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Let the Bastards Freeze in the Dark

A combination of environmental concerns and energy shortages is fostering widespread beggar-your-neighbor attitudes. Everyone wants cheap, unlimited energy, but all are prepared to fight tooth and nail to protect the environment and to prevent the location of energy facilities in their vicinity. It so happens that we are going to have neither cheap energy nor a perfect environment. Moreover, if we do not learn how to think nationally rather than parochially and to balance energy needs against environmental concerns, we are headed for trouble. Likely candidates for experiencing miseries are the people of the northern and eastern states. They have enjoyed cheap hydrocarbons from Texas, Louisiana, and Oklahoma. These supplies seemed to be guaranteed, but two developments have cast doubt on the security of supplies, particularly of natural gas. One is depletion of reserves. The other is a threat of indefinite dimensions. The southern states have awakened to the fact that they face future shortages and are looking for means of reserving their hydrocarbons for themselves. Bumper stickers can be seen in Texas, Louisiana, and Oklahoma with the motto, "Let the Bastards Freeze in the Dark."

Some Southerners were shocked recently by news from San Antonio. An electric power plant there will be fueled not by Texas oil or gas, but by coal, probably from Colorado. Louisiana, the principal supplier of natural gas to the eastern states, cannot expand industry as it would like because its gas is already committed. Moreover, some of its citizens will lose their jobs this winter because interruptible supplies previously available to Louisiana industry will be going north. Of the large curtailments of natural gas this winter, nearly half will be in the Gulf Coast region. Small wonder that the governors of Louisiana, Texas, Mississippi, and Oklahoma have joined in threatening to use police power if necessary to preserve their states' fuel supplies.

Governor Edwin Edwards of Louisiana recently pointed out that people in other states are content to have oil gas wells drilled off the Gulf Coast and to have refineries running in his state and pipelines crisscrossing its terrain. "But these states don't want any of that activity in their own backyards." The governor went on to say, "We're not going to be forced to continue operating our refineries and drilling new wells to deplete our resources in Louisiana to benefit the rest of the country."

The governor has a point. When Louisiana's resources are exhausted, who will furnish his people hydrocarbons, and at what cost? The governor was also on target in criticizing the attitude of the Atlantic Coast states toward exploration of their offshore resources. To the east on the continental shelf are thick sedimentary layers with substantial potential for oil and gas. Not a single exploratory hole has been drilled, however, and when the possibility of such exploration was mentioned about a year ago, there was immediate, strong opposition. Even if exploratory wells could be drilled within the next year, it would be 1980 before natural gas would be flowing into homes. But events on the energy front have been moving with a time scale of weeks rather than years. It is not clear that the southern governors can curtail northern supplies of gas soon, but they will be under increasing pressure to do so.

Given resolute action and national cooperation, we can make it through the coming crisis without suffering. But a continuation of present energy consumption patterns, coupled with the trend toward parochial self-interest, can only lead to divisive tensions and some freezing in the dark.—PHILIP H. ABELSON