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After the oil is gone

Say goodbye to your suburban house, yoke up that horse, and stand by to repel pirates! Author James Howard Kunstler talks about the dire world of his new book, "The Long Emergency."

By Katharine Mieszkowski



May 14, 2005 | Suburbs will collapse into slums. Farmhand will be a more viable career choice than public relations executive. And avoiding starvation will replace avoiding boredom as the national pastime.

Those are just a few of the predictions that James Howard Kunstler makes in his new book. "The Long Emergency" paints a dystopic view of the United States in the wake of what

Kunstler dubs the "cheap oil fiesta." It's a future the author insists is not apocalyptic. Calling it the end of the world would be too easy.

No, Kunstler believes the human race *will* survive as we slip down the other side of [Hubbert's Oil Peak](#). But the high standard of living we've built by gorging on cheap oil will not. America, as a political entity, will be history too.

When will the doom begin? It already has. "There have been no significant discoveries of new oil since 2002," Kunstler says. And the Saudis have screwed up their super-giant Ghawar oil field, long a fossil-fuel font for the U.S. "They have damaged it by pumping enormous amounts of salt water into it; in fact, the field itself may be entering depletion," he says.

A former journalist turned novelist turned social critic, Kunstler is best known for his book excoriating the suburbs, "Geography of Nowhere." Now he foresees the end of the entire artifice of American life, from the suburbs to the interstate highway to Wal-Mart and the global supply chain that supports it.

In Kunstler's world, a teenager will be better off learning how to yoke up a horse-drawn buggy than how to change the oil in a car. Woodshop will be more important than computer literacy. Among Kunstler's predictions: The South will devolve into agricultural feudalism and the Pacific Northwest will be beset by a plague of pirates from Asia. Forget about sleek hydrogen-powered cars coming to the rescue. For that matter, quit tilting your hopes toward wind power.

Kunstler displays a kind of macabre wit about the unpleasantness and strife that await us all. Talking to him is like trying to argue with a prophet. His assertions have a neat way of doubling back to anticipate your critiques. If you express doubt about his views, then you may well be among the deluded masses too addicted to your McSUV and McSuburb to accept the reality that lies ahead.

Salon spoke to Kunstler at his home in upstate New York, mindful that in the future such an hour-long, cross-country telephone call, undertaken so casually, could be a remote luxury, a quaint remnant of a bygone era rich in the splendors of oil.

Plenty of analysts are confident that in coming decades we'll switch from oil to another form of energy, like Europeans switching from burning wood to burning coal when forests became scarce. Why aren't you?

That's been a pattern in the last several hundred years, but it has followed a supply of mineral resources that we've exploited to their logical end. When a society is stressed, when it comes up against things that are hard to understand, you get a lot of delusional thinking.

There are at least two major mental disturbances in the collective American mind these days that can be described with some precision. One is the Jiminy Cricket syndrome -- the idea that when you wish upon a star your dreams come true. This is largely a product of the technological achievements of the last century, which were themselves a product of cheap energy: namely, things like our trip to the moon, combined with the effects of advertising, Hollywood and pop culture.

We have now become a people who believe that wishing for things makes them happen. Unfortunately, the world just doesn't work that way. The truth is that no combination of alternative fuels or so-called renewables will allow us to run the U.S.A. -- or even a substantial fraction of it -- the way that we're running it now.

There's another mental disturbance that Americans are suffering from. It's the idea that it's possible to get something for nothing -- unearned riches, free energy, perpetual motion -- and it's exemplified by Las Vegas. Combine the Jiminy Cricket syndrome and the idea that it's possible to get something for nothing and you end up with a population that's thoroughly deluded and unable to deal with reality. That's precisely where we're at.

You point out that there are all sorts of ways that we're dependent on oil that we don't think about.

We have evolved a cheese-doodle agriculture system run by large corporations like Cargill and Archer Daniels Midland, which grow immense amounts of corn by using fossil fuels to produce immense amounts of corn-based junk food. The prospects are poor that we will continue living this way. The implications are enormous. We will have to grow much more of our food closer to home.

Also, our national retail chain system -- otherwise known as Wal-Mart and Co., Wal-Mart and wannabes, Wal-Mart and imitators -- is unlikely to survive both the rising costs of oil and far more volatile price fluctuations. Their economic equation requires them to predict the cost of transport because their margins are so razor thin. And they won't be able to anymore.

