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OPINION

The inevitability of the car

BY RICH LOWRY

Americans have arrived at an answer to high gas prices and concerns about global warming -- buy more cars. According to a report in The New York Times, households with a small, gas-efficient car own, on average, almost three cars.

They are just adding the small car to their driveway fleet. The Times reports that last year more than 500,000 small models -- the Toyota Prius and Corolla and the Honda Civic -- were purchased as a second or third car. Which couldn't have been what small-car evangelists had in mind when urging people into more efficient vehicles. Ever since Henry Ford alighted on his vision of mass-produced cars affordable to the average consumer, there is no question to which Americans haven't found the answer to be more cars and more driving.

By 1930, three of four American households already owned a car. Today, more than 90 percent of even urban households

have cars, as do 80 percent of poor households. So any plan to save the planet or anything else by getting Americans to drive less is a fantasy.

The White House and top Democrats are proposing to increase mandatory fuel-economy standards for cars as a way to lessen our dependence on foreign oil and reduce greenhouse emissions. By increasing the efficiency of cars, however, they only will encourage more driving. In the Cato Institute publication Regulation, Andrew Kleit writes, "The latest estimates are that for every 10 percent increase in fuel efficiency, people increase their driving by 2 percent."

Europeans enjoy top-notch transit and endure five-dollar-per-gallon gasoline, and yet they don't drive that much less than we do," Ted Balaker and Sam Staley write in their book "The Road More Traveled." "In America, automobiles account for about 88 percent of travel, and in Europe the figure is about 78 percent. And the Europeans are gaining on us. In Europe, per capita driving

has been increasing more than twice as fast as in the States."

Mass transit is the supposed alternative to driving, but outside of the imaginations of urban planners and environmentalists (and a few large cities), it's not practical. The number of workers increased by 63 million from 1960 to 2000, according to Balaker and Staley, but 2 million fewer people took transit to get to their job. Less than 5 percent of Americans use transit to get to work, and most who do simply don't own cars.

Do all the new cars clog the roads? Sure, if no new roads are built. The amount of driving has doubled in the past few decades, but roads have hardly been expanded, and so congestion has increased 200 percent since the early 1980s. But urban areas with more roads don't have a congestion problem. "Of the 10 largest urban areas," Balaker and Staley write, "Los Angeles has the least amount of pavement per person. Dallas has twice as much pavement per person, and congestion is only half as bad as it is in L.A."

The automobile is an inevitability of modern American life. For good reason, the average American loves his cars -- each and every one of them. ■

Debate presidential

BY ROGER E. HERNANDEZ

When Univision initially invited candidates earlier this month to the first-ever presidential debate en espanol, linguo-political fires flared all over.

The Tom Tancredo campaign was eager as ever to work the we-are-being-overrun-by-Hispanics angle. A spokesman issued a statement proudly proclaiming, "I can say with 100 percent certainty that we will not be attending."

On the opposite side were Bill Richardson and Chris Dodd, eager to jump all over the chance to show off their fluent Spanish. The New Mexico governor is a native speaker, and the Connecticut senator learned while serving in the Peace Corps in the Dominican Republic.

Other candidates are still figuring out whether the Univision debate (anchors Jorge Ramos and Maria Elena Salinas ask questions in Spanish, with simultaneous translations of candidates' answers) presents an opportunity or a threat.

Representatives for John McCain, John

Edwards and Mitt Romney said that their campaigns have not decided whether to participate. Romney spokesman Alex Burgos added that the idea of reaching Hispanic voters in Spanish is something his guy "is already familiar with." The Rudy Giuliani and Barack Obama campaigns did not respond before deadline for this column.

Hillary is saying No, and giving an oddly punctilious rationale. "What we have said is that the [Democratic National Committee] has six sanctioned debates from July to December, and that during that window we were just going to participate in the six sanctioned debates," spokesman Mo Ellefthee told me.

Last week, Univision issued a clarification. The network notified candidates that under the format, nobody except the anchors will be able to speak in Spanish and thereby pre-empt the translator -- all candidates will be required to speak in English. Richardson and Dodd cooled off their initial linguistic enthusiasm and are now threatening not to participate.

Maria Elena -- who is also my colum-

nist colleague at King Features Syndicate -- defends Univision's decision to require English even from candidates fluent in Spanish. "This is a debate of all the candidates," she told me. She said her network has "plenty of other shows" where candidates can speak in Spanish, and that for this debate "it is important for us to be fair and balanced and give each candidate the same opportunity."

That a race for president of the United States is almost certainly going to feature a debate in Spanish -- even if some of the major candidates don't show up -- is a sign of the growing political power of Hispanics.

I've covered presidential campaigns going back to the Reagan victory in 1980, first as a television producer then as a columnist, starting with the Clinton victory in 1992, and have seen the number of Hispanic voters grow from 2.6 million in 1980 to 7.6 million in 2004. That latter figure represents only 18 percent of the Hispanic population, according to a study two years ago by the Pew Hispanic Center, partly because that overall population has a high number of newcomers not yet eligible to vote. As more of them become citizens, Spanish-language presidential debates are likely to become a regular feature of American political life. ■

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