Cheney’s energy recipe is bad diet for United States


Real men don’t conserve.

That seems to be the message Vice President Dick Cheney was conveying in recent remarks on the Bush administration’s energy policy. “Conservation may be a sign of personal virtue, but it is not a sufficient basis for a sound, comprehensive energy policy,” he said. In other words, because conservation and renewable energy sources cannot by themselves satisfy our insatiable energy appetite, the only option is to drill for more oil and burn more coal --- the consequences for human health and the environment be hanged.

The term “conservation” embraces both the common-sense notion that machines should operate as efficiently as possible and the principle that, through smart design and decision-making, we can live our lives in less energy-intensive ways. None of this necessarily requires painful sacrifice, but Cheney’s rhetoric equates these measures with “austerity” and unacceptable privation. Conservation, he said in so many words, threatens our very lifestyle.

This, of course, is calculated to make the plundering of public wilderness and weakening of environmental standards more acceptable to a gullible populace. President Bush and Cheney are both former oil men and were heavily financed by energy-dependent industries. They apparently are determined to remove as many barriers as possible to drilling, mining and burning.

Cheney, for example, is desperate to drill for oil on the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, which is expected to yield about 600,000 barrels of oil per day by 2010. But that amount pales next to the savings possible if we raise average fuel efficiency for cars and SUVs to 35 miles per gallon. That would save about 1.5 million barrels a day in 2010, and 4.5 billion in 2020 --- and by then the refuge oil would be depleted. Imagine what would be possible with the rapid adoption of newly developed hybrid vehicles that get 60 miles per gallon and more.

Cheney also claims we need to build power plants at the absurd rate of one a week for 20 years, for a total of 1,300. He bases this on a calculation by a wing of the federal Department of Energy known for its relentless promotion of fossil fuels.

Meanwhile, he ignored a study from another arm of the department, “Scenarios for a Clean Energy Future,” that found that conservation and renewable fuels (solar, wind, fuel cells and others) could eliminate the need for more than 600 of those plants. One of the important conservation measures was new efficiency standards for appliances from dryers to air conditioners --- standards the Bush administration just gutted.

And renewable fuels? “Years down the road alternative fuels may become a great deal more plentiful than they are today,” Cheney said.

But not if the Bushies have anything to do with it, apparently. The Bush budget slashes funding for research and deployment of required new technologies.

In a world of limited resources, those are terribly short-sighted moves. California’s rolling blackouts and the current gas prices are warning signs of over-consumption run amok, something like the chest pains that precede a fatal heart attack. Under those circumstances, even real men cut back on steak and fat-drenched potatoes. Just ask Dick Cheney.