

States of the Union

WASTED ENERGY

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

DON'T BE fooled by the energy crisis. What this country pariously lacks is not only refined oil but also unrefined sociability, the invisible power that keeps us all shambling in a sensibly civilized direction. Fossil fuels and the technology they make possible have separated us from one another, encapsulated us in assorted isolation booths (like cars) and rendered the sweet balm of community all but obsolete. The resulting alienation goes under the name of progress. But progress, thank the Lord, may be getting scarce.

Such, at any rate, were my thoughts this morning as I walked down the gravel road on my way to the mailbox. Our household shares the road with four neighbors, one of whom, mercifully, moved out a few days ago, thereby doing his inadvertent bit for energy conservation. This neighbor had a dog—a sullen cur with a too-cute name, Sniffy—whose snarls and bared teeth had made cowards of us all. Short errands down the road had become eight-cylinder occasions, because walking was hazardous to our health. But this morning, with Sniffy banished and civility restored, I saved gas. I had regained that rarest of rights—the right to saunter.

Some items in the mail kept me ruminating. An insurance company sent me a message featuring a perfectly matched, electronically typed, personalized “fill-in,” to wit:

DEAR MR. MARGOLIS:

We want you to know that we care about your family's future . . .

Think about the many sacrifices required to bring me such cheering news. Measure the letter's history in ergs and dynes: the coal, the gas and the uranium expended to fell the trees, transport the logs, mill the pulp, cut the rolls, and box and ship the stationery; to power the computers that fingered my name out of millions of direct-mail prospects; to switch on the automated gimmickry that typed my letter with the faultless fill-in, addressed my envelope, stuffed the former into the latter and rammed it through an electric postage meter; to propel the trucks and airplanes that carried my letter from place to place, eventually depositing it in Georgetown, Connecticut, where Al Meccozzi, our mailman, put in in his car and drove it to my mailbox.

All that gold paid to OPEC just so an insurance company in the Midwest could assure me it cares about my family's future. Of course, the company

has never met my family and couldn't care less about our collective fate. People in advertising have decided, however, that what consumers crave most these days is not value but solicitude, and Madison Avenue is probably correct as usual. In a world whose citizens have frequently ceased to care about each other, a world where dog bites neighbor, a little tender concern is no mean consolation, even when it comes third class. A lot of people must be feeling pretty lonely these days, else those computers wouldn't be clacking out all that single-spaced solace.

After I'd discarded the insurance pitch, I came upon a letter from a publisher who wanted me to subscribe to his magazine. He got right to the point, which turned out to be me, not the magazine:

DEAR RICHARD MARGOLIS:

Have you ever suspected that no one understands you? . . .

Just as the insurance company guaranteed me it cared, this publisher assured me he understood. Not a bad morning's catch.

I don't mean to make too much of this. After all, a sense of one's isolation has always been part of the human condition. Yet why has J. Walter Thompson only just now discovered it? And why is the advertising clan offering us so much tea and sympathy? I think it is because we have dangerously narrowed our opportunities to touch one another, and have thus become vulnerable to the ersatz hugs of commerce.

Many of the barriers we have carelessly erected between us seem connected in uncanny ways to our dependence on fossil fuels. A recent essay by Anthony Lewis in the *New York Times* shed some light on the riddle. Lewis pointed to all the wasted energy inherent in “our suburban way of life”—a life-style based on dispersion rather than on community. In suburbia, he reminded us, the combustion engine was as essential an amenity as indoor plumbing.

Lewis quoted Professor Walter Dean Burnham of MIT to demon-

strate that it was not mere chance that drove many of us beyond the city limits; it was human enterprise and national policy: "Destroy local mass-transit systems, promote suburban sprawl through every governmental and private incentive, permit central cities to deteriorate into jungles, and stimulate the automotive industry by every advertising trick known to man, and what do you get? A spread-out network of settlement, work, distribution, and consumption which has become dependent on the automobile for its existence." The professor could have added racism to his litany of dispersal. White flight offers us an excellent example of the link between

he said. "Everybody's got air conditioning now."

Years ago I became acquainted with an odd couple who lived in Brooklyn Heights inside a totally sealed house, one equipped with a central vacuum cleaning system that sucked in every alien speck of dust. Each window was glued tightly and eternally to its frame. The sole egress into this antiseptic sanctum was a small door and vestibule, where guests were made to take off their shoes and put on paper sandals.

I haven't seen those two in years, but I picture them still, sitting inside their sealed place on a loveless settee, ever on the alert for an errant smudge

chances we have to embrace each other.

Air terminals are the perfect architectural metaphor for the odd sort of world fossil fuels seems to require, a world of multiple enclosures, closed gates, snoopy x-ray machines and "Restricted Personnel" signs. The moment we enter one of these shipping plants, we become captives of a petro-energy system that moves us around like so much baggage. The set smile on the stewardess' pretty face is meant to help us forget the endless queueing up, the constant importunings of the loud-speaker, the long corridors with the insistent arrows—signs and right-of-ways nearly identical to those we encounter on super-highways, and for the same purpose: to keep us moving at speeds and in directions convenient to the demands of fossil fuel energy.

Have you ever attempted to say goodbye to a friend or loved one taking off in a jet? At a railroad station that simple act of affection is relatively easy. You can talk and touch until the very moment of departure, and then you can trot alongside the moving train for a spell. But in an airport such human gestures are out of the question. The glass between you and your departing friend is thick, tinted and soundproof. The distance separating you is enormous: It is dead space.

Most of us use airplanes with reluctance and resignation. We assume we have little time and much fuel to spare. Probably we are wrong on both counts and as the oil wells run dry we shall surely foresake our winged gas-guzzlers in favor of more efficient, more leisurely modes of travel. Already, half-dead companies like Amtrak and Long Island Railroad are being started into rebirth by waves of new passengers prepared to abandon planes and automobiles. And now both Greyhound and Trailways are running television commercials that feature an entirely new American theme: The pleasure of getting acquainted with one's fellow bus passengers.

In short, our travel habits are beginning to adapt to Exxon's avarice. Having banished the mad dog of OPEC, some of us are learning to saunter.



shortages of gas and of gregariousness.

Other examples, not just suburban or automotive, come quickly to mind. A few weeks ago the *Washington Post* ran an affecting feature about a milkman who had lost his route. People didn't want their milk delivered any more, he said; they preferred to buy it in supermarkets. So after 37 years of grade A service, the milkman was packing it in. The most satisfying part of the job, he told the *Post* reporter, had been getting to know the neighbors, chatting with them each morning, watching their kids grow up. But in recent years he had noticed an atmospheric change on his route: People had become less accessible. They kept their doors and window shut.

"I think it's the air conditioning,"

of reality. And all the while they can hear the steady, alienating hum of mispent energy: the air conditioner, the vacuum system, the microwave oven, the sun lamp that shines on the rare philodendron in the corner.

*O brave new world;
That has such people in't!*

IS AMERICA heading for a Sealant Spring—a long season of mass loneliness in which each of us awaits lovenotes from L.L. Bean? I think not. In fact, certain aspects of the current energy crisis suggest that we now may have an opportunity—possibly our last—to join the human race. Consider just a single instance of the contemporary madness: the way we travel. The faster we go, the fewer