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The theater playing out in Congress -- and occasionally in Montana -- in which some politicians have concluded that drilling remote, uncertain, and expensive to get to places such as the Outer Continental Shelf or Arctic National Wildlife Refuge will somehow reduce gas prices would, if reviewed by, say, Ebert and Roper, be ridiculed as unconvincing, fake and clumsy drama.

Enough already with the feigned earnestness that drilling the oceans and a small, but environmentally critical corner of Alaska is somehow crucial for today's energy needs.

This drilling isn't necessary or even helpful today. And the drilling advocates know it. But they are still using shrill drill-it-all-because-we're-desperate arguments to convince you, the voter, that they have an answer to \$4 a gallon gas. But this isn't an answer. It's not even about energy. This is election season 2008's version of gay marriage or gun control. It's a contrived political wedge issue. You are either for or against high gas prices. They are treating voters as suckers.

Here's what the DrillFirst! crowd is not telling you. Even if the Arctic Refuge or off-shore areas were open for oil and gas development, it would be years, if not decades, before they produced. And we're not even sure how much they'll produce. And thus, it won't effect today's, or maybe even tomorrow's, gas prices. One Montana politician recently said, okay, but at least if we lease these areas for drilling it will send a message to the market that we're serious about fossil fuel development, which he claimed will then somehow mysteriously lower gas prices. This rationalization is peculiar. It seems to concede that high gas prices aren't a result of limited supply, but might instead result from market speculation for the available supply.

The drill-it-all crowd also has not told you there are already thousands of federal oil and gas leases in the queue, waiting for final approval or drill rigs. The amount of leased but untapped federal tracts in the West would alone cover two-thirds of Montana, and a lot of them are in Montana. Why should adding more leasing options in the oceans or Arctic make a difference?

Nor do they tell you that some of our domestic oil production is actually exported, and that exports have recently increased. This is because the weak American dollar means oil companies can often make more money overseas. So, if more supply is the answer to high domestic prices, how about keeping America's oil in America, which is what pretty much every politician implies our energy policy should be? Well, you'll be told that exports are okay because we're all about free trade. Okay, but how does that square with the calls to eliminate foreign imports of oil, which after all also results from free trade?

And, of course, the drill-first mob also neglects to mention that developing offshore areas and the Arctic requires more money and more energy than development in most places because they are remote and tough environments. Which begs the question, why not, for economic efficiency's sake, just invest instead in developing alternatives to fossil fuels? And besides, if we're shooting for energy security from evildoers in other countries, why the heck would we centralize more critical oil or gas production into one or two pipelines in remote places like arctic Alaska where any Gomer with a rifle or a few explosives, can, and has, shut down the flow?

Much of the justification to drill it all now is shallow and disingenuous. But look forward to hearing more of it in Montana, where the BLM and Forest Service are cranking out more leases, and where Montana's Department of Natural Resources and Conservation is increasingly leasing more areas in wildlife, fish and recreational areas.

The justifications for all-out fossil fuel development in Montana and elsewhere promise to get more twisted and more phony. After all, it's always election season and we're suckers.

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