

## EDITORIAL

### America's Terrible Mistake

John H. Perkins

On a recent trip to Denver and Colorado Springs (for my mother's 80th birthday party, no less!), I was vividly reminded as we landed at Denver of a pattern that is increasingly obvious from the air: American cities sprawl over hundreds of square miles interlaced with clogged freeways.

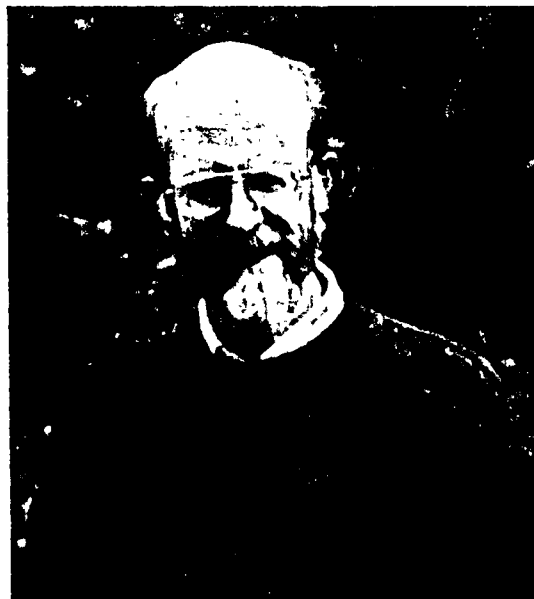
Homes and businesses are larger than 50–100 years ago. Places of work are scattered along the freeways like big ice cubes. Homes and businesses are isolated from each other and from other support facilities like schools, restaurants, grocery stores, laundries, department stores, day-care centers, and doctors' offices. Virtually everything we do requires that we get into an automobile and travel long distances. In short, Americans embraced automotive technology so completely that our cities no longer can function without it.

Now these are hardly new observations. Complaining about urban sprawl and environmental trashing of automobiles has been good sport for environmentalists for many years. The American lifestyle so clearly visible on the plains of eastern Colorado around Denver is also evident in many other metropolitan regions: Atlanta, northern Virginia, northern New Jersey, Chicago, Kansas City, Houston, Phoenix, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Seattle, for example.

Rather than novelty, I'm trying to convey a point that is insufficiently recognized: This settlement pattern, the sprawling city, now enslaves us and it is America's terrible mistake. The consequences come in three major forms, some remediable, some not.

First, the ways in which we have constructed our cities, especially in the last 50 years, has been a major contributor to our own energy insecurity. If energy supplies failed, even for a short time, then the whole house of cards of the modern American city would collapse. People couldn't get to work, to school, to the grocery store, or to the doctor's office. Commerce would grind to a halt. Food supplies would rot in farmers' fields or warehouses while people starved for lack of access. What is at stake is not just a life style; it's survival itself.

Various policy strategists worry about how to keep oil-exporting countries in line so



that we have access to "our" oil supplies, and one might think that those countries are the potential threats to our security. But the hard truth is that a major source of the insecurity came from our own decisions about how to build cities.

At the moment, those energy supplies are not going to fail suddenly or precipitously. I also have great faith that human ingenuity and new technology can ultimately find substitutes for the fossil fuels upon which the American ability to function now depends. In addition, movement to more fuel-efficient vehicles is a patently obvious

method for relieving the demand on foreign petroleum. Nevertheless, we must remember that it was the patterns of American consumers' choices and the practices of developers that dug us into a hole of "needing" vast amounts of foreign oil.

Second, the embrace of automobiles and oil is the foundation upon which many other environmental issues are based. Count a few of the ways: Tremendous amounts of energy supplies are needed to make it work, which means high levels of mining, transporting, and burning stuff to pollute the air; water quantity and quality are adversely affected by pollution from autos and the vast areas of impermeable surfaces (roads, big houses, suburban malls, and others); sprawling suburbs encroach on valuable agricultural land and wildlife habitat; higher amounts of toxic substances enter the air, surface water, and ground water in many places; transportation is a chronic mess because everyone has to drive to do anything.

Unfortunately, the scale of environmental pollution is not easily or completely remedied by higher fuel efficiencies. We could have an automobile fleet that achieved 40 or more miles per gallon, but that would not change the factors leading to water problems, destruction of habitat and agricultural land, widespread dissemination of toxic materials, or chronically congested roadways.

Maybe environmental professionals should be happy that our mode of living seems to generate the problems guaranteeing permanent jobs for ourselves. Of course we like full employment, and we also probably like our cars. But professionals also have an obligation to tell clients why they have problems. It's a bit like why dentists need to tell people not to eat so much sugar, even though sugar generates jobs for dentists. The question is, are we doing our job of telling the full story?

Third, the sprawling suburbs contain a deep irony: America opted for the automobile and low density living partly out of a perception that it was more healthful to be in the suburbs rather than in crowded cities. This very same suburban living pattern is now suggested to be a major factor in one of America's newest and most serious health problems: obesity, with all its associated medical ailments.<sup>1</sup> Essentially people who live in these suburbs don't walk anymore, both because distances are too great and because suburban sprawl often has no sidewalks for safe, pleasant walking.

We wanted to live in "nice places," but just maybe we're ending up making ourselves sick, trashing the only planet we'll ever have, and feeling always insecure about where the next gallon of gasoline will come from.

Where might solutions lie? Well, for starters we have to face the obvious: if automotive-spawned sprawl is the problem, then we have to envision living in denser settlements where homes, businesses, and services mingle together. These are the conditions that allow walking, biking, and mass transit.

This is not a call for a return to the steaming tenements of 19th-century industrial

cities. Many American cities have urban neighborhoods, generally built before 1945 or shortly thereafter, that are vibrant, pleasant, with park and recreation areas, and served by mass transit. Technology for moving around is based on a simple device called the shoe. Some urban planners have been working on such designs for some time.

Unfortunately, neither major political party really wants to risk the unhappiness many voters will exhibit when questions are raised about their uses of the auto. Democrats emphasize fuel efficiency and pollution control, which are good but not broad enough thinking to deal with the problem. The current Republican administration is more forthright: Their attitude seems to be that if people want to burn gasoline, then it is the government's sole and sacred duty to make sure the stuff is there to burn.

The recently released *National Energy Policy*; prepared by a committee headed by Vice President Dick Cheney, is devoid of any serious recognition of the problems we face.<sup>2</sup> Mr. Cheney and his colleagues propose a policy that boils down to "drill and burn/fission and generate." To be fair, the report gives a nod here and there to conservation, efficiency, and alternative fuels. But

a careful reading of its few budgetary and policy specifics makes clear that "drilling and fissioning" are the only real order of the day. It is not a report based on an understanding of the scientific literature.

Many years ago, my mother gave me some sound advice: if you make a mistake, it's better to acknowledge and deal with it than hide it and pretend it didn't happen. America made a terrible mistake, and we now have behavior patterns that make us sick or are terribly destructive to the habitat upon which we depend. It's time for environmental professionals to rise to the level of the good dentist who tells people not to eat too much candy. We all have some soul searching to do here.

#### Notes

1. L. Montgomery, 2001, "Suburbs Ponder Weighty Matter," *The Washington Post*, January 21, A01.
2. National Energy Policy Development Group, 2001, *National Energy Policy*, ISBN 0-16-050814-2, Washington, DC, 170 pp. Available online: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/energy>.

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