Remember: These immensely hypertrophic organisms like Wal-Mart are products of the special economic growth of the late 20th century, namely an unusually long period of relative world peace and extraordinarily cheap energy. If you remove those two elements, all large-scale enterprises -- corporate farming, big-box shopping, big government, professional sports -- are going to be in trouble.

So, the collapse of the cheap oil fiesta is going to...

I wouldn't call it "collapse." That's the cause of a lot of misunderstanding. What we're talking about is the process of heading down the arch of depletion, not the catastrophic cutoff of oil. Heading down the arch implies that we will not have the normal growth of industrial economies anymore. And that has tremendous implications for capital-finance instruments to produce wealth, namely securities and bonds. All the financial paper in the world is essentially based on the increasing accumulation of wealth.

You argue that we won't know we've hit the global oil peak until a few years after it's happened. There will be hangover.

The rearview-mirror effect.

What will be the first signs of the long emergency?

We're already seeing them. The two clearest signs are serious geopolitical friction and the volatility in the oil markets. A third one, which hasn't quite gotten traction, will be disruptions in the financial markets. But that could happen at any moment.

And the real estate bubble?

Absolutely. The housing bubble is a perverse form of financial behavior. It's a consequence of capital desperately seeking a way to increase in an industrial economy that has ceased to grow. America is no longer producing wealth in the conventional sense. And so the housing bubble is a way for residual capital to produce wealth. But like all bubbles, it's a delusional thing that will probably end in tears.

You write that even the educated minority in the U.S. is clueless about its role in geopolitical problems, like the family in your neighborhood that had a sign in their yard that said, "War Is Not the Answer," and two SUVs in the garage.

Or all my politically progressive friends who drove their SUVs to the peace rallies of 2003.

Why do you think that there's such a disconnect?

Because we haven't been challenged for such a long time. The last challenge we experienced was the OPEC oil disturbances of the 1970s, which thundered through our economy and caused a lot of problems. But they were short-lived and the cheap oil fiesta was able to continue because the final great discoveries of the oil age came online in the 1980s, namely the North Sea and the Alaska North Slope. And that allowed us to go back to sleep for another two decades.

Does the Iraq war presage the kind of resource wars that you see in the future?

The Iraq war is not hard to understand. It wasn't an attempt to steal Iraq's oil. If that was the case, it would have been a stupid venture because we've spent hundreds of billions of dollars occupying the place, not to mention the lives lost. It was not a matter of stealing the oil; it was a matter of retaining access to it. It was an attempt to stabilize the region of the world that holds two-thirds of the remaining oil, namely, the Middle East.

We opened a police station in the Middle East, and Iraq just happened to be the best candidate for it. They had a troublesome dictator. They were geographically located between Iran and Saudi Arabia. So we went to Iraq to moderate and influence the behavior of the two countries --Iran and Saudi Arabia -- that are so important to us. We desperately wanted the oil supplies to continue coming out of them in a reliable way. So the Iraq venture was all about stabilizing the Middle East. It raises the obvious question: How long can the U.S. hope to occupy unfriendly nations? The answer is, not forever.

Why do you skewer Amory Lovins of the Rocky Mountain Institute, who promotes the idea of a futuristic hypercar, which would get 100 miles per gallon?

I regard Lovins hypercar venture as a stupid distraction, if for no other reason that it tends to promote the idea that we can continue being a car-dependent society. Clearly we can't, no matter how good the gas mileage is. I wrote three other books about the fiasco of suburbia before I even got a bug up my ass about the energy issues.

What's wrong with trying to make a more efficient car?

I'm not against efficient cars. I'm against the idea that somebody in Amory's position would focus on cars at the expense of something else like promoting walkable communities. The New Urbanist movement, for example, was campaigning for a much more intelligent response to suburbia at around the same time. And the solutions that they were promoting made a lot more sense than underwriting the continuation of the suburban fiasco. I think that this was perhaps an unintended consequence of Lovins' venture. It shows the limits of our imagination.

Is your basic critique of renewable energy that wind, solar and biomass all depend, to some extent, on fossil fuels?

