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Energy Independence: Brazil's Best Kept Secret

Last week I had the opportunity to experience some of the customs of the Brazilian people, and to learn first-hand some of the similarities and differences between Brazil and the United States. The customs and similarities were not surprising, and often quite enjoyable, but one big difference really took me by surprise – namely, Brazil's energy independence.

Brazil's reputation for the production of quality beef, coffee and sugar is well deserved, especially when experienced at a traditional Brazilian barbeque. It is a meat lover's dream. And experiencing one of their traditional adult beverage concoctions, called "caipirinha", is like drinking lemonade, but you don't feel the bus that hit you until the next day. It has a kick and a stomping all in one specially blended combination.

Brazil is a country of about 180 million people compared to the United States' 300 million. Brazil has a much smaller economy, more inflation, a far lower median income, a higher unemployment rate and a modest military – because they do not bear the responsibility of being a world economic and military superpower.

Most of my visit was in Sao Paulo, one of the largest cities in South America, which struggles with the same issues as most large cities, including economic development, traffic congestion, crime, poverty and political stress.

But! Brazil is energy independent!

This demonstrates what can happen if the leadership of the nation exercises the political and national will to become energy independent, instead of paying energy independence lip service for 30 years as our Congress has done in the United States.

Brazil's energy independence did not happen overnight.

Robert Zubrin clearly explains this transition in his book *Energy Victory*, and I had the opportunity to confirm his account anecdotally with many Brazilians during my stay.

In essence, Brazil developed a competent energy policy in the 1970s while we as a nation were ringing our hands over the Arab oil embargo. Since that time, Brazil has gradually adapted the use of flex-fuel technology to all cars in Brazil. This means that all cars in Brazil can use either

gasoline (which is 25 percent ethanol from sugar cane) or 100 percent ethanol.

When a Brazilian stops to fill up at a local station, the car does not care what is put in the tank. The engine determines what it is burning and burns it accordingly. This technology is not foreign to U.S. automakers, since they produce a large portion of the Brazilian car market.

Additionally, Brazil encouraged and facilitated the acquisition and processing of all of its natural oil resources that did not depend on foreign oil. They did not have a "don't upset the caribou" restriction like we have in the Alaskan National Wildlife Refuge, nor did they have prohibitive restrictions for drilling, as we have in our own U.S. continental borders.

While Brazil was achieving energy independence from 1972 to 2006, the United States' dependency on foreign oil went from 30 percent to 60 percent. Brazil's use of foreign oil went down to zero.

The United States has never lacked the skill to solve its problems. It has been the lack of will, which translates to a deficiency of leadership. And since we are in a 2008 presidential race, we see this deficiency even more, and hear less and less of a truly competent comprehensive energy strategy.

It was great to experience some of Brazil's customs, great food and wonderful hospitality, but it is way past time for Congress to do what they should have done 30 years ago.

Brazil's best kept secret is one of our country's greatest shortcomings.

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