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The Amazing Energy Race

By [THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN](#)

President Obama delivered his most important national security and jobs speech last week. I think he also mentioned something about climate change.

The headline from Obama's speech was his decision to cut America's carbon emissions by bypassing a dysfunctional Congress and directing the Environmental Protection Agency to implement cleaner air-quality standards. If the rules are enacted — they will face many legal challenges — it would hasten our switching from coal to natural gas for electricity generation. Natural gas emits about half the global-warming carbon dioxide of coal, and it is in growing supply in our own country. As a result of market forces alone, coal has already fallen from about one-half to one-third of America's electric power supply.

But I would not get caught up in the anti-carbon pollution details of the president's speech. I'd focus on the larger messages. The first is that we need to reorder our priorities and start talking about the things that are most consequential for our families, communities, nation and world. That starts with how we're going to power the global economy at a time when the planet is on track to grow from seven billion to nine billion people in 40 years, and most of them will want to live like Americans, with American-style cars, homes and consumption patterns. If we don't find a cleaner way to grow, we're going to smoke up, choke up and burn up this planet so much faster than anyone predicts. That traffic jam on the Beijing-Tibet highway in 2010 that stretched for 60 miles, involved 10,000 vehicles and took 10 days to unlock is a harbinger of what will come.

“In reducing coal's historic dominance, the president is formalizing a market trend that was already taking shape,” remarked Andy Karsner, who was an assistant secretary of energy in the last Bush administration. His bigger message, though, was “no matter where you find yourself on the political spectrum, it's useful for the nation to discuss, debate and consider a strategy for climate change. The consequences of inaction are potentially greater than all the other noise out there.”

Sadly, many Republican “leaders” rejected Obama’s initiative, claiming it would cost jobs. Really? Marvin Odum, the president of the Shell Oil Company, told me in an interview that phasing out coal for cleaner natural gas — and shifting more transport, such as big trucks and ships, to natural gas instead of diesel — “is a no-brainer, no-lose, net-win that you can’t fight with a straight face.”

But, remember, natural gas is a fine gift to our country if, and only if, we extract it in a way that does not leak methane into the atmosphere (methane being worse than carbon dioxide when it comes to global warming) and if, and only if, we extract it in ways that don’t despoil land, air or water. The Environmental Defense Fund is working with big oil companies, like Shell, to ensure both.

But there is one more huge caveat: We also have to ensure that cheap natural gas displaces coal but doesn’t also displace energy efficiency and renewables, like solar or wind, so that natural gas becomes a bridge to a clean energy future, not a ditch. It would be ideal to do this through legislation and not E.P.A. fiat, but Republicans have blocked that route, which is pathetic because the best way to do it is with a Republican idea from the last Bush administration: a national clean energy standard for electricity generation — an idea the G.O.P. only began to oppose when Obama said he favored it.

Such a standard would say to every utility: “Your power plants can use any fuel and technology you want to generate electricity as long as the total amount of air pollutants and greenhouse gases they emit (in both fuel handling and its electricity conversion) meet steadily increasing standards for cleaner air and fewer greenhouse gases. **If you want to meet that standard with natural gas, sequestered coal, biomass, hydro, solar, wind or nuclear, be our guest. Let the most cost-effective clean technology win.**” [*emph. added*]

By raising the standard a small amount every year, we’d ensure continuous innovation in clean power technologies — and jobs that are a lot better than coal mining. You can’t make an appliance, power plant, factory or vehicle cleaner without making it smarter — with smarter materials, smarter software or smarter designs. Nothing would do more to ensure America’s national security, stimulate more good jobs and global exports — the whole world needs these technologies — than a national clean energy standard. And, of course, the climate would hugely benefit.

Improving our energy system plays to our innovation strength. Clinging to our fossil-fuel past plays to the strengths of Russia and Iran. Why would we do that? Why would the

G.O.P.? It's already losing young voters. Question: How many college campuses today have environmental clubs and how many have coal clubs?

“The Germans and the Chinese are already in this clean energy race, and we’re still just talking about it,” said Hal Harvey, the chief executive of Energy Innovation. “The question is: Do we want to control our energy future, or continue to rent it from other countries?”