

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Lead Balloon

In the world of environmental politics, there is a natural law: If you're losing, create a scare. A classic example of that tactic has just been applied to force the administration to back off on its plan to ease gasoline lead regulations.

Perhaps the Reaganites should have known better than to fool around with an environmental issue that was so well booby-trapped. On the other hand, when Vice President Bush's deregulation task force looked at gasoline lead last year it seemed like a place where substantial economic gains could be had with no untoward health effects. Indeed, President Carter had eased up once during the gasoline snafus without even getting a rise out of the environmentalists.

The argument for letting refiners put a bit more lead in regular gasoline is twofold: By raising octane artificially it increases the gasoline yield of a barrel of crude oil and hence could save a lot of crude oil, and dollars, over time; since cars that use leaded gasoline are disappearing from the highways, it wouldn't raise total lead emissions.

But there is an emotional issue involving lead—and the environmentalists, looking for ways to derail Reaganite deregulatory efforts, used it with a vengeance. It seems that various research studies have discovered high levels of lead in the bloodstream among certain children, particularly children already disadvantaged by life in urban ghettos. These reports were held to show that at the very least several hundred thousand youngsters were having their minds dulled by lead ingestion, and at the worst, some were dying. The studies were pulled out to fight the gasoline lead relaxation effort.

When this information first came to be known, the paint industry voluntarily phased out the use of lead, even before federal rules were imposed in the 1970s. In 1973, the government also undertook to reduce the use of leaded gasoline, a process hastened by the introduction on cars of catalytic converters, which require unleaded fuel.

Unfortunately, none of this dealt with the prime source. Children still would eat paint chips so long as there were old houses with the paint peeling off. Dr. J. Julian Chisolm, a pediatrician at Baltimore City Hospital, did research indicating that children living in modern housing didn't show any symptoms even if they were living near highways with relatively high levels of lead in the ambient air. He concluded that changes in the lead levels in gasoline would have a "negligible effect" on children's health.

As to fears about learning problems, it certainly is plausible that brain damage could result from large lead intakes. But some of the studies that have attempted to establish a correlation at lower levels are being called into question. A much-cited study by Dr. Herbert Needleman of the University of Pittsburgh found that lead, even in minute doses, impairs IQ scores. But a Cleveland study by Dr. Claire B. Ernhart could not duplicate that finding after allowance for other influences on IQ, such as parental IQ, home life, school quality and other socio-economic factors.

We are not qualified to pass judgment on whose research is the most valid, but it seems clear to us that there is far more disagreement among scientists on the lead issue than the attacks on the proposed regulatory changes acknowledged. And we are inclined not to believe that a few old cars driving down the streets of ghettos are poisoning the children who live there.

All's fair in love and politics, we suppose, but it is exactly the use of this kind of tactic that has caused even some of the legitimate claims of environmentalists to be suspect. There is little reason to think that what the administration had in mind for gasoline lead would poison a single child.

That is not to say the lead studies have no basis. When this issue first came up in the 1950s, it was quickly discovered that lead in paint was the prime suspect. Later research has borne that out. In a syndrome known as pica, children—particularly those in slums—sometimes eat paint chips or dirt contaminated by lead from old exterior house paint. They also inhale lead-tainted household dust from peeling and chalking old paint.

The economy is rich enough to survive the failure of the gasoline lead deregulation move. On the other hand, it is seldom admitted in these debates that a more efficient economy, capable of producing more wealth and more jobs, would most likely do more for ghetto children than some of the protections the environmental lobby is demanding.

We wish the Reagan administration would fight a little harder against the environmentalist assaults. But that of course requires it to understand that there is more involved here than just helping out the lead industry. We are not sure that it does.