

Tell President Obama About Coal River Mountain

Coal River Mountain and the Heathrow Airport runway remind me how important it is to keep our eye on the ball.

Coal River Mountain is the site of an absurdity. I learned about Coal River Mountain from students at Virginia Tech last fall. They were concerned about Coal River Mountain, but at that time most of them were working to support Barack Obama. They assumed Barack Obama would not allow such outrages to continue.

The issue at Coal River Mountain is whether the top of the mountain will be blown up, so that coal can be dredged out of it, or whether the mountain will be allowed to stand. It has been shown that more energy can be obtained from a proposed wind farm, if Coal River Mountain continues to stand. More jobs would be created. More tax revenue would flow, locally and to the state, and the revenue flow would continue indefinitely. Clean water and the environment would be preserved. But if planned mountaintop removal proceeds, the mountain loses its potential to be a useful wind source (<http://www.coalriverwind.org/> <http://www.crmw.net/>).

There are two major requirements for solving the global warming problem:

(1) rapid phase-out of coal emissions, and (2) a substantial, rising price on carbon emissions.

Election night euphoria is subsiding. Now we are in a tricky situation. The President faces enormous tasks, so he must be given time. But directions, once set, are hard to change. Clarity about what is needed is important. Young people (who deserve a large share of credit for helping Obama get the nomination and win the election) had better ask what is happening.

The answer, or so it seems: not much. If that impression is right, there had better be a hue and cry soon, or the opportunity for fundamental change may be missed.

Action 1. The important thing needed quickly is a moratorium on new coal. Coal River Mountain is just one example of the idiocy that is proceeding. I am swamped by requests to write letters. Can you believe that Nevada, with all its sunshine, wind and geothermal energy, is going ahead with plans for new coal-fired power plants? So is South Dakota, South Carolina, etc. I could harp about the greenwashed (or worse) politicians, but what is the point of that? Now, given the election that has occurred, it should be possible to solve the problem. Solution is possible, but will it happen? The national government has all the power that it needs to, in effect, declare a moratorium on any new coal plants that do not capture and store the CO₂.

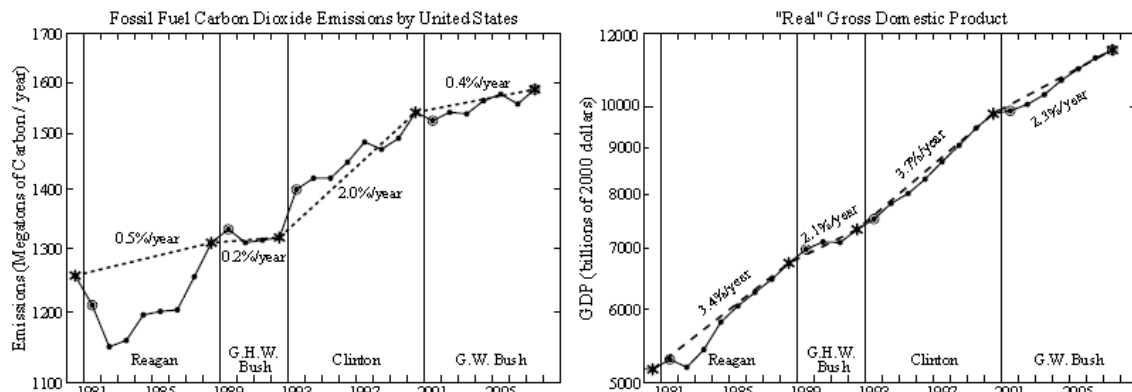
Action 2. The other essential action is imposition of a rising carbon price. Is Barack Obama going to explain the need for a substantial and rising carbon tax on coal, oil and gas in his first Fireside Chat? Or will the matter be brushed aside, with a pretense that the world can be moved in a fundamentally different direction by tweaking Kyoto-style approaches? In order to move to the world beyond fossil fuels, there must be a strong economic incentive to do so, and the business community must realize that we mean business. The tax does not have to start out large, though it should be substantial. It has to be a tax that covers all fossil fuels. It should not be a cap-and-trade that allows some carbon to escape, and makes Wall Street millionaires on the backs of the public.

