



Bio-Fools

by Max Schulz

PRESIDENT OBAMA DREW RAVE REVIEWS for his unorthodox selection of Dr. Sanjay Gupta as the nation's surgeon general. Not only is Dr. Gupta an accomplished neurosurgeon, but as CNN's in-house doc he has also proven himself a bona fide celebrity. *People* magazine tagged him as one of 2003's "Sexiest Men Alive," and the swooning that met Obama's announcement suggests the Love Doctor can still raise pulse rates. In a culture that prizes the news-gathering skills of Page Six and TMZ when the *New York Times* must mortgage its Manhattan headquarters, Dr. Gupta stands out as a splendidly obvious choice. It's just a matter of time before Associate Justices Judith Sheindlin and Joe Brown take their rightful places on the high court.

As good as the Gupta pick was, however, President Obama missed an opportunity to truly tap into the nation's cultural zeitgeist when he passed over Craig Alan Bittner, M.D., to be the nation's top medicine man. The founder and chief practitioner of Beverly Hills LipoSculpture™, Dr. Bittner successfully melded our national body-image consciousness with the eco-faddishness that dominates the campaign to wean Americans off oil.

In Southern California, a land where plastic surgeons are as common a feature as palm trees, Dr. Bittner stood out from his industry brethren by his heartfelt commitment to the environment. It turns out that Dr. Bittner was turning the fat he removed from his patients into biodiesel and using it to fuel his and his girlfriend's SUVs.

"The vast majority of my patients request that I use their fat for fuel—and I have more fat than I can use," explained Bittner on his website (since removed). "Not only do they get to lose their love handles or chubby belly but they get to take part in saving the Earth." A win-win by any definition.

Not that the good green doctor could avoid controversy. According to several complaints lodged against him, Bittner and his unlicensed assistants often took too much fat from patients' bellies, thighs, and buttocks, allegedly disfiguring them. A benign way to view it is like siphoning gas from a neighbor's car. A more jaundiced description is medical malpractice.

Rather than cooperate with investigators and trust his fate to the courts, Bittner decamped in late 2008 to South America, where he is presently on the lam. A Roman Polanski for the tummy-tuck set, Dr. Bittner gives us something profound to think about when it comes to addressing our nation's energy challenges.

AT A TIME WHEN SKY-HIGH GASOLINE PRICES are still a sharp memory, and politicians of all stripes think we need to end our supposed addiction to oil, alternative energy advocates are casting about for something—anything—to use instead of petroleum products, and much of the focus has turned to biofuels. Corn and cellulosic-based ethanol are most frequently mentioned, and the federal government is spending a lot of money trying to find economical ways to derive this fuel from corncocks and switchgrass stalks.

Whatever its merits, ethanol is unquestionably boring. A far more exciting biofuel candidate, as Dr. Bittner demonstrated, is biodiesel. Animal and vegetable fat contains triglycerides that, with minimal effort, can be turned into diesel. And conventional diesel engines can be converted to run on a variety of biodiesel products. Unsurprisingly, the most enthusiastic biodiesel advocates come from the environmental movement.

As William Tucker notes in his excellent new book, *Terrestrial Energy*, greens have proposed tapping all kinds of sources—cooking grease, food

scraps, crop wastes, anything organic—to promote the promise of biodiesel. Dr. Bittner was merely pushing the envelope of what has been a common practice on the fringes of the green movement. Writes Tucker, “Typically, someone will design a car that runs on some organic waste—turkey droppings, hayseed, coconut oil—and drive it around until it attracts press attention. Then they will announce they have solved the world’s energy problems.”

It’s the ultimate in recycling. Who hasn’t seen a local news report about the enterprising driver who has converted the engine in his car to run on cooking grease he takes off the hands of the local fast-food joint? Sure, the car may smell faintly like fries or Chinese food or whatever the grease was used to cook. The upside to that odor is it will usually mask the scent of patchouli.

