The Hightower LOWDOWN
Edited by Jim Hightower and Phillip Frazer ◆ Vol.11 No.8 ◆ August 2009

"[We must] democratize energy through the creation of a radically different energy infrastructure and market where supply is not controlled by a handful of utilities, but by every individual household."
— U.S. REP. MIKE HONDA (D-CA)
June 24, 2009

We don't need Big Fossil Fuel Inc. to build a new energy system

Renewable energy can green America's environment, economy, and democracy

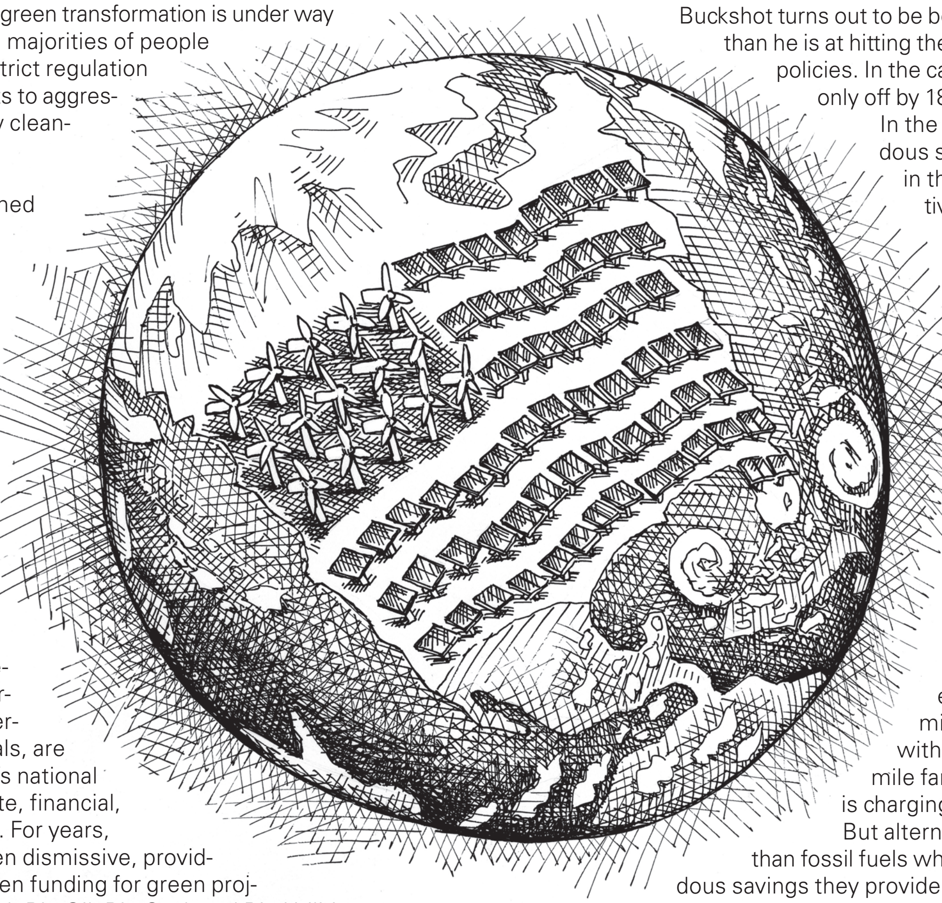
THE BIBLE TELLS US THAT ON THE SIXTH DAY, God created man, allowing him to live in the lush Garden of Eden and be steward of the whole Earth. That hasn't worked out so well. As we can see all around us, God's great mistake on that day was failing to demand a damage deposit before turning the place over to such a calamitous creature.

What a mess we've made.

At last, though, humankind seems to grasp the fact that we're perilously close to environmental catastrophe, and governments around the world are beginning to respond. A green transformation is under way as growing majorities of people demand everything from strict regulation of climate-change pollutants to aggressive development of a new clean-energy economy.

As you would expect, America—with its unmatched resources, technological prowess, entrepreneurial inclination, quality workforce, and can-do spirit—is on top of this sweeping transformation, leading the world to a bright and fruitful future.

HA-HA-HA! Just kidding. Of course, for all those reasons, we *should* expect that our country would be way out front on the exciting frontier of a new green economy and green culture. And indeed, individual pioneers and creative groups, along with forward-thinking mayors, governors, and other local officials, are on the move. But America's national leaders—political, corporate, financial, and media—have failed us. For years, they've dillydallied and been dismissive, providing only lip service and token funding for green projects while locking arms with Big Oil, Big Coal, and Big Utilities to block any real change. Dick Cheney pretty well summed up their attitude in 2001, when he snidely said that energy-conserving approaches might be "a sign of personal virtue, but [they are] not a sufficient basis for a sound, comprehensive energy policy."



Price, environment, jobs

Buckshot turns out to be better at shooting lawyers than he is at hitting the target on sound energy policies. In the case of renewables, he was only off by 180°.

In the past few years, tremendous strides have been made in the development of alternative-fuel technologies, mostly by a world community of freelance inventors, small companies, co-ops, professors, backyard mechanics, and a few mad scientists. Solar inventors, for example, have lowered the cost of sun-powered electricity almost to the