

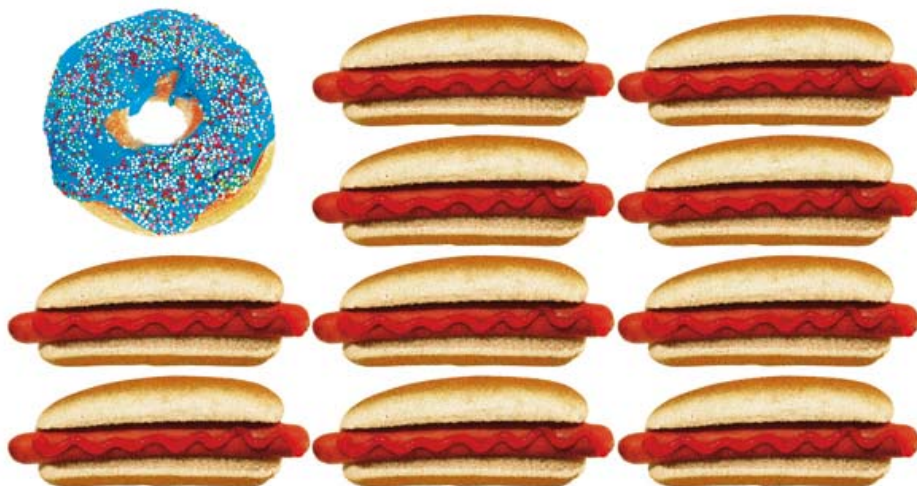
 **THE AMERICA ISSUE**

HOW SPECIAL ARE WE? • HILLARY CLINTON • WHAT AILS AMERICA?

A Hummer in Every Driveway

Americans use more energy per capita than any other country, and have nothing to show for it.

BY VACLAV SMIL | NOVEMBER 2011



The problems that ail the U.S. economy and American society are one and the same: Both consume too much and refuse to make badly needed changes. This is true above all in the realm of energy. The United States doesn't need exotic biofuels or balloon-borne wind turbines. Its real problems are wasteful private energy use and the near-total absence of effective, down-to-earth, long-term policies.

Energy use is merely a means to many rewarding ends: economic security, education, health. The United States consumes nearly twice as much energy per capita as the richest countries of the European Union, which raises the question: What has it gotten in return? Are Americans twice as rich as the French? Are they twice as educated as the Germans? Do they live twice as long as the Swedes? Are they twice as happy as the Danes or twice as safe as the Dutch? The obvious answer for all of the above is no; indeed, many of America's quality-of-life indicators

-- including infant mortality, longevity, and educational achievement -- do not even rank among the world's top 10!

It's not as though Americans don't know better. U.S. industries from steel-making to plastics synthesis are among the world's most energy-efficient; American agriculture is highly productive, as are America's railroads. But for decades, Americans themselves have been living beyond their means, wasting energy in their houses and cars and amassing energy-intensive throwaway products on credit. The size of the average American house has more than doubled since the 1950s, and they are more often than not poorly insulated, inefficiently heated in the winter, and cooled to near-arctic temperatures in the summer.

Automobiles are even worse. Incredibly, the overall efficiency of America's cars, vans, and SUVs didn't budge between 1986 and 2006, and subsequent improvements have been risible compared with the doubling of efficiency that the country's automotive fleet managed between 1975 and 1985. If that trend had continued -- which was well within the realm of technical possibility -- the average American would be driving a 50 miles-per-gallon vehicle now rather than today's 30 mpg clunker. And that's nothing next to what could have been saved had the United States finally joined the 20th century and built rapid trains on par with France's *trains à grande vitesse* to serve high-population-density regions such as the corridor between Boston and Washington. (Amtrak's Acela? Please.)

The parallels with America's great public-health epidemic of obesity are inescapable. Even after throwing away some 40 percent of its abundant food supply, the United States still has the industrialized world's most overweight population. America similarly produces more energy per capita than any other major rich economy -- so much so that if the United States were to consume that energy at a rate comparable to Germany or France, it would be a massive energy exporter. Instead, America imports more than 25 percent of its energy, paying more than \$2 trillion for the privilege over the past decade -- and still ends up with little to show for it. The United States now faces the choice of curbing its energy appetite with deliberation, commitment, and foresight, or waiting for the unraveling economy to put it on a painful crash diet.

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