For those who think turkey droppings or french fry grease are the path to energy independence, a whole industry has sprung up to help patriotic and environmentally minded drivers make the switch. Massachusetts-based Greasecar Vegetable Fuel Systems, Inc. is among the leaders in the car conversion field. Greasecar offers a network of about 40

locations nationwide where installers will retrofit your diesel engine to handle biodiesel. The cost ranges from about \$2,000–\$3,000 for the kit and installation. Whether this was worth the effort last year, when a gallon of diesel fetched nearly five dollars, isn’t clear; it would have taken driving a lot of miles to recoup the investment. Now that the price of diesel is half what it was last summer, the half-baked idea seems to make half as much sense.

Still, it’s not just the half-baked crowd that’s been showing interest in fueling up on McDonald’s discarded fry grease. Switching the old VW bus to run on waste vegetable oil used to be the strict preserve of hippies living off the grid and under the radar. But with the spike in pump prices in recent years, a somewhat more respectable clientele—like celebrated Beverly Hills liposuctionists—has emerged as a potential market for diesel engine conversions.

TAKING THE IDEA MAINSTREAM has brought its share of problems, though. The *Los Angeles Times* profiled a mechanic last year who has converted his fleet of vehicles to be fueled by fryer grease from a local chowder house. Then Sacramento



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called, not to praise him for his green efforts but to bust him. Apparently he had failed to get his state "diesel fuel supplier's license" and wasn't paying the required 18-cent per gallon tax on the fuel he burned. Oh, and he faced further trouble from California's Meat and Poultry Inspection Branch for removing grease without a license. Then there was his missing permit from the Air Resources Board allowing him to burn fat, not to mention that he didn't have liability insurance to cover potential spills.

Don't just pity the poor mechanic. The state's green governor, Arnold Schwarzenegger, faced a similar conundrum. Trying to set a good eco-example, the Governor has made a point of powering his

Several states exempt small-time drivers who run on kitchen grease from paying taxes.

Hummer on cooking oil from Costco. He wasn't paying taxes or complying with the regs either.

Several states exempt small-time drivers who run on kitchen grease from paying taxes, as well as from needing to jump through the regulatory hoops that were designed to apply to large-haul handlers of fuel or animal by-products. Given California's budget fiasco (the governor has asked Washington for its own bailout), it's unlikely Sacramento will loosen its requirements anytime soon. Despite this hurdle (the largest concentration of biodiesel vehicles are thought to be in California), biodiesel advocates believe they are making significant inroads into the culture at large.

Ironically, the effort to broaden biofuel's image from hippies to a wider segment of the public has employed one of America's best-known long-haired dope smokers as its spokesman. In 2005, country music legend Willie Nelson lent his name and image to a product called BioWillie diesel fuel. The Red-headed Stranger has long toured in a biodiesel-powered bus, so his sponsorship seemed natural. BioWillie was pitched to independent truckers thought to be fed up with paying huge sums to Middle Eastern sheiks when they just as easily could be filling the pockets of American farmers. The idea, as Willie put it, was to "put five million farmers back on the land growing fuel and keep us from having to start wars for oil."

Willie Nelson is certainly a great musician and songwriter, but he has never shown much aptitude for handling women (married four times) or money

(his assets were seized in 1990 when the IRS said he owed about \$17 million in back taxes). So perhaps it's no surprise that BioWillie went belly up. In 2006, Earth Biofuels Inc., the company behind BioWillie, found itself paying more to produce a gallon of biodiesel than it was earning by selling it, hardly a sustainable business practice. Most of the outlets that carried it stopped doing so. Earth Biofuels reportedly lost \$63 million in 2006, and Nelson himself quit the board of directors and gave up six million shares of worthless Earth Biofuels stock. The company retains the rights to the BioWillie brand and is continuing feeble efforts to make a go with it.

Not that Willie is dissuaded. He is still a true believer, in 2007 publishing the page-turner *On the Clean Road Again: Biodiesel and the Future of the Family Farm*. It's worth buying if only for the chapter entitled "To All the Oils I've Loved Before."

