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Arctic Folly

By Jimmy Carter

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Congress is about to make one of those big decisions that marks an era. Unless wiser heads prevail, it may do it badly -- making the wrong decision in the wrong way and about the wrong place. At stake is America's greatest wildlife sanctuary, the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. To dissuade Congress from this environmental tragedy, Americans must rally, and quickly.

Congress had its Pyrrhic energy victory this summer, with a new energy policy that ignores much-needed conservation measures and gives the oil industry large new tax breaks regardless of where it drills and pumps. Surely Congress has done more than enough to increase the profits of the oil industry.

Yet now, in a separate decision, the White House and Big Oil are pressuring Congress to allow drilling rigs to rip into the ecological heart of America's preeminent wildlife sanctuary. We must not confuse this with Prudhoe Bay, which lies west of the Arctic refuge and is already an industrial landscape resembling Houston more than Yellowstone.

With increasing gasoline prices bringing economic hardship and concern to many Americans, we must not be misled by oil lobbyists who are trying to convince us that our energy security is singularly dependent on sacrificing the Arctic refuge. They promote the false premise that development will touch just a few thousand acres when, in fact, it would introduce roads and pipelines spider-webbing across hundreds of thousands of acres on the fragile coastal plain.

We cannot drill our way to energy security or lower gasoline prices as long as our nation sits on just 3 percent of world oil reserves yet accounts for 25 percent of all oil consumption. An obvious answer is to increase the fuel efficiency of motor vehicles, at least to the level we set more than a quarter-century ago.

Instead, the administration recently proposed a tiny increase in gas mileage for SUVs, minivans and pickups. Not effective until the 2011 models, this would save about one month's current consumption of fuel over the next 20 years -- far less than will be saved in just one state by a new California law. The new ruling offers automobile makers an opportunity to avoid the reductions by modifying the size of various models as they persist in manufacturing gas guzzlers. It is not a coincidence that Moody's has just downgraded the debt of General Motors and Ford to junk status, while makers of efficient vehicles prosper.

I have been to the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to study the wilderness wildlife. Far from being the frozen "desert" some suggest, this is a rich, Serengeti-like haven of life: nursery for caribou, polar bears, walruses and millions of shorebirds and waterfowl that migrate annually to the Lower 48. To sit, as Rosalynn and I did, watching a herd of musk oxen

circle-up to defend their young and then to find yourself literally in the midst of thousands of caribou streaming by is to touch in a fundamental way God's glorious ark of teeming wildlife.

We Americans use a lot of energy, and millions of us want to do so in a more efficient way that also allows us to cherish our disappearing wilderness heritage. In the Arctic refuge we cannot have it both ways. In the next few months Americans could lose this special and amazing place through a backdoor legislative maneuver.

Each fall Congress endeavors to combine budgetary directives covering the nation's \$2.5 trillion dollar annual budget in a single "reconciliation" decision. In a tricky ploy to avoid full debate, drilling advocates have buried their despoil-the-Arctic goal in this mammoth measure. So, conservation-minded Americans must ask our elected representatives to vote down any final budget reconciliation bill that would allow the sacrifice of our Arctic sanctuary.

Now is the time to speak up for the ecological integrity of this unsurpassed 18-million-acre wilderness. Many Americans will be in Washington on Sept. 20 for the Arctic Refuge Action Day rally on the Mall and to contact congressional representatives personally.

If we are not wise enough to protect the Arctic refuge, future generations will condemn us for needlessly sacrificing the wilderness of their world to feed our profligate, short-term and shortsighted energy habit. The pathway to a better, more sustainable energy future does not wind through the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

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