

XVI. America and Climate Change

AIT: “As shown in this graphic representation of every nation’s relative contribution to global warming, the United States is responsible for more greenhouse gas pollution than South America, Africa, the Middle East, Australia, Japan, and Asia—all put together.” (*AIT* pp. 250-251)

Comment: No American should feel guilty about this. Carbon dioxide emissions derive from energy use, which in turn derives from economic activity. The United States is “responsible for” more cumulative CO₂ emissions than South America, Africa, the Middle East, Australia, Japan, and Southeast Asia combined, because the United States has been the world’s great economic engine for the past 60 years or more. The world would be a much poorer place had the U.S. economy been built on wind turbines, solar panels, and bio-fuels rather than on fossil energy.

AIT: “If you compare the per capita carbon emissions in China, India, Africa, Japan, the EU, and Russia to those in the United States, it is obvious, as the chart at top right shows, that we are way, way above everybody else.” (*AIT*, p. 252)

Comment: No one should feel guilty about this either. An energy-rich country like the United States naturally has higher per capita carbon emissions than an energy-poor country like China or India. People in those countries emit less CO₂ per capita not because they are more virtuous or care more about the planet but because they produce less.

There are also compelling economic and cultural reasons why U.S. per capita emissions are higher than Japanese and European per capita emissions.

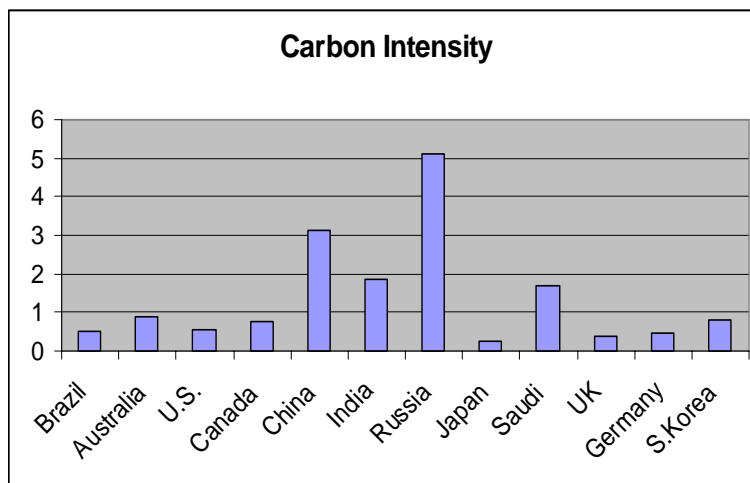
America is endowed with abundant fossil energy resources—coal, oil, and natural gas. Japan has virtually no fossil energy resources. Where energy is scarcer, energy efficiency is more valuable. Heavy investment in energy efficiency was economically efficient in Japan; it would have been wasteful in the United States.

The United States is a continent-sized country. Japan is a tiny island nation. In the United States, the distances from farm and factory to market are much greater, so we must use more fuel per dollar of output to run our economy. The spaciousness of our country also fosters development patterns that would be prohibitively costly in Japan. Real estate in Japan is very scarce, hence very expensive, so most people live in small homes or apartments in densely packed communities. Real estate is plentiful in the United States, so an average family can afford a larger home with more space for more energy-using appliances. Communities are more spread out, contributing to greater automobile use, which in turn fosters low-density development.

Europe is as large as the United States, but Europe was slow to develop an integrated market, limiting commercial demand for motor fuel. Also, the Old World, with its legacy of stratified social classes and authoritarian governments, has never prized personal

mobility. EU governments tax gasoline at rates that would not only cripple commuter and commercial transport in the United States, but also fuel taxpayer rebellions.¹ Europe is plagued by high unemployment rates and stagnant GDP growth. All of these dubious “advantages” contribute to Europe’s lower per capita emission levels.

A more accurate measure of environmental performance is carbon intensity—emissions per dollar of economic output. This measure is still inappropriate if used as a moral metric, because carbon intensity chiefly reflects geographic and historical “accidents” such as a country’s natural resource base and industrial structure. That said, the U.S. economy is far from the world’s most carbon intensive. We are more carbon intensive than the U.K., Germany, Japan, and Brazil, but less carbon intensive than Russia, China, India, Saudi Arabia, Australia, South Korea, and Canada. See the Figure below.



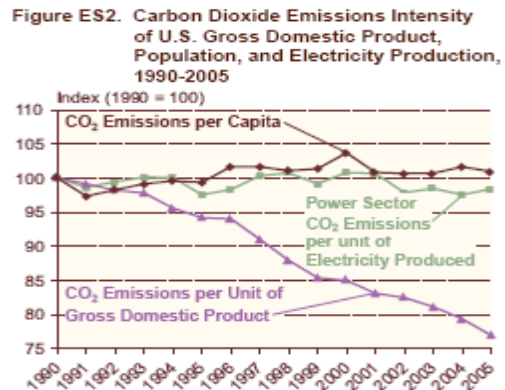
Metric tons CO₂ per \$1000 GDP

Data source: EIA²

U.S. carbon intensity is declining at a rate of about 1.6% annually. Per unit of GDP, U.S. CO₂ emissions in 2005 were 23% lower than in 1990.³ See the Figures below.

Decade	Overall Change in Intensity (Percent)		Average Annual Change in Intensity (Percent)	
	Carbon Dioxide	Total GHG	Carbon Dioxide	Total GHG
History				
1950-1960	-12.9	—	-1.4	—
1960-1970	-3.3	—	-0.3	—
1970-1980	-17.8	—	-1.9	—
1980-1990	-25.6	—	-2.7	—
1990-2000	-15.0	-17.7	-1.6	-1.9

Source: Energy Information Administration, *Annual Energy Review 2005*, DOE/EIA-0384(2005) (Washington, DC, August 2006), and estimates presented in historical carbon dioxide emissions data series.



U.S. Carbon Intensity Trends

Source: EIA

AIT neglects to mention the circumstances that make it reasonable rather than blameworthy for America to be the world's biggest CO₂-emitter: the world's largest economy, abundant fossil energy resources, markets integrated across continental distances, highly productive workers, plentiful real estate, and the world's most mobile population. These are all positive attributes. Yet Gore manages to depict the United States as an environmental villain.

Gore claims his message is non-partisan and non-ideological (*AIT*, p. 287). But he blames America-the-'fuelish' for everything from floods, to hurricanes, to famine in Africa. In this respect, Gore is just another partisan ideologue who "blames America first"—a practice that was habitual among left-leaning activists and politicians long before global warming emerged as a public concern.⁴

¹ In August 2005, gasoline cost \$6.77 in the Netherlands, \$6.56 per gallon in Norway, \$6.29 per gallon in Denmark, and \$6.02 per gallon in Belgium and the UK. Rachel Elbaum, "What if you had to pay \$6.02 a gallon for gas?" MSNBC, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/8994313>.

² Energy Information Administration, Energy Related Carbon Intensity, measured in metric tons CO₂ per \$1000 year 2000 U.S. dollars, <http://www.eia.doe.gov/environment.html>.

³ Energy Information Administration, *Emissions of Greenhouse Gases in the United States 2005*, November 2006, pp. xi, xii, 8, <ftp://ftp.eia.doe.gov/pub/oiaf/1605/cdrom/pdf/ggrpt/057305.pdf>.

⁴ Jeane Kirkpatrick, 1984 GOP Convention Speech, <http://www.cnn.com/ALLPOLITICS/1996/conventions/san.diego/facts/GOP.speeches.past/84.kirkpatrick.shtml>.