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## **Giving Our Choke Point the Heimlich Maneuver: A Bottom-up Egalitarian Approach to Reverse America's Watery Crisis**

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Tomorrow is Election Day, marking a merciful end to countless automated robo-calls instructing us how or for whom we should vote. But believe it or not, you haven't heard every campaign promise or ballot initiative in the book. Indeed, despite Circle of Blue's series on the collision of water scarcity and energy demand, there are some things even the most craven politician won't say out loud. No candidate has stood on a platform in the midst of the Great Recession and vowed: "Once elected I promise to raise the price of water, gas, electricity and grocery bills."

This isn't a partisan issue. We conducted an informal survey (read: Google search) of races in every district of the U.S. and discovered universal consensus. It did not matter whether the office-seeker was Republican, Democrat, Socialist, John Birch, Green Party, Tea Party, Libertarian or Peace & Freedom Party. Yet we could find no one stumping for an increase in prices for our most essential services and goods.

And therein lies the root of our problem. Because our country's 'choke points' reported thus far portend such massive national security risks, readers may have assumed such are the result of bad policies, obsolete technologies, or distracted officials at the top. If true, the disease offers obvious quick fixes. The reality runs deeper, and more disturbing.

Natural resource depletion comes at the behest of our free, rational and informed electorate. We confront threats not from some corrupt regulator, incompetent bureaucrat or nefarious multinational corporation, but from the enemy in the mirror: ourselves. Yes, when it comes to water and energy, our democratic system is working all too well.

To grasp this paradox, recall Monopoly. Yes, the board game. Of all the pretty colored properties a player could land on, from Mediterranean Avenue to Boardwalk, two bland squares sat relatively worthless: "Electric Company" and "Water Works." You couldn't invest in these assets with houses and hotels, and rent was cheap. Too cheap.

In reality undervalued utilities are our only remaining, centrally organized, all-encompassing, absolute monopolies. They control every aspect of our lives.

What's more, the two are inextricably linked. In the U.S. a fifth of all energy may be consumed by water, and the biggest use of water – 42% by some estimates – is for energy. We might well consider the two utilities as one combined, vertically integrated 'watery' monopoly.

Of course, watery's monopoly is natural; there's nothing unfair or illegal about it. We can't have dozens of competing wires or pipes extending from a single hydropower dam, river and reservoir. So, to control the monopoly's risks, we enact oversight laws, establish public service commissions, and elect honest men and women to represent our civic interests. These officials work carefully and tirelessly to prevent watery monopolies from exploiting end users, especially the poorest among us, with exorbitant rates. The bottom line is that we enjoy a watery supply that is, in effect, rent-controlled.

However, this delightful economic outcome grows perverse when coupled with our political system. The guy who decides what we pay for watery? He works for us.

As watery flows decline and provision costs rise, utilities could – and in theory should – raise rates to balance out demand and supply. In practice, we voters ensure that they don't. We only elect officials who keep rates – for residential, commercial, industrial and agricultural use – artificially low. It is hard to call them 'cowards' for declining to commit political suicide.

As a result, utilities muddle along, forced to make up cash shortfalls caused by low per-unit rates by selling a higher volume of our liquid assets. So cheap rates encourage us to waste both water-embedded energy and energy-embedded water. In the rare emergency situations during which a utility does increase rates to cover costs, a brief rate spike can trigger a vicious 'death spiral' which causes frugal consumers to use less watery, which – as our basic economic training tells us – must then be offset by even higher rates, leading to even less use, causing higher rates etc. Thus, one alternative to choking is starving.

Or mandatory gastric bypass. The dark irony is that authoritarian regimes may do a better job of imposing a diet of forced conservation than free societies. Likewise, the most effective watery-saving campaigns in the U.S. are also the most heavy-handed, involving rations, restrictions, police, surveillance, fines, and hotlines through which 'good citizens' are urged to snitch on 'bad neighbors' private habits.

Our analysis of choke points may seem bleak, even fatalistic. Must democratically governed utilities keep wasting watery at our behest? Does watery conservation require erosion of economic freedom and individual liberty?

Happily, the answer to both questions is no. Information technology offers us a fast, fair and judicious way to stop choking ourselves through bottom-up incentives. The secret lies in owning and trading shares of watery efficiency credits. Here's how it could work:

- First, encourage monopoly utilities to convert physical water or energy into cleanly defined virtual credits: one hundred gallons or one Kilowatt-hour could be deemed an EcoShare (for the formulaic among us: .100 Gal = 1 Kwh = 1 EcoShare)
- Next, allocate equal quantities of these online metered assets – say five EcoShares per day — to every residential, commercial and industrial account.
- Then let recipients trade whatever surplus they produce or choose not to consume to those who want more ("save and trade").

In this scenario, there is no need to 'correct' human nature, but instead we leverage our innate greed or envy to address our watery crisis. Any individual who consumed less than his/her share, could sell unused shares to others who wanted more, whether they be thirsty neighbors with a green lawn in the desert; water-intensive businesses; innovative conservation groups who wanted to "retire" them or return them to the watershed; or to the utility itself, all for a cash profit.

This concept – pioneered nearly 30,000 years ago by Africa's Bushmen – was impossible to replicate in the 21st Century even a few years ago. But through social media and proven Web 2.0 technology, utilities can now unlock virtual markets within watery's natural monopolies, and reward voluntary frugality, efficiency, and innovation. Soon individuals – seeing the possibility to turn saved EcoShares into movies tickets, dinners out, or college savings – will be asking their local hardware stores for "water-efficient light bulbs" and "energy-efficient toilets."

In an election year, such an approach offers benefits across the political spectrum. Conservatives know that 'owning' virtual shares in watery would unlock and engage the creative energies of a majority of private individuals working in their own long-term self-interest. Liberals could embrace their democratic impulse to give every American an equal opportunity starting point each day, and seize upon this approach's ability to avoid punishing the poor or policing our neighbors over watery use. Libertarians can rejoice that – instead of new laws, policies, taxes or police pushing reforms from the top down - an online community exchange platform would encourage a competitive yet voluntary culture of conspicuous conservation.

In sum, watery depletion is hardly reserved for technocratic elites. To the contrary, the problem, and solution, belongs entirely to you and me. And, in our do-it-ourselves watery world, it helps to remember the Heimlich maneuver. The first lesson is not reaching down in to forcibly dislodge the source of the choke point from above. Instead, seek out natural reserves, work with rather than against the flow, and use our own hands to lift up from below.

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