

The End of Suburbia: Oil Depletion and the Collapse of the American Dream

Hosted by Barrie Zwicker. Featuring James Howard Kunstler, Peter Calthorpe, Michael Klare, Richard Heinberg, Matthew Simmons, Michael C Ruppert, Julian Darley, Colin Campbell, Steve Andrews, Kenneth Deffeyes and Ali Samsam Bakhtiari.

Directed and written by Gregory Greene.

Produced and edited by Barry Silverthorn.

Reviewed By Derek J Wilson.

When it comes to the world's principal supply of energy – oil – few people seem to realise that we are sitting on a large stick of dynamite with a very short fuse. **The End of Suburbia** in its 80 minutes demonstrates graphically beyond all argument that the American way of life, and thus by inference the global growth-driven, materialistic consumer way, is on a collision course with reality, for like most of its other resources, Earth holds a finite amount of oil. Even if the optimists temporarily hold sway, oil prices will escalate steeply as demand exceeds supply leading to fierce competition, international strife, massive disruption of the economic system and the collapse of civilisation as we know it.

This film, made in Canada and the United States by the Electric Wallpaper Company in 2004, takes us on a reality trip from the start of the Industrial Revolution's dangerous dependency on non-renewable resources, first on coal with its heavy pollution (excellent images of William Blake's 'dark Satanic mills'), followed by oil. This led America and the rest of the busily industrialising world to construct a paradigm of endless growth, all of which was predicated on the everlasting supply of oil. But as Colin Campbell, the world's recognised leading authority on this issue, puts it in his 2003 book *The Essence of Oil & Gas Depletion*:

Oil and gas are finite fossil fuels from the geological past and are inevitably subject to depletion. Eventually we must run out, but what matters more is the inevitable peak of production when growth gives way to decline. The wider implications of this historic discontinuity are colossal.

We are shown in some detail how the suburbs were created after World War 2 when President Roosevelt put in place the Veterans' Emergency Housing Program to build 2,700,000 homes and apartments, which were to become the American Dream. Post-war suburbia became "a cartoon of country life" with, instead of its real amenities, a six-lane highway, decanting the city into the automobile suburb, often after a daily drive of 50 to 100 miles.

The automobile industry's aim was to produce each year ever more cars, with more highways/expressways, and thus more suburbs. Originally the developers paid for light rail to the suburbs. This was too much for General Motors and Firestone (and possibly Standard Oil), who bought up the light rail systems across the States and tore them out. For this action they were convicted of conspiring to destroy. But General Motors, Firestone and Standard Oil combined in highway planning and competition. We are told by James Kunstler that "in the United States we have a railroad system

that the Bulgarians would be ashamed of.” (Aren’t New Zealanders aware of a similar situation here?)

An unsustainable dream got packaged, highly subsidised and sold to the American people; a dream which wouldn’t exist if it wasn’t for cheap oil; a dream described as “the greatest mis-allocation of resources in the history of the world.” Dormitories were built on cul-de-sacs named Quail Run and Oak Ridge indicating that the birds had all been shot and the trees cut down. Now, with approaching oil depletion, “we are literally stuck up a cul-de-sac in a cement SUV without a fill up.”

The August 2003 Canadian blackout, where peak summer air-conditioning in industry, commerce and residential came on line simultaneously, shows what can happen. This was “a big red light” but the authorities “didn’t get the message”. Attention is drawn to the fact that politicians resist telling people the truth, while the media is “staggeringly irresponsible” in maintaining silence on the issue as “reality is bad for business, fantasy good.” “The politicians’ will to address oil depletion does not exist.” Society, being addicted to oil, is not prepared for shocks and doesn’t want to hear that oil supplies will run out.

As Aldous Huxley stated: “Facts do not cease to be facts simply because they are ignored.” It is therefore worth taking on board the facts as known for some time and as confirmed in the film.

- US oil *discovery* peaked, as predicted by “probably the world’s most famous and influential geologist”, the late M K Hubbert, around 1930. In 1956 Hubbert publicly announced the ‘peak oil’ theory, which has it that 40 years after peak *discovery* comes peak *production*.
- Global oil *discovery* peaked in the mid-1960s.
- US oil *production* peaked in 1970-71.
- Global oil *production* is predicted to peak around 2005-2007. Some say it peaked in 2000 and we are on a plateau.
- US natural gas *production* peaked about 1970, while global natural gas *production* is predicted to peak shortly after oil. (By the year 2000, US domestic *production* was at 1/3 of its peak level.)

