

EXCURSUS II

Edward A. Olsen on

Hedging Our Bets on Global Interdependence

In talking about economic and political interdependence among nations, a false "either/or" range of options is commonly assumed. On the one hand we are frequently told by one-world theorists and conservationists that we must wholly commit ourselves to improving relations in an interdependent world, accommodate the economic demands of the poor nations, and adjust to a reduced standard of living as the price for a secure future. On the other hand political conservatives and business interests tell us that we must become more self-reliant, reduce our vulnerability to foreign suppliers by exploiting domestic resources, and develop some variant of an economic "Fortress America." In fact, we are now doing neither. While decrying the utopianism or self-centeredness of either extreme, we seem to be setting ourselves up for the worst of both worlds.

We say nice things about the concept of global economic and political interdependence, but we strive for resource and energy independence in order to fend off worse-case scenarios of economic blackmail or collapse. Such ambivalence serves only to undercut meaningful adjustment to real interdependence. Moreover, should we fail to meet the challenges posed by interdependence, our efforts to achieve greater national self-reliance will leave us ill-prepared to face the domestic crises that—because of increased depletion of our domestic resource base—will probably follow aborted cooperation.

The answer, I submit, is neither a middle course nor immediate efforts to foster self-reliance. Instead, the American people should consider adopting a two-stage approach. First, we need a *nonutopian* commitment to global interdependence. That is, we need to advocate sincerely and participate in measures of global cooperation to assure reasonably equitable access to economic resources and free trade. We should quietly underline our commitment to interdependence by emphasizing our desire for free trade and by gradually reducing our domestic exploitation of nonrenewable natural resources to a degree short of creating debilitating short-run vulnerabilities. Instead of retreating to an autarkic economic bastion, we should rely as much as possible on foreign suppliers to meet our needs through free trade.

At first blush such an approach hardly seems nonutopian. Especially since it would increase our vulnerability to foreign economic pressures. It would not be utopian, however, if—in preparation for an eventual second stage—it is accompanied by an effort to preserve for the future the resources we would no longer be exploiting domestically. We

obviously need to continue to conserve and prevent waste by reducing, wherever feasible, our consumption of increasingly scarce resources. This essential strategy serves our fundamental global and domestic interests. But we need more than just user conservation. We need domestic supply preservation—with a *nonutopian* motive.

As we reduce our domestic exploitation of nonrenewable resources and avail ourselves of foreign resources through the marketplace we should set aside simultaneously domestic resource preserves for future use. These preserves can be promoted now for aesthetic, ethical, and ecological reasons, but in the long run they could become economic lifelines. If an egalitarian, interdependent world order eventually emerges, such American resource preserves would become in time part of a global natural heritage. If, on the other hand, the world of the future proves to be harshly competitive, the United States would still have the time and (more important) the reserves to fall back to a second stage of domestic self-reliance.

Conservation groups in America are frequently criticized as insensitive to economic needs. In many ways the critics are correct. Conservationists and environmentalists are often motivated by a need to preserve natural beauty for its own sake or to prevent economic forces from disrupting the ecological balance, also for its own sake. The approach advocated here would require the powerful critics of environmentalists to repress their convictions and go along with the preservation of large-scale domestic natural enclaves. It would be prudent for these critics to downplay their ulterior motives for accepting what they have long opposed. They have much to gain and little to lose. If any of the present schemes to achieve viable global interdependence are successful, the current critics of conservationists will have been proven wrong and their descendants will enjoy a better life. On the other hand, if present and future efforts to build global economic and political interdependence founder, the United States of fifty to a hundred years from now will probably confront growing competition from nations that are unable to adjust to mounting resource scarcity. At that point the resource preserve areas will give our descendants the opportunity (if they so desire) to partially shield the United States from the "worst-case" economic, political, and environmental crises that a world of dire scarcity clearly implies.

Edward A. Olsen is a specialist in Japanese affairs.

WORLDVIEW

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