That's one critique. I'm not trying to militate against them. We are going to use them. But we're not going to run the interstate highways and Disney World on them. Suburbia is not going to run on biodiesel. The easy-motoring tourist industry is not going to run on biodiesel, wind power and solar fuel. The point I would repeat is this: We don't know whether we can fabricate the components for these things absent a fossil-fuel economy.

My beef with the alt-fuel people is not the renewable or alt-fuel ideas themselves. Sooner or later, there's no question we're going to have to rely on them. For me, it's an issue of scale. As far as I can tell, we're much more likely to use these things on a very small neighborhood or town basis.

We're going to have to make tremendous readjustments in every aspect of how we live. Let me give you an example. One of the main characteristics of the suburbs is that everyone can lead an urban life in a rural setting. But land is simply not going to be available for suburban development anymore. So what we're going to see in the years ahead is the return of a much firmer distinction between what is urban and what is rural, between what's the town and what's the country. Because we're going to have to grow so much more of our food close to home, we're going to have to value rural land differently than we have for the past half century.

How will this affect our livelihoods?

We will no longer be a nation of public relations executives living 38 miles away from town. The future that I see tells me that the larger cities will be in big trouble and the action will be in the smaller cities and smaller towns. They will have resilience. It will be very important to live close to places that have viable agriculture, and the places where this is not possible are going to be in trouble.

The huge suburban metroplexes like New York and Chicago are not going to function very well. They're products of the oil age. They are oversupplied with skyscrapers and mega-structures that have poor prospects in a society with scarce energy. We will see a painful contraction in these places.

The Southwest is going to be real trouble. And the problem of contracting big cities will be real. I would also hasten to point out that many of them have already entered an advanced state of contraction: Detroit, St. Louis, Kansas City, Milwaukee, Des Moines, Louisville and Cincinnati. The list is very long of cities that have been in contraction for quite a bit of time. The difference, of course, is that they have been enjoying hyper-mega-growth in their suburbs, and that's going to stop.

What kind of reaction have you been getting when you say we're better off learning how to operate a horse-drawn plow than becoming a P.R. executive?

To put it mildly, a lot of people have trouble processing these ideas.

What if you put it not so mildly?

It tends to conflict with their picture of reality.

Do they take you seriously?

There is a good term for this and I hasten to point out that I did not invent it, although I couldn't tell you who did. It's really what's called "an outside context problem." It's so far from our normal realm of experience that we are collectively having a hard time processing it. In fact, we can't process it. Talking about these things tends to induce waves of denial, fear, ridicule.

But a great philosopher said new ideas are often greeted in three stages. First, they're ridiculed. Second, they're violently opposed. And finally they're accepted as self-evident.

What stage do you think that you're in?

I think we're in the ridicule stage, for sure. One thing that I'm predicting is that there will be a vigorous and futile defense of suburbia and all its entitlements, no matter what reality is telling us to do. And this will translate into a lot of political mischief. You can quote me: Americans will vote for cornpone Nazis before they will give up their entitlements to a McHouse and a McCar.

If there is such a massive threat to the American way of life, why are our government and civic institutions unable to foresee it and make any changes to address it?

You will now be enlightened: The dirty secret of the American economy for more than a decade now is that it is largely based on the continued creation of suburban sprawl and all its accessories and furnishings. And if you remove that from our economy there isn't a whole lot left besides hair cutting, Colonel Sanders' chicken, and open-heart surgery.

So it would take down the American economy?

If we had to actually reform the way that we live, or let go of some of it, the losses would be politically untenable. No politician, whether it is the gallant John Kerry or George W. Bush, will go near the issue. They know that if the suburban-sprawl economy is challenged there isn't a whole lot left behind it.

But we're going to have to let those things go, whether we like it or not. Just don't expect to be led through this in an orderly way. The key to understanding what we face is turbulence. We're going through big changes attended by a lot of turbulence, disorder and hardship.

The reason that I called this book "The Long Emergency" is precisely because it describes an interval of trouble. I'm not saying that the world is coming to an end. I'm saying we're going to pass through a period of history that's going to be very difficult. There's a distinction between calling something the apocalypse and calling something an epochal discontinuity.

But won't the political landscape change in reaction? If the lights aren't coming on because natural gas is scarce, don't you think that a lot of the barriers to, say, nuclear power, will drop pretty quickly?

