
Washington needs to lead a green energy revolution

Published: Tuesday, June 5, 2007

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Surely the most glaring contrast in American political life today is the amount of words, speeches and magazine covers devoted to the necessity of "going green," "combat- ing climate change" and gaining "energy security," and the actual solutions being offered by our leaders to do any of these things. You could very comfortably drive a Hummer through the gap between our words and deeds.

We are playing pretend - which, when you think about it, is really troubling. Here are the facts: Our worst enemies, such as Iran, have been emboldened by all their petrodollars. The vast majority of scientists tell us that global warming caused by our burning of fossil fuels is a real danger. And with 3 billion new consumers from India, Russia and China joining the world economy, it is inevitable that manufacturing clean, green power systems, appliances, homes and cars will be the next great global industry. It has to be, or we will not survive as a species.

And yet our president and our Congress still won't give us an energy bill that would create the legal and economic framework to address these issues at the speed and scale required.

If you were President Bush, wouldn't you want to leave behind something big, bold and important on energy, just in case - you know, just in case - Iraq doesn't turn out so well?

I sure would. But the president still has not challenged Congress or the country to undertake a radical departure on energy. So we still have only "energy politics," not "energy policy." Like previous energy bills, the packages working through the House and Senate today represent more "the sum of all lobbies," as the energy expert Gal Luft, co-chairman of the Set America Free Coalition, puts it, not the sum of our best ideas.

Some lawmakers are pushing corn ethanol from Iowa, either because they hail from that area and are looking to give more welfare to farmers by wasting money on an alternative fuel that will never reach the scale of what is needed, or because they plan to run in the Iowa caucuses. Others are pushing huge subsidies to turn coal into gasoline, because they come from coal states. Those who don't come from Michigan want higher mileage standards imposed on Detroit, while those who come from Michigan prefer to continue their assisted suicide of the U.S. auto industry by blocking tougher mileage requirements.

"The only green that they are serious about in Congress right now is the one with Ben Franklin's picture on it," Luft said.

Yes, it is helpful that Bush expressed a desire last week to work with other nations to limit greenhouse gases. His bully pulpit matters. But no one will - or should - take him seriously unless his government first leads by example. What would that

look like? It has to start with a clear, long-term price signal. That is, a carbon tax or gasoline tax - or a cap and trade system with a binding national ceiling on carbon dioxide emissions - which would set a price for dumping carbon into the atmosphere or driving a gas-guzzling car.

Get Washington to signal that gasoline is never going to retreat from a level of \$3.50 or \$4 a gallon - and that wind and solar subsidies will be there for a decade, not stop and start as they always have before; get Washington to commit to buying a fixed volume of solar and wind power for government buildings and Army bases for 10 years, with only U.S.-based manufacturers able to compete for contracts; get Washington to set a new fleet average of 35 miles per gallon for Detroit within 10 years - with no loopholes; establish government loan guarantees for any company that wants to build a nuclear power plant; and, finally, build a national transmission grid - a green power superhighway - so that solar energy from Arizona or wind from Wyoming can power homes in Chicago. Do all that and our private sector will take America from green laggard to green leader.

Unfortunately, Congress is brewing instead a hodgepodge of incrementalism. This is particularly disappointing when America's corporate icons - GM, GE, AIG, DuPont, PepsiCo - ``have all come out in favor of a national mandatory limit on carbon emissions," notes Fred Krupp, president of Environmental Defense. ``But Democrats and Republicans in the Senate have not risen to their challenge."

We have a multigenerational problem that requires a systemic, multigenerational response, and that can happen only if we get our energy prices right. Only that will guarantee green innovation and commercialization at scale.

Anything less is wasted breath and wasted money.

Thomas Friedman is a columnist for The New York Times.