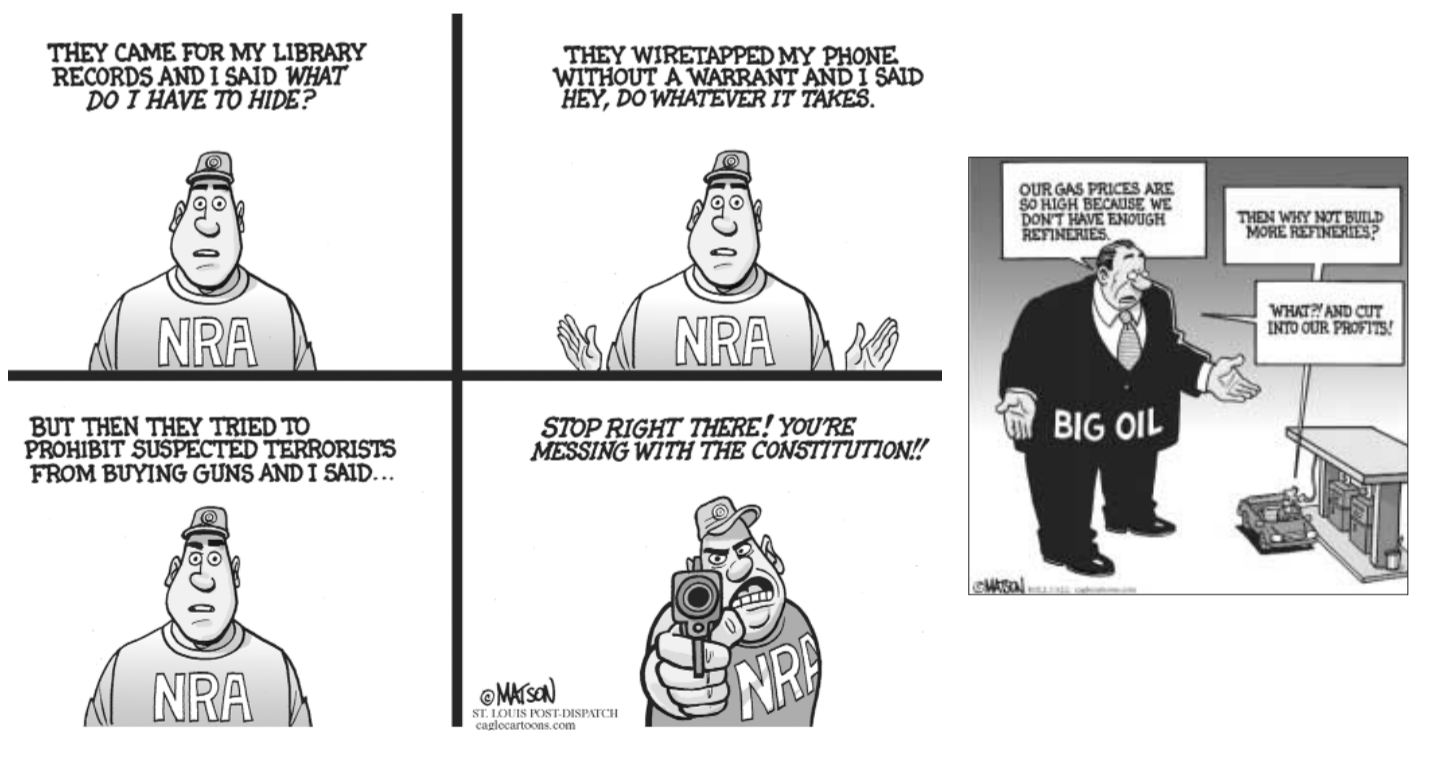
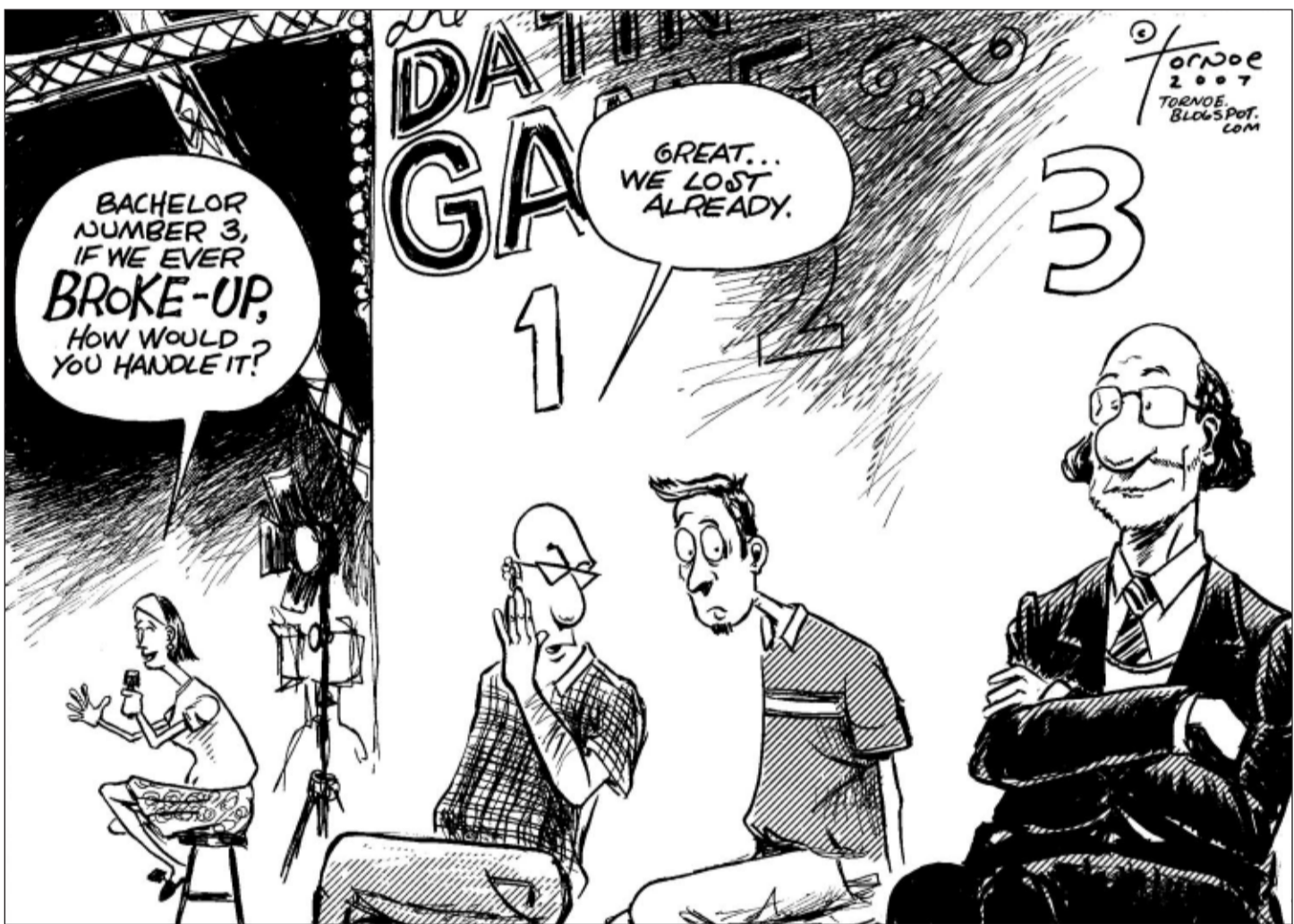
That's a national epidemic of staggering proportions — but one that can be brought under control, if state and federal lawmakers heed the institute's call to action. ...

