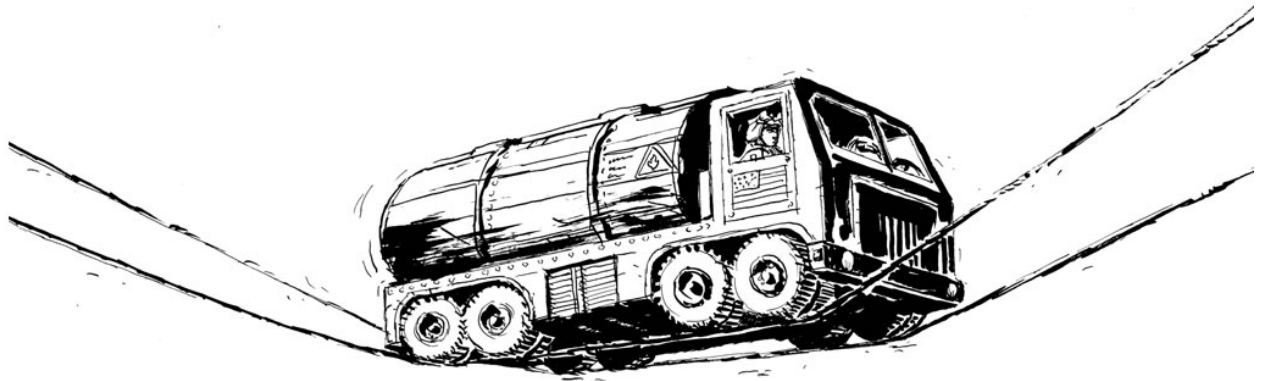


Opinion | OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

# Save Energy, Save Our Troops

By STEVEN M. ANDERSON JAN. 12, 2011



Arlington, Va.

A NATO oil tanker truck [was blown up](#) by insurgents at the Pakistan-Afghanistan border last week, and while no one was injured, the incident temporarily closed the Khyber Pass, the main supply artery for Western troops in the Afghan theater. This has become an all-too-routine occurrence; in the last nine years some 1,000 Americans have been killed on fuel-related missions in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Until the Defense Department develops battlefield policies recognizing that energy efficiency contributes to military effectiveness, more blood will be shed, billions of dollars will be wasted, our enemies will have thousands of vulnerable fuel trucks for targets and our commanders will continue to be distracted by the task of overseeing fuel convoys.

As the military's senior logistician in Iraq for 15 months in 2006 and 2007, I tracked the tremendous amounts of fuel needed to power the generators

providing electricity for air-conditioning and other essential uses in shelters hastily constructed of canvas, plywood and sheet metal. Today our troops in Afghanistan are furiously building more of the same. Nine years into that war, they are living more or less as Alexander the Great's men did 23 centuries ago — in often dangerous and always inefficient tents and shacks.

For many in the military, improving the situation isn't a priority. "To hell with efficiency, effectiveness is all I care about," a finger-wagging superior once told me in Iraq. But keeping our bases and units supplied with fuel endangers not just the lives of many soldiers manning the tanker convoys, it also drains \$24 billion a year from the Pentagon budget. The solution: a Defense Department policy requiring all structures in the combat zone be energy-efficient.

Upgrading the efficiency at our bases and outposts would not require any new technology. Watch almost any home renovation show and you'll see spray foam being used to cut energy use significantly. Cured spray foam is nontoxic, fire-resistant and waterproof. (Disclosure: until last month, I was the chief operating officer of an energy consulting company, but I have no financial stake in the issue.)

In 2007, an Army study found that spraying foam insulation on the exterior of inefficient structures would reduce their energy requirements by over 80 percent and improve the quality of life for the troops living in them. Accordingly, we obtained the necessary safety, fire and disposal certifications and began a \$95 million effort in Iraq; a study last year confirmed this initiative was saving about \$1 billion a year and taking more than 11,000 fuel trucks off the road.

Yet, despite three years of quantitative proof that insulated structures in extreme climates tremendously reduce fuel requirements, there has been little effort to broaden the scope of the initiative.

An across-the-board Pentagon efficiency mandate would have many benefits. First, it would save many lives: there are casualties in one out of every 24 fuel supply convoys in Afghanistan; 47 drivers were killed there last year. It would save money; it costs taxpayers about \$66 million a day for air-conditioning in the war zones.

It would also reduce opportunities for the enemy. Some soldiers jokingly call the fuel trucks "Taliban targets," and for good reason — they are a high-payoff quarry for insurgents using nothing but homemade bombs. In addition, having fewer fuel shipments would allow NATO to take highly trained troops off convoy duty and use them in combat or, even better, send them home.

Why has the Defense Department dragged its feet on energy efficiency? Chalk it up to the impediments to change found in any large organization: passive leadership, lack of accountability, competing priorities. In this case, add

skepticism over the data, calls for additional studies and unfounded environmental concerns.

But strong leadership can overcome these obstacles, as Secretary of Defense Robert Gates demonstrated in 2008 when he oversaw the acquisition and deployment in Iraq of a new generation of mine-resistant, ambush-protected fighting vehicles, which brought about a decline of up to 90 percent in the deaths of American troops from roadside bombs.

A new energy efficiency policy would not only save lives and cut costs, it would make a powerful statement regarding the Pentagon's commitment to lowering our dependence on foreign oil. We have the finest troops in history; improving the insulation in their structures would not only keep them more comfortable, it would also go a long way to bringing more of them home safely.

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