HOW WE'LL KNOW WHEN GAS IS HIGH ENOUGH

The price of gasoline and diesel is spiking upward toward $5 per gallon. I don't think it's high enough.

Were it high enough, the drive-through lanes at fast-food restaurants and doughnut shops would not be lined with mostly oversized vehicles carrying mostly oversized people toward food energy.

Were the price of gas high enough, the carpool lanes on local interstates would not be nearly empty when the other lanes are at or beyond capacity with solo drivers. One-person rides are justified for an irregular schedule and a multiplicity of origins and destinations. But this is clearly not the case for so-called urban rush hours, when many exits are clogged both coming and going on a regular schedule.

Were it high enough, the school buses in the suburbs and countryside would not be running so much below capacity, with parents following the same route a few minutes later in their cars. This defeats the economy of scale that created buses in the first place.

Were it high enough, the amount of energy burned for sports entertainment would not be so extravagant at all levels. Nationally, millions of people with time and energy to spare fly to an endless series of Super Bowls, college tournaments, World Series and soccer cups to support their teams and have fun. Locally, public and private middle schools have travel teams playing a schedule of away games attended by dozens of parents who each drive dozens of miles crisscrossing our towns.

Were it high enough, the boondoggle of business travel to resort destinations such as Hawaii and Vegas would end because the cost of getting there would be too high. The relative ease of flying and its affordability drastically increases the number of trips and the total distance traveled.

Please don't misunderstand me. I am not opposed to the personal choices described above because it's a free country and they are driven by natural incentives. What I'm opposed to are government policies that create the energy economy within which we make our individual choices, an economy that still encourages nearly bottomless demand for fossil fuels.

Were the right policies in place, America would not burn in a single morning the entire volume of oil leaked into the Gulf of Mexico during the Deepwater Horizon disaster a year ago. The accident occurred because we're drilling in deep water below the horizon of safety, because safer locations have already been sucked dry.

Were the right policies in place, more than a dribble of federal dollars would be spent for research and development on new energy technologies. In the latest budget compromise, the Office of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy is funded for fiscal year 2012 with approximately $1.8 billion. This is only about 1 percent of the $148 billion total for the Department of Energy and about 2 percent of what is targeted for war-related research in the Department of Defense.

Were the right policies in place, private oil companies would not be getting million-dollar subsidies from the federal government during years of record high profits. Public anger would rise to the point where elected leaders would close the door to big oil and to knee-jerk perpetrators of economic gloom and doom.
Were the right policies in place, you would not have to travel major interstates with an endless series of tractor-trailers carrying goods alongside rusting railroad tracks that parallel abandoned canals. In this progression, each technological step forward is a step backward in energy consumption.

Were the right policies in place: Mass transit would be the default choice for most sectors of society; the income disparities regarding the price of fuel for private transportation would be ironed out; planet Earth would not be experiencing many of its present environmental problems; and the looming prospect of climate change would be less ominous.

Go ahead. Get angry with me. It won't change the price at the pump.