Guest Comment

Shouldn’t coal be the alternative?

A review of German industry in 1945 shows that everything now made by the U.S. plastics industry from natural gas and oil was then made by the Germans by processes based on coal and lignite. Speer’s book “Inside the Third Reich” demonstrates that the German war machine ran on petrol from coal hydrogenation. Overall, the Germans had superb technical solutions to their material shortages, but their management was a failure because of political interference by the SS and other circles close to the dictator.

The parallel between the management of German industry in World War II and the management of the U.S. energy program today is alarming; as yet we Americans have no clearly accepted goals. We are kept from setting these goals by the strident voices of many different interests who want things done their way and no other. The bureaucrats, the media, the environmentalists, and special interests in academia, congress, industry, and labor all seem to be pulling in different directions and nothing gets done. They are as disruptive to the setting of U.S. policy as were the SS and the other dictatorial henchmen who meddled with the management of German industry in World War II.

For Americans, the job to be done is to have operating facilities by 1985 that can replace all imported energy. This energy gap can be filled by using our abundant coal and lignite resources. The use of coal for power generation could be greatly expanded except for the questionable federal emission standards. Recent studies show little correlation between sulfur dioxide levels and health, and the identity of the unhealthy part of stack emissions is conjectural (Fortune, February 1975, page 114). The proven Fischer-Tropsch and hydrogenation processes can convert coal to motor fuel, alkanes, alkenes, and aromatics; chemicals derived from acetylene can be made via coke-based carbide or from the hydrocarbons. Modern by-product coke ovens can also make gases suitable for use in these syntheses.

The tools are available now; all we need is agreement on a program to put them to use. The following points seem to be part of such a program: 1) Forecast for 10 years, revising biennially, all U.S. energy needs and availability from domestic sources, assuming a 3% annual growth rate. 2) Involve the public by mandatory segregation of solid wastes before collection into metals, glass, dry combustibles, and wet combustibles. Collected, the last two items could be added to the energy supply, since they can be burned with powdered coal to generate power and diminish sulfur in stack gases. 3) Prepare definite schedules to close the forecast energy gaps through the use of coal-based facilities, and build these as needed. 4) Average out the energy costs by applying a tax on energy from the cheap existing domestic sources to compensate for possible costs, higher than oil from the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, that may be involved in processing coal.

Such a program would put a ceiling on OPEC prices. Even if it might involve government investment of $50 billion in facilities to use coal, this would be less inflationary than the program to put men on the moon, since it would be invested in productive effort that will reduce inflation, and would offer new employment for many Americans. It also would improve our balance of payments.

Walter E. Gloor
Polymers Consultant, Wilmington, Del.