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IT'S A GRAY AREA: A positive world revolution

By **JAMES P. GRAY**

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Recently while I was flying home from Houston, where I had been invited to speak about our nation's failed drug policy, I had the good fortune to sit next to a Continental Airlines pilot who was going home to Ventura. And this interesting fellow had an idea that I want to pass along to you.

He suggested that our government offer a prize, or a "bounty," for anyone who would develop a process or method that would be commercially viable to separate the hydrogen and oxygen elements from water.

Then the pure hydrogen could be used as a fuel. Our government would pay anyone who would develop such a process \$1 billion, or even \$5 billion, and then we would donate the process to the public domain.

Imagine what would happen if something like this could be developed. I believe the more you think about it, the more you will agree that this would be one of the most profound and positive revolutions in the world since the invention of the printing press.

Of course, the separation of hydrogen and oxygen from water can be achieved now, but the cost prohibits it from being commercially viable at this point. Furthermore, it now takes more energy to separate the hydrogen and oxygen molecules than is gained by eventually burning the hydrogen.

But the implications from this discovery would be far-reaching and even earthshaking. It could furnish cheap and viable energy that would come from an inexhaustible source. It would burn cleanly, with the only waste product being water vapor. Hydrogen-burning automobiles and other vehicles would soon be commonplace, with inestimable benefits to the environment. Electricity

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vehicles would soon be commonplace, with inestimable benefits to the environment. Electricity could be generated from this source of power, which would greatly reduce, or over time even eliminate, our reliance upon the burning of coal, with all of the pollutants that come with that process. And the list would go on and on.

Also, and most importantly, this development could change the face of local and world politics forever. Our country would no longer be reliant upon governments in the Middle East and other corrupt and unsavory governments around the world for their oil. The present status quo seriously strengthens them and weakens us, but this would be forever changed. Further positive results would be both to increase funds available for world trade, which would tend to strengthen both wealthy and poor countries alike, and to allow us to support world civil liberties and rights for the downtrodden without having politically to kowtow to so many repressive despots.

Hydrogen-burning plants could be installed all around the world that would convert seawater into fresh water, and this could allow presently arid regions to raise crops to feed their own people. So this new process in itself could seriously reduce tensions in many countries of the world. In fact, it could even have some beneficial influence on the "tinderbox of the world," which is Israel and Palestine. Another result would be the reduced competition for water between farmers and migrating fish, etc.

Furthermore, consider the effect this development would have upon our balance-of-payments problem, since we would no longer be exporting billions of dollars per year to the Middle East and elsewhere for oil. This could help our country's economy and those of most other nations to explode into unheard of productivity.

Now, I agree that this suggestion does some violence to my Libertarian principles of a smaller and less-dominant government, as well as the principle of simply allowing the marketplace to devote the necessary capital to meritorious projects.

In most circumstances, rewards in the marketplace are sufficient to promote needed advances. ("Necessity is the Mother of invention.") But so far, even though the discovery of such a process would indisputably bring untold wealth to the discoverer, this viable process still remains elusive. So our government's offering a large incentive or bounty might just do the trick. And providing this process for free to the world would allow new further developments and products to be generated more quickly. So I think a compromise in my personal philosophy would be acceptable.

Will our government put such a plan into operation? Maybe so; maybe not. But a private Manhattan Project-style program to develop plentiful, inexpensive and clean-burning fuel would be one of the best things that our government could do with our money. So I think we should give it a try. What do you think?

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