

PDF - PETROLEUM—TODAY AND TOMORROW. - researchcub.info FROM ALMOST EVERY POINT OF VIEW, petroleum was “strategic mineral number one” during the World War that ended in 1945. Even the spectacular advent of the atomic bomb in the final days of the conflict did not displace it from its position of prime importance, although within a few years uranium will almost certainly be the “number one” material in the minds of military strategists, if it is not even now in that position. It was the ceaseless flow of petroleum from the oilfields of the United States, Venezuela, the Middle East, and a few other places of lesser importance that kept the Allied Forces in motion on land and sea and in the air, the world around, and even provided them with some of the most potent of their weapons. It was the progressive attrition of Germany’s supplies of oil that clipped the wings of the Luftwaffe and made possible the astonishingly swift advance of the Allied Forces from the periphery of Hitler’s ill-gotten empire to its nerve center in Berlin. It was the cutting of the supply lines from the oil fields of the East Indies to Japan and the exhaustion or destruction of the Japanese stores of petroleum that presaged the capitulation of the Japanese war lords, even before the bombs fell on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Verily, the Allied Powers rode to victory on a flood of oil. Now that the “shooting war” is ended, and as we turn to the distressingly difficult task of arranging a peaceful world in which men may use the rich resources of our bountiful earth for the welfare of all mankind, petroleum continues to hold its leadership among the natural resources of the earth. Both as fuel and as raw material for chemical industries, petroleum will hold the center of the stage for many years to come. Hardly any other substance illustrates so fully the manner in which science and technology may be combined to achieve the utmost success in contributing to human efficiency and comfort. Fundamental to any understanding of the problems implied by my topic is the comprehension of the fact that petroleum is a nonrenewable resource; it is in the category of nature’s stored capital, not of man’s annual income. It is, of course, true that the geologic processes responsible for oil pools are continuing to operate today as in the past. On the sea floor off the coast of southern California, for example, there are broad hollows where the tissues of marine animals and plants are now accumulating in mud and ooze at depths of 200 or 300 fathoms. The conditions are closely similar to those that recurred repeatedly during the Paleozoic era in Oklahoma and Texas, when the oil of certain rich oil fields was being generated. But millions of years must elapse before that organic material can be transformed into petroleum, stored in the interstices of overlying sandstones, and made available by crustal movements for recovery from wells to be drilled by some future inhabitants of the earth’s surface. In relation to the feverish haste of mankind’s insatiable demands, the creative processes of nature’s laboratory operate very slowly. For all practical purposes our planet must be reckoned as a storehouse of such minerals as petroleum, not as a factory in which that substance is generated year by year, or even millenium by millenium. Mother Earth has made available a cupboard richly stocked with a vast amount and a great variety of goods indispensable to us in an age of science and technology, and among these stores we find petroleum. Each year we go to the shelves of that cupboard and take away a few packages of the goods stored thereon; if we keep going long enough, some day someone

will find that the cupboard is bare. Indeed, petroleum is now being used at such a rate in relation to its total amount in the earth's crust that its complete exhaustion is, from a geological viewpoint, alarmingly imminent. Between 1859, when the first oil well was drilled in the United States, and January 1, 1947, the production of petroleum from all parts of the world has totaled nearly 52,000,000,000 barrels. Of that total, slightly more than 30,000,000,000 barrels were produced in the United States. As shown in Fig. 1, the annual production, both for the world as a whole and for the United States, has increased each year since 1938, with the sole exception of 1942, the first year of American participation in the war, and there is every indication that these increases will continue for the next few years.

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