We are told in some detail how Hubbert noted that exploration in all its forms follows a bell curve with production plotted against time. In the ascending curve exploration and production are easy and cheap, but in the descending curve it becomes progressively more difficult and expensive. Against a still increasing population and rapidly rising global demand, we are currently burning four barrels of oil for every one barrel discovered. It shouldn’t take an Einstein to see clearly what this film illustrates so well.

Although not part of the film, the NZ Ministry of Commerce 2000 report shows where we are going.

In the last 100 years New Zealand’s use of energy doubled every 22 years, while our CO2 emissions increased 22 percent from 1990 to 2000, and are projected to increase by 45 percent from 1990 to 2012 if growth in energy continues unchecked.

To return to the film which is particularly powerful and insightful in its details. At the October 2003 San Francisco *Symposium on Oil and Natural Gas Depletion*, in answer to the question Is America running out of gas? the following information was given:

Peter Calthorpe: “We are making decisions now in our lives and decisions are being made for us that will determine the fate of future generations. We are living in the age of the greatest empire the world has ever seen and it is an empire of oil.”

Michael Ruppert: “Where is the oil that’s left? We heard it two or three times tonight – 60 percent of the recoverable oil on the planet is in the Persian Gulf.”

Peter Calthorpe: “And so comes The Carter Doctrine of 1979 which says the oil in the Middle East is of strategic importance to the US and we will use our military to defend our access to it.” (It’s interesting to note that 27 years ago President Carter warned that the energy crisis in the US could bring on a “national catastrophe”. Americans were told that they must respond with the “moral equivalent of war”, making “profound” changes in their oil consumption.)

Michael Ruppert: “The world is already in a position where we are not fighting over major oil reserves; we’re fighting over scraps.”

Peter Calthorpe: “Enter the neo-coms. They have a plan. It’s a plan in fact for world domination. They make no secret of it. Read it in the documents widely available, including from the Internet and their own web sites – The Project for the New American Century (PNAC). The domination of the world first requires the domination of the planet’s dwindling energy resources. Iraq was intended as the opening act in the general reshaping of the Middle East and Central Asia. We’ve been told by our president and vice-president to expect war for the remainder of our lifetime. The US would not be in Iraq if that country didn’t have oil. The only interest of the US in the Middle East is oil.”

Michael Ruppert: “Certainly we are witnessing a sequential war to control the last remaining oil reserves on the planet. That’s the war that will not end in our lifetimes.”

Colin Campbell: “I think this war in Iraq was really what stimulated everybody’s interest in this subject. Ironically, it did a bit of good, you could say, in that regard, because people would say: ‘Why in hell would you want to invade Iraq unless it had a critical role in oil?’ It’s now evident these weapons of mass destruction don’t exist and never did exist and so there must be some other reason.”

Michael Ruppert: “The United States must deny any possible competitor on the world stage from controlling the resources.”

James Kunstler: “Afghanistan and Iraq are the two opening engagements in what are bound to be a long series of wars and international contests over the remaining oil in the world, and over 60 percent of that oil is located in places where people don’t like us very much. What we’re doing now is that we’re expending lots of money and energy in the direction of securing those overseas oil supplies. Can we control the pipelines and the wellheads and the refineries? I doubt it. All it takes is five pounds of plastic explosive and a camel to put down an oil refinery.”

Michael Ruppert: “Do you think Cheney was kidding when he said a ‘war won’t end in our lifetime?’ Do you think Cheney was kidding when he said ‘this is going to be the biggest conflict that we’ve seen’?”

The film finishes, first, by explaining that there are no combinations of alternative energy sources that will support even a small fraction of the life style we have grown accustomed to, and secondly, by pointing out the many steps that can be taken to help reduce the severity of our future.

The End of Suburbia is compulsory viewing for everyone, but in particular for every Parliamentarian, city councillor, company CEO and all others who push the buttons and pull the levers. The consequences of inaction in the face of approaching global crisis, as clearly shown, are devastating.

Postscript

One week after the film's showing at The Paramount in Wellington to a near capacity crowd, the producer, Barry Silverthorn, reported from 'somewhere near Toronto' that **The End of Suburbia** had been accepted in four film festivals in September in Toronto, Erie PA, Washington and Los Angeles.

"And we're confident," said Barry, "that we'll be picked up by a few more in October. I just hope we can get the message out before our oil hits \$50 a barrel and the proles start rioting."

The End of Suburbia was shown to a near-full house at The Paramount in Wellington on 8 August 2004.