

OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Endless Summer

By Michael Downing

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CAMBRIDGE, Mass. - CONGRESS has an amazing new scheme to cut crime, automobile fatalities and energy consumption. There is one hitch. We have to stay in bed until sunrise during the first week of November -- lights out, televisions and radios off and please stay away from that coffee maker.

Of course, doing so might interfere with breakfast, school attendance, morning workouts and jobs. That's because during that week, the sun won't rise until 7:30 a.m. at the earliest. If you live on the western edge of your time zone, **expect darkness until 8:30 a.m.** Sorry, Boise. Good night, Grand Rapids.

Congress has extended daylight saving time by four weeks: In 2007, our clocks will spring forward on the second Sunday of March and fall back on the first Sunday of November. And frankly, there may be another hitch or two in the plan.

First, the trick of shifting unused morning light to evening was intended to exploit long summer days, when sunrise occurs between 4:00 and 5:00 a.m. Standard Time -- hours of daylight that do not exist during the short days of March and November.

Second, after nearly 100 years, **daylight saving has yet to save us anything.**

The idea of **falsifying clocks** was proposed by the British architect William Willett in 1907, but the Germans were the first to try it in 1916, hoping that it would help them conserve fuel during the **First World War**. Then Britain and America gave their clocks a whirl. The **fuel savings never materialized**, and **daylight saving was so unpopular here that Congress repealed it before officially declaring an end to the war.**

That most Americans still believe we save daylight to help farmers tells you something about the quality of debate on this perennial controversy. In fact, **farmers hated daylight saving. They needed morning light to get their dairy and crops to markets, and they were powerful enough to rally popular opinion against the law.** For that reason, except during the Second World War, Congress did not dare to pass a national daylight saving policy for almost 50 years.

It was New York City that kept the practice alive, and it did so by passing a local daylight ordinance in 1919. This served the powerful department stores, which wanted evening light to tempt working people to shop on their way home. Wall Street profited, too; fast time preserved one hour of overlap with London traders, whose clocks sprung forward every year.

By 1965, 71 of the largest American cities practiced daylight saving and 59 did not. One airline reported 4,000 calls a day from customers asking what time it would be in their destination cities. The United States Naval Observatory dubbed the nation "the world's worst timekeeper."

And so in 1966, Congress passed the Uniform Time Act, which gave us six months of Standard Time and six months of daylight saving. This wise compromise has since been compromised out of existence. We now face eight months of daylight saving. Before we bargain our way into a permanent, year-round policy, we should know whom we have to thank for saving us nothing.

Richard Nixon infamously mandated year-round daylight saving in 1974 and 1975. This decision did not soften the blow of the OPEC oil embargo, but it did put school children on pitch-black streets every morning until the plan was scaled back. A Department of Transportation study concluded that Nixon's experiment yielded no definitive fuel saving. It optimistically speculated, however, that daylight saving might one day help us conserve as many as 100,000 barrels of oil a day. Based on that projection and the hope of reducing street crime, in 1986 and again this year Congress extended daylight saving by a month. But **there has been no corresponding reduction in oil consumption or crime.**

The new four-week daylight saving extension won't save fuel or lives, but it will put our clocks seriously out of sync with Europe's, costing airlines \$150 million a year. It will **foul up clocks in computers**, confuse trade with our continental neighbors and **make it impossible for many Jews to recite sunrise prayers** at home.

Sure, later sunsets will encourage Americans to go outside -- to the mall or the ballpark -- but this will only **put more cars on the road for more hours of the day. The petroleum industry recognized daylight saving's potential to increase gasoline consumption as early as 1920.** And it is a sweet deal for retailers: **candy makers have long lobbied to extend daylight saving past Halloween.** In 1986, the golf industry told Congress the extension would boost fees and retail sales by as much as \$400 million annually. The barbecue industry saw a \$150 million bonanza. And 7-Eleven convenience stores stocked up for a \$50 million rise in sales.

I am a fan of long summer evenings and of social policy that promotes conservation. But I can't promise I won't turn on a light until 8:30 in the morning. Come November, wouldn't it make more sense for Congress to leave the clocks alone, ask us to turn down our thermostats at night and maybe spring for a pair of flannel pajamas?

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