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T. M. Power

Reducing Greenhouse Gas Emissions: Too Costly and Too Disruptive?

Some energy companies, especially coal producers, and energy-intensive industries in the United States are leading the fight against any mandatory reductions in greenhouse gas emissions. As usual, rather than base their objections on their fears about their own profits, they have tried to cast their objections in term of the public interest. Restrictions on the emission of greenhouse gases, they argue, will be unbearably costly and will disrupt the American economy and the livelihoods of millions of Americans, forcing a reduction in our standard of living.

Anyone who has thought much about Americans' energy use realizes that halting the rise in greenhouse gas emissions and then dramatically reducing those emissions will take a major overhaul in our energy infrastructure and in our patterns of energy use. Nothing short of a technological revolution will allow us to meet the greenhouse gas reduction goals scientists tell us we must reach if the world our children and grandchildren face is going to be a familiar and hospitable one. In that, the critics of mandatory reductions in greenhouse gases are correct: It will take major investments and significant economic changes.

But before concluding that that means that it will be disruptively costly and will impoverish us, we need to look back over other the many other major changes in our economy and lifestyles that have taken place during the last century . When we do, we see a much more adaptive and innovative society than the one the business critics of greenhouse gas reductions seem to believe in

At the turn of the 20th century, the primary source of greenhouse gases from our transportation system came from the manure and flatulence of horses. Thirty years later we were well into the era of the truck and private automobile. That transformation required massive investments in the building of the automobile industry, the development of petroleum deposits, the building of refineries to produce gasoline, the establishment of a nationwide network of gasoline stations, and the building and paving of a nationwide highway system. That infrastructure allowed our cities to spill over into sprawling suburbs, requiring still more investment in new housing, new commercial districts, and new highways. The industrial structure and economic geography of the nation changed dramatically. The massive cost of this transformation, however, did not impoverish the nation, quite the contrary.

Jump forward to the last quarter of the 20th century when computers and a revolution in telecommunications shifted the nation into a post-industrial world. Computers used to be the domain of research institutes where their mainframe computers filled large buildings and were accessed by only a tiny number of super-geeks. Now those computers are in nearly every home and business and they help operate our cars and most of our other appliances. The Internet has become the dominant way we communicate, entertain ourselves, and conduct commerce. Wireless telecommunications is pervasive to the point of being obnoxious. This too took massive investments in new computer equipment that had to be replaced every few years, extending a fiber optic cable network to almost every community, communication satellites, and a nationwide grid of cellular telephone towers. Somehow our businesses, schools, households, and government organizations were able to accumulate the funds

and cover those costs. Doing so did not bankrupt us or irreparably damage the economy. Again, quite the opposite.

A more depressing example of the costs our economy has been able to bear without breaking down and impoverishing us is found in the cost of the Iraq war. That five-year old fiasco has already cost the nation over \$500 billion. That is about \$100 billion dollars for each year so far. \$340 million per day during this last year. A total of almost \$5,000 per American household so far.

When Americans are faced with an important challenge, we have shown that we can organize ourselves, mobilize the necessary resources, and meet that challenge. We did it during World War II when in just half a decade we mobilized a depression-era broken down industrial system to become the industrial center of the world that produced thousands of military airplanes, hundreds of battleships, and the military supplies necessary to arm the Allies to defeat Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan. That cost an astronomical amount of wealth and resources. What it did not do is destroy the American economy or permanently set back our standard of living.

We and our economy have repeatedly shown that we have the smarts, the discipline, the entrepreneurial energy, and the innovative technologies to make dramatic changes in relatively short periods of time. We can mobilize capital, invest it wisely, and accomplish things that were unimaginable before we put our moral courage, commitment, and minds to it.

We, working with the rest of the world, can do the same thing in coping with the threat of global warming. Our economy is strong and innovative enough. We are smart and adaptable enough. But what we have lacked so far is the leadership to begin to

organize ourselves to do what we have to do if we want to leave a hospitable world for our grandchildren to enjoy. Wringing our hands over the imagined burden of the economic cost is just a ruse to try to confuse or scare us out of doing what we most certainly can do and what we have to do.