

Editor's Note

Dave Newman

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EDITOR'S NOTE

North America experienced the largest power outage in history this past summer. From New York to Detroit, people gazed into the starry night - unobstructed by light pollution - wondering what could have caused such a huge failure. The problem was traced back to a few downed power lines in Ohio and an overburdened and increasingly interconnected transmission grid. Almost immediately, politicians and civic leaders were calling for the heads of those responsible. Unfortunately, the blame was placed almost exclusively on the nation's aging transmission grid rather than on the nation's gluttonous over-consumption of power.

With the blackout's root cause misleadingly diagnosed, most of the proposed solutions have been extremely limited and, in some cases, wrongheaded. The Bush Administration and the electric industry insist that the answer to our energy woes is increased supply – in this case, spending billions of dollars of ratepayers' money upgrading and modernizing the nation's power grid. In a mantra that has become all too familiar from this Administration, no attention is paid to reducing the rate of consumption as a way of minimizing the stress on our existing energy infrastructure.

In fact, the Administration has consistently worked to undermine such efforts, whether by slashing funding for Energy Star – the program dedicated to increasing appliance efficiency – or by exempting over 17,000 energy facilities from compliance with the Clean Air Act. When asked whether Americans should cut back on energy consumption, Press Secretary Ari Fleischer summed up the Administration's position as follows: "That's a big no. The president believes that it's an American way of life...the American way of life is a blessed one. And we have a bounty of resources in this country."

To be sure, we must invest in upgrading our crumbling infrastructure. But, this is only part of the equation. We must also begin using and generating energy more wisely through greater efficiency and conservation and a greater reliance on renewable sources of energy. Especially important is the use of decentralized clean power sources like solar cells and wind turbines that can create power at or close to the point of consumption, thus avoiding reliance on the transmission grid altogether.

Before we commit to spending billions of dollars of ratepayers' money on merely expanding what we currently have, we must consider the alternatives. For example, by adjusting electricity rates according to the level of consumption – as California utilities began doing during the 2001 energy crisis – efficiency and conservation is rewarded by way of lower-than-ordinary rates for the power that is consumed. Myriad other practical examples exist for reducing energy demand: from more efficient building design to the use of power-saving lighting and appliances. As decreased demand lowers the stress on the existing infrastructure and the money required for maintaining the grid, more money can be made

available for tax credits and other incentives for renewable energy investments. This more sustainable energy path would not only prevent future catastrophic power failures, but would also lead to cleaner air, a healthier environment, and the development of new industries and jobs.



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Editor-in-Chief

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