



# Shovel, Baby, Shovel

My friend Amos Eno, one of the country's leading conservation experts, spent a decade running the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and more recently the Land Conservation Assistance Network. His writing appears in all the right publications, and he is a popular speaker at conferences everywhere. Writing about the old/new President's endorsement of the almost-cliché adage, "Drill, baby, drill," he added another related but separate concept: "Shovel, baby, shovel."

It is an apt way to describes what he calls an urgent need "to resurrect our mining of strategic and critical minerals and coal, throwing off the wet blanket of climate suffocation policies."

There is considerable attention and debate about President Trump's insistence on domestic oil and gas production and "American energy dominance." Indeed, at least four first-day executive orders were about re-starting domestic energy production, especially one entitled, "Unleashing American energy." It includes directives revoking the electric vehicle mandate, freezing unspent green new deal funds, expediting liquid natural gas export facilities, and especially streamlining the permit process for oil and gas leasing, exploration, development, production, pipelines, and other facilities.

That executive order also includes a less-reported provision called Section 9, related not to oil and gas drilling, but to mining. It instructs federal agencies to identify all regulations, policies, and orders "that impose undue burdens on the domestic mining and processing of non-fuel minerals and undertake steps to revise or rescind such actions." It even suggests that the government's list of "critical minerals" needed for national defense might be amended to include uranium, perhaps foreshadowing a new plan to jump-start the nuclear power industry.

There can be reasonable disagreements about these details, of course, but the debate is overdue. The Minerals Education Coalition keeps track of minerals Americans use, by averaging consumption statistics with annual population estimates. The statistics are staggering. The average American will need in a lifetime roughly 18,000 pounds of stone, sand and gravel, 685 pounds of cement, 148 pounds of clay, 383 pounds of salt (I might need more), 275 pounds of iron ore, 168 pounds of phosphate, 35 pounds of soda ash, 34 pounds of aluminum, 34 pounds of copper, lead, zinc, and manganese, 25 pounds of other metals, and 584 pounds of other non-metal minerals.

Altogether, the Minerals Information Institute once concluded that each of us will need in our lives over 3.6 million pounds of minerals, metals and fuels. Where will we get all that?

For years, leaders have warned about U.S. reliance on China for critical minerals, especially “rare earth” minerals, several of which are critical in the production of renewable energy, and high-tech equipment like cell phones, computers, MRI machines, and satellites – minerals with hard-to-pronounce names like ytterbium, dysprosium, and praseodymium. The term “rare earth” is a misnomer, applied to 17 specific elements because they were once considered difficult to extract from the surrounding rock in which they are found. But supplies abound worldwide, including the U.S., where America’s known reserves are at least ten times the entire world’s production.

China now produces 80-90 percent of the world’s rare-earth minerals, according to the U.S. Geological Survey. Yet China has only about 37 percent of the world’s estimated reserves. Relying on China for critical minerals is obviously not smart, nor safe, nor necessary. The U.S. once had a national defense stockpile, but sold it all in 1998, while the last American processing plant in Texas was closing.

Sadly, many Americans simply assume we ran out of such mineral resources.

The truth is that we will never run out –

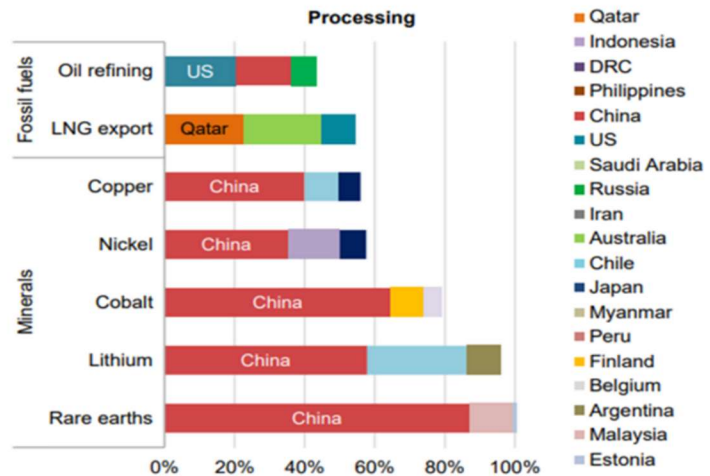
not in your lifetime or the lifetimes of your great grandchildren. There is no limit to mankind’s ability to discover, produce, create, invent and perfect new sources of energy. No, Americans put the brakes on their own mining industry for a variety of reasons, especially concerns about environment impacts – none of which we can control in other countries. We control that in the U.S. when we work with American companies to supply the minerals needed to build a more prosperous society. The near demise of American mining was not because the resources played out, but because the political will did. And that may finally be changing.

Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote that “Nothing is rich but the inexhaustible wealth of nature. She shows us only surfaces, but she is a million fathoms deep.” He could never have imagined the levels of energy we use today, but he is nonetheless continually proven right. It may be time to stop our national whining and start shoveling.

*An edited version of this column first appeared in the Grand Junction Daily Sentinel.*

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