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**The Highest Patriotism Lies in Weaning U.S. From Fossil Fuels**  
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By Robert Redford

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December 2 2002

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**COMMENTARY**

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Wasteful consumption of fossil fuels creates political liabilities overseas, air pollution at home and global warming. The rate at which the United States burns fossil fuels has made our country a leading contributor to global warming. The Bush administration's energy policy to date -- a military garrison in the Middle East and drilling for more oil in the Arctic and other fragile habitats -- is costly, dangerous and self-defeating.

Despite the absence of leadership on energy security in Washington, some local efforts are paying off. Last year, San Francisco voters overwhelmingly approved a \$100-million bond initiative to pay for solar panels, wind power and energy efficiency for public buildings. The measure was supported not only by the environmental community but also by the Chamber of Commerce, labor unions and the American Lung Assn.

San Francisco's first solar project, a \$5.2-million energy- efficiency upgrade at the Moscone Convention Center, was dedicated last month. What's the straight economic benefit of this particular project? Plenty. The upgrades and the panels combined will cut energy consumption in the building by as much as 38%, and the project will pay for itself from energy savings. The net savings to taxpayers after debt service is subtracted are projected to be more than \$200,000 a year. American rooftops can be the Persian Gulf of solar energy. After Australia, no developed nation on Earth gets more annual sunlight than the United States. In addition, wind is now the fastest-growing energy source worldwide and one of the cheapest. But wind and solar power generate less than 2% of U.S. power. We can do better.

We can increase auto fuel economy standards to 40 miles per gallon. The technology to achieve that goal exists now. Phasing in that standard by 2012 would save 15 times more oil than Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is likely to produce over 50 years. We could also give tax rebates for existing hybrid gas-electric vehicles that get as much as 60 mpg and invest in mass transit. These measures would keep energy dollars in the American economy, reduce air pollution and create jobs at home.

The benefits of switching to a mostly pollution-free economy would be considerable, and the costs of failing to do so would be steep. Prolonging our dependence on fossil fuels would guarantee homeland insecurity. If you are worried about getting oil from an unstable Persian Gulf, consider the alternatives: Indonesia, Nigeria, Uzbekistan.

If we want energy security, then we have to reduce our appetite for fossil fuels. There's no other way. Other issues may crowd the headlines, but this is our fundamental challenge.

Big challenges require bold action and leadership. To get the United States off fossil fuels in this uneasy national climate of terrorism and conflict in the Persian Gulf, we must treat the issue with the urgency and persistence it deserves. The measure of our success will be the condition in which we leave the world for the next generation.

Weaning our nation from fossil fuels should be understood as the most patriotic policy to which we can commit ourselves.

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