Reasons for concern:

1. The big action so far is the indication that the government will demand fuel efficient cars. That is an important action. It will not prevent the world's major oil pools from being used, but efficiency helps buy time, so we can move toward carbon-free vehicle propulsion. Absent improved efficiency, there would be pressure to squeeze oil out of coal, tar shale, etc. – disasters that must be nipped in the bud. However, note that the vehicle efficiency action will only truly

succeed if Action 2 (carbon tax) occurs. Demand for highly fuel efficient vehicles will be limited (not large enough to drive a thriving economy) unless fuel price makes them essential. People will need money in hand to buy them – one of the reasons for 100% dividend (another: the public will not accept a large enough tax if Washington and lobbyists are going to decide where the money goes).

2. Jesse Ausubel makes a case that government policies don't matter much – the energy-fossil fuel situation determines things. Let's look at data for fossil fuel emissions and the economy:



Data sources: (left) Marland, G., T.A. Boden, and R.J. Andres. 2008. Global, Regional, and National Fossil Fuel CO₂ Emissions. In *Trends: A Compendium of Data on Global Change*. Carbon Dioxide Information Analysis Center, Oak Ridge National Laboratory, U.S. Department of Energy, Oak Ridge, Tenn., U.S.A. (http://cdiac.ornl.gov/trends/emis/tre_usa.html) (right) U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis, National Economic Accounts (<http://www.bea.gov/national/index.htm#gdp>)

The numbers on these graphs are misleading. Emissions and economic growth in the first year of a President's term probably should be credited to (blamed on) the prior President. In that case the numbers become:

Annual Growth Rates for:	CO ₂ emissions	Real GDP
1981 → 1989 (Reagan)	1.2%	3.5%
1989 → 1993 (Bush, G.H.W.)	1.3%	1.9%
1993 → 2001 (Clinton)	1.1%	3.5%
2001 → 2007 (Bush, G.W.)	0.7% (first 6 years)	2.6% (first 6 years)

The CO₂ emissions support Ausubel's thesis, but the period covered was all business-as-usual. There is such a thing as free will. With coal phase-out and a rising price on carbon emissions, the curve can be changed fundamentally, and move downward fast. But it will not happen as a consequence of "goals" and weak cap-and-trade measures -- and a temporary downturn of emissions due to economic slowdown should not be misinterpreted as fundamental change.

Conclusion

We are only weeks into the Obama administration. But people are getting restive. I have been asked to speak at or support several different actions, in different parts of the country, by young people and not so young. I don't know what to say. I feel that more time must be given. But these people are right – the directions that are taken now are important.

Someone needs to tell President Obama: Coal River Mountain is a symbol of the promise and the hope and the possibilities for a brighter future. As he begins to address the nation's energy, climate and economic challenges, he needs to remember these people, among his core original supporters. They are counting on him to change direction – a real change.

Post Script: Apology to UK Environmentalists

I have relearned a basic lesson re interviews – which will have to be fewer and more guarded. I recall giving only one interview to UK media this year, but perhaps it was two. One resulting story was that I said the climate problem must be solved in four years – of course, what I meant to say was that we needed to start moving in a fundamentally different direction during President Obama's first term. CO₂ in the air will continue to increase in those four years – we are not going to take the vehicles off the roads or shut down commerce.

I must have said something dumber in response to a question about air travel. Special apologies to people working in opposition to expansion of Heathrow Airport – I had no intention of damaging their case. All I intended to say was that aviation fuel is not a killer for the climate problem – at worst case we can use carbon-neutral biofuels (not current biofuels – there are ways to do biofuels right, for the fuel volume needed for global air traffic – ground transport will need a different energy source). When asked about the proposed added runway at Heathrow, I apparently said, in effect, that coal is the (climate) problem, not an added runway – in any case, what was reported angered a huge number of people, as indicated by my full e-mail inbox. I should have deferred questions on Heathrow to local experts – I am sure there are many good environmental reasons to oppose airport expansion. I am very sorry that I was not more guarded. You can be sure that in the future I will be more careful to avoid making comments that can be used against good causes.