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Letters to the Editor

GAS PAINS

Robert Bryce's article on the U.S. military's gas consumption in Iraq ("Gas Pains," *May Atlantic*) is factually inaccurate, tactically misguided, and a classic case of a red herring. Bryce mistakenly asserts that fuel is the American center of gravity in Iraq. He overlooks a crucial point: Kuwait has been giving the United States nearly all the gas it has required ever since the invasion of Iraq, in 2003 (it began charging the United States only this past March). Although the American military could certainly stand to be more fuel-efficient, fuel is hardly an Achilles' heel.

Bryce's timing couldn't be worse. After the unexpected success of the January elections, insurgent attacks on U.S. convoys and supply depots dropped dramatically, a development that took significant pressure off U.S. supply lines. More important, his essay betrays the same type of tactical-conceptual error that has plagued U.S. military thinking ever since World War II: the idea that if the right resources and personnel are put in the right place at the right time, then victory is assured. Bryce's ham-handed comparison of the modern U.S. military to General Patton's Third Army displays his gross lack of military understanding. In truth, America's troubles in Iraq center on a misguided counterinsurgency strategy, not a bad energy policy.

Captain David J. Morris
U.S. Marine Corps (ret.)
San Diego, California

The Pentagon's attention to the heavy cost in lives and dollars associated with fuel logistics has been diverted ever since the 2001 report by Admiral Richard Truly's Defense Science Board panel, on which I served, was largely accepted by the Joint Chiefs of Staff just sixteen days before 9/11. But the kinds of issues Robert Bryce describes are now refocusing that attention. A gradual but promising solution is emerging: highly energy-efficient military vehicles.

Last September my team's independent study "*Winning the Oil Endgame*" (free at www.oilendgame.com), co-sponsored by the Department of Defense, extended the DSB analysis. We found that over a few decades, while sustaining or improving performance, the Pentagon's land, sea, and air platforms could cost-effectively save two thirds of their fuel directly, plus more fuel to deliver platforms and fuel. Such fuel efficiency would save many lives, billions of dollars a year in fuel cost, and perhaps ten times that in logistics cost, while making war-fighting more capable-and ultimately less necessary.

That's because the key to agile, fuel-frugal forces is ultralight but ultrastrong materials. As Pentagon R&D helps to commercialize advanced materials and manufacturing processes, it could transform the civilian economy as profoundly as the Defense Department did when it created the Internet, GPS, and microchips. Over the next few decades Defense could thereby enable business to eliminate U.S. oil use at a profit. That would enhance both national security and economic strength far more than just leaner fuel logistics.

Amory B. Lovins
Rocky Mountain Institute
Old Snowmass, Colorado

Robert Bryce replies:

I cannot dispute David Morris's credentials, but he does not have his facts right. According to the Defense Energy Support Center, from March of 2003 to January of 2005 the United States spent more than \$1.3 billion on fuel for Operation Iraqi Freedom. Yes, the Kuwaitis have been supplying significant amounts of fuel to the United States at no cost, but that satisfies only part of the military's total fuel needs. Further, Morris seems to suggest that logistics issues are not important on the battlefield-and yet he faults me for my "gross lack of military understanding." I stand by every word I wrote.

As for Amory Lovins, I agree with virtually all his points; I just wish more people would listen to him. That said, we disagree on the 2001 letter from the Joint Chiefs of Staff regarding the DSB fuel-efficiency study. The Joint Chiefs agreed with the DSB study only on the most general issues. When it came to making fuel efficiency a "mandatory performance parameter" for new weapons systems, they refused to go along, saying that it "should not adversely impact" the ultimate purchase of a system.