For all his goofiness and wrongheadedness on everything from biofuels boosterism to 9/11 conspiracies, Willie Nelson is still the man who penned "Crazy" and "Hello, Walls." He's a national treasure. He puts on a helluva concert, even for a septuagenarian in a perpetual cannabis fog. In my book, Willie Nelson will always get a pass.

Someone who doesn't get a pass, however, is loathsome former Long Island congressman Vito Fossella. Before his career was ruined by a DUI and revelations that he fathered a child with his mistress, Fossella stumped for legislation to double the federal tax credit for using restaurant grease as fuel: "From cooking fried calamari to powering trucks," he announced, "restaurant grease represents a viable energy source for our nation."

Except it doesn't, not by a long shot. As *Terrestrial Energy* points out, if all the kitchen grease in all the world's McDonald's restaurants were converted to biodiesel, it would amount to 75,000 barrels per day, or approximately .004 percent of America's daily oil consumption. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, all U.S. restaurants produce 300 million gallons of waste oil per year. That's about one gallon for every American.

That's not enough to make any sort of dent in our oil consumption, but it does give us incentive to eat more unhealthy fast food. And if that conundrum gives the left fits, it's good enough for me. ☘

Max Schulz is a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute.

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The New Humanism

by Roger Scruton

THE FAMILY IN WHICH I WAS RAISED WAS, in the matter of religion, typical of postwar England. There was no objection to the children receiving Christian instruction at school, and performing there a daily act of worship. There was no objection to chapel and Sunday school—indeed, provided these institutions were gloomy enough, my parents thought, their children could only be improved by them. But the home was a religion-free zone: no grace before meals, no prayers at bedtime, and the Bible wedged firmly on the shelf between the Oxford Dictionary and Winston Churchill's *History of the Second World War*. Our parents called themselves humanists. They had been raised as Christians, but had lived through the Second World War and lost faith in the God who permitted it. They regarded humanism as a residual option, once faith had dissolved. It was not something to make a song and dance about, still less something to impose on others, but simply the best they could manage in the absence of God.

All around me I encountered humanists of my parents' kind. I befriended them at school, and was taught by them at Cambridge. And whenever I lost the Christian faith which had first dawned on me in school assemblies I would be a humanist for a spell, and feel comforted that there existed this other and more tangled path to the goal of moral discipline. Looking back on it, I see the humanism of my parents as a kind of rearguard action on behalf of religious values. They, and their contemporaries, believed that man is the source of his own ideals and also the object of them. There is no need for God, they thought, in order to live with a vision of the higher life. All the values that had been appropriated by the Christian churches are available to the humanist too. Faith, hope, and charity can exist as human causes, and without the need for a heavenly

focus; humanists can build their lives on the love of neighbor, can exercise the virtues and discipline their appetites so as to be just, prudent, temperate, and courageous, just as the Greeks had taught, long before the edict of the Church had fallen like a shadow across the human spirit. A humanist can be a patriot; he can believe with Jesus that "greater love hath no man than this, that he should lay down his life for his friend." He is the enemy of false sentiment and lax morals, and all the more vigilant on behalf of morality in that he believes it to be the thing by which humanity is exalted, and the proof that we can be the source of our own ideals.

That noble form of humanism has its roots in the Enlightenment, in Kant's defense of the moral law, and in the progressivism of well-meaning Victorian sages. And the memory of it leads me to take an interest in something that calls itself "humanism," and is now beginning to announce itself in Britain. This humanism is self-consciously "new," like New Labour; it has its own journal, the *New Humanist*, and its own sages, the most prominent of whom is Richard Dawkins, author of *The Selfish Gene* and vice-president of the British Humanist Association. It runs advertising campaigns and letter-writing campaigns and is militant in asserting the truth of its vision and its right to make converts. But the vision is not that of my parents. The new humanism spends little time exalting man as an ideal. It says nothing, or next to nothing, about faith, hope, and charity; is scathing about patriotism; and is dismissive of those rearguard actions in defense of the family, public spirit, and sexual restraint that animated my parents. Instead of idealizing man, the new humanism denigrates God and attacks the belief in God as a human weakness. My parents too thought belief in God to be a weakness. But they were reluc-