The report could lend support to Gov. Kathleen Sebelius' 2004 proposal to raise state tobacco taxes by 50 cents, to \$1.29 a pack, to help cover the state's uninsured. Her plan went nowhere in the Legislature, but Sebelius recently said she might push the tax hike again next year. ...

It's becoming more difficult to ignore the risks. According to a U.S. surgeon general's report last year, nearly 60 percent of kids ages 3 to 11, or about 22 million children, are exposed to secondhand smoke, often in their homes. There is no safe level of smoke, that report noted.

The public debate on tobacco is changing, with the clearer understanding that tobacco is a public health scourge and preventable cause of illness. Health experts now have given lawmakers a clear blueprint for how to reduce those health costs.

## WEEKEND GALLERY



# Reagan would know what to do

By BILL STEIGERWALD  
Pittsburgh Tribune-Review.

What would Ronald Reagan do — with Iraq?

President Reagan was way too wise to have gone to Mesopotamia in the first place. But what if he had to extract us from Iraq today? And what if he wanted to make sure Iraq had a chance of becoming a functioning, semi-civilized country after we left?

The Gipper probably would be in favor of doing something the Bush administration won't do — decentralize and federalize Iraq's government.

As is documented in the new book "The Reagan Diaries," Reagan understood the value of a weak central government in countries boiling with ethnic, religious and political hatred and violence. On July 2, 1986, he wrote in his diary that one way to solve the tricky transition of power in South Africa from 5 million whites to 26 million blacks might be to set up

"something like Switzerland's 'Canton' type of gov't."

A lot of smart folks — conservatives, liberals and libertarians — have always argued that decentralization is exactly what Iraq needs to avoid total meltdown. Some have proposed a three-part split of Iraq — a partition that gives the Kurds, Sunni and Shia control of their own turf.

Republican 2008 presidential dreamer Tommy Thompson has mentioned a vague plan to create 18 provinces ruled by Iraq's main Muslim sects. But Democrat 2008 presidential dreamer Sen. Joe Biden of Delaware, with the help of Leslie Gelb of the Council on Foreign Relations, has proposed a more detailed scheme.

Under Biden's plan, a unified Iraq would be maintained but government power would be seriously decentralized. Oil money would be shared proportionately among the Kurds, Sunni and Shia. Baghdad's mixed population would become a federal city protected by interna-

tional peacekeepers.

The Biden plan, Biden's presidential Web site says, is not a partition and it is consistent with the Iraq Constitution. Biden, like many others, believes that giving Kurds, Sunni and Shia their own territories is the only way to ensure that their militias don't slaughter each other trying to get sole control of the central government. Overall, Biden contends, his plan is in the self-interest of the Kurds, Sunni and Shia — as well as Iran.

Ivan Eland of the Independent Institute, who discounts fears that federalizing Iraq will bring even worse chaos and instability or result in meddling by Iraq's neighbors, believes decentralizing power in Iraq is still the best — and last — hope for saving it from "going up in smoke" after we leave.

Biden's Web site lists nearly 40 people or editorial boards that support his idea or want to pursue it — including Henry Kissinger,

Republican Sens. Richard Lugar and Sam Brownback and Bill O'Reilly. Unfortunately, the idea of formally decentralizing Iraq's government — which is already occurring neighborhood by neighborhood on its bloody own — is going nowhere.

The idea barely registers on the mainstream media's radar screen. It has not been seriously addressed in the presidential soundbite-trading "debates." And the Bush administration still isn't interested in it.

Ronald Reagan would not have been so stupid. He obviously understood that Switzerland's Frenchmen, Germans and Italians lived in peace and prosperity in part because of their loose confederation of 26 highly autonomous cantons.

But unfortunately Reagan's not coming back from heaven to fix Iraq or anything else the Bush Republicans have broken — no matter how hard the GOP's faithful pray.