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## The Age of Oil Is Over

**Monte Paulsen, Dragonfly Review of Books**  
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What would you do differently if you knew you would run out of oil in your lifetime?

That's the chilling question posed by two recent books, both of which flow from the work of geophysicist Marion King Hubbert. Born in the Texas oil patch and educated at the University of Chicago, Hubbert observed that the production histories of most oilfields follow a similar pattern. Output climbs slowly after discovery, rises steeply once the reservoir is mapped, slows during the peak-production years, and then declines steeply once the easy-to-get oil is gone. When plotted on a graph, this looks like a bell curve.

Hubbert poured his own most productive years into directing research for Shell Oil, where he knew that the discovery of new U.S. oilfields had peaked in the 1930s. Hubbert factored this data into his bell-curve model, and predicted in 1956 that production of crude oil in the contiguous 48 states would peak sometime between 1966 and 1972. The oil industry dismissed his prediction and discredited his work.

U.S. crude oil production peaked in 1970, and has fallen steeply ever since.

Hubbert became a legend, and his prediction became known as "Hubbert's Peak." In the past decade -- as the rate of discovery of worldwide oil reserves has slowed to a trickle -- a flood of Hubbert followers have tackled the obvious question: When will global production peak?

In *The Party's Over: Oil, War and the Fate of Industrial Societies* (New Society Publishers, \$18), author Richard Heinberg drills into the work of Hubbert disciples, such as Colin Campbell, as well as detractors including Peter Huber and Bjorn Lomborg. Heinberg rousts a consensus that global production peak between 2006 and 2015.

Kenneth S. Deffeyes was also born in the oil patch, and worked as a geologist for Hubbert at the Shell lab in Houston. And his *Hubbert's Peak: The Impending World Oil Shortage* (Princeton University Press, \$20) predicts a peak between 2004 and 2009, though he notes that it won't be until several years afterward that we will know when the peak actually occurred. Deffeyes' book is reverent where Heinberg's is shrill. His anecdotes about Hubbert and his detailed passages about where oil deposits are found echo the style of John McPhee, with whom he worked at Princeton.

Ironically, neither book startles as much as one line in the preface to the revised edition of *Hubbert's Peak*, which states: "The year 2000 very likely will stand as the year of greatest oil production."

Production fell in '01 and '02, and looks likely to fall again in '03. In other words, the zenith of the Oil Age may have already passed.

Which brings us back to that thorny question. Here in North America -- where most of us consume more than our own body weight in crude oil each week -- what drastic measures would you deem reasonable if you were certain that every last drop of crude has been found, that half of it is already gone, and that at the current rate of consumption the other half won't last 50 years?

Develop alternative sources of power? Both books propose immediately investing billions of dollars in alternatives such as wind and solar. But at present, fossil fuels provide about 85 percent of our energy. It will be a horserace to see whether alternative power can be brought to market before oil runs out. "The Party's Over" concludes we'd need to immediately begin building 20,000 wind turbines a year just to tap the wind power slice of the alternative power solution. That's five times greater than the total now standing. Deffeyes is even more sanguine: "...no initiative put in place starting today can have a substantial impact on the peak production year... no renewable energy projects can be brought on at a sufficient rate do avoid a bidding war for the remaining oil. At least, let's hope that the war is waged with cash instead of with nuclear warheads."

Go after new types of fossil fuels? The U.S. government recently reclassified Alberta's frozen tar sands as "recoverable" oil, instantly transforming Canada into the world's second most oil-rich nation (behind Saudi Arabia). But because it takes an estimated two barrels worth of energy to scrape one barrel of usable crude from tar sand, Canada's gooey treasure will not fill the global gap. And since tar sand is scraped out of open pit mines then washed with water, its extraction threatens to transform northern Alberta into one of the world's largest environmental disaster zones.

Or perhaps you would be willing to seize what's left before someone else does? If you knew

about Hubbert's Peak a decade ago -- as oilmen Bush and Cheney surely did -- perhaps you would regard occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq as an ugly but necessary price to pay in order to secure sufficient time for the U.S. economy to convert?

Invading Iraq, writes Heinberg, "was more understandable -- if no less morally and tactically questionable -- when viewed in light of a single piece of information to which the administration was privy, but which was obscure to the vast majority of the world's population. That crucial fact was that the rate of global production was about to peak."

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