They will shift the political landscape, and the shift will include a great deal of turbulence and mischief. That's precisely why the quixotic attempt to defend suburbia will probably produce a lot of political trouble. Politically, we will try to save it. We will try to take measures, whether that means engaging in more overseas adventures.

What I don't understand is why you're so confident that any political change will be futile.

I think that we've overshot our window of opportunity to have an orderly transition.

It's too late to invest heavily in nuclear energy?

No, we may do that. If we want to keep the lights on after 2020, we may have to seriously consider building more nuclear power plants. But even under the best circumstances, it would take five or 10 years to get them built.

Here is my talk show question: What do you think people should do?

People have to ask themselves about where they're living, whether that place has a viable future. If I was living in the Atlanta suburbs, I would give serious consideration to relocating, ditto Las Vegas or Tucson. If I was a young person, I would rethink my expectations to make public relations my career, or indeed have a corporate future at all. If I was a local politician, I would think very seriously about stopping the sprawl-approval system in my town. And I would turn my attention to local self-sufficiency. The bottom line is this: All these things point to the fact that we're going to have to live a lot more locally and profoundly in the years ahead.

The end of the cheap oil fiesta is going to destroy the suburbs and create a simpler, community-based future?

Let me draw a parallel for you. A lot of people point out that the kind of predictions I've made about the post-oil world seem to resemble the Pentecostal Christian scenario about apocalypse. It happens that I'm not a born-again Christian. My view of the future is no more a matter of anti-suburban religion than it is a matter of being

a Christian. It was simply self-evident that the American way of life was moving into a kind of terminal stage, whether you liked it or not. And I think that there will be a lot of benefits for us.

What are the benefits?

I think that we will return to many social relations and social enactments that we lost and that were of great value to us, such as working closely with other people on things that really matter to us.

Like farming, so we can eat?

I'm not saying everybody is going to be a farmer. In the book, I think that I went to great pains to say that we were going to have to reconstruct whole networks of local economic relations and interdependences.

As opposed to the globalized situation we have now?

Yeah. People are working for large entities that they don't care about and that don't care about them. I think that people will be working on things that will tend to be more meaningful, that will tend to have meaning for their neighbors and the places that they live.

One of the great tragedies of the Wal-Mart fiasco has been the destruction of the social and economic roles of businesses in communities. Those roles were pretty complex and created deep webs of culture that we've allowed to be systematically dismantled and destroyed. We're going to get some of them back.

I also think we will cease to be a nation of TV zombies who are merely entertaining ourselves to avoid being bored.

So, much as we may resist, there will be upsides?

Yes. It's possible to boil them down to the idea that we will not be living in the kind of narcissistic isolation that was so pervasive in recent decades. Geopolitically, the world is going to be a larger place. But our individual worlds may become smaller places. American life will be much more about staying where you are than about ceaseless and endless and pointless mobility.

And that will resonate. We're afflicted by so many places that are simply not worth caring about anymore. This is having a tremendous effect on us. It's corroding our spirits. And, if pressed, I would have to say that it's led directly to the idea that it's possible to get something for nothing and if you wish upon a star your dreams come true.

Americans are suffering so much from being in unrewarding environments that it has made us very cynical. I think that American suburbia has become a powerful generator of anxiety and depression. If we happen to let it go, we won't miss it that much. Very few people are going to feel nostalgic about the parking lot between the Chuck E. Cheeses and the Kmart.

Why do you think we resist this transition?

I think the notion behind your question is that we've become so accustomed to leisure and comfort that we're afraid to let them go and enter a world of less comfort and greater toil. I myself am a fairly cheerful person. I made certain choices years ago that have led me to lead a rewarding and purposeful life. At 56 years old, I've already outlived Babe Ruth and Mozart. I've enjoyed the cheap oil fiesta. I barely made a living until I was over 40 years old as a professional writer. I've experienced a moderate amount of hardship myself. And I'm

not afraid of it. But I also feel fortunate.

Fortunate for what?

I feel fortunate that I enjoyed the blandishments of modernity. I had hip replacement and root canal. I was able to travel on airplanes. I was able to take cheap food for granted. I went to the movies. I enjoyed rock 'n' roll. And now I'm ready to move on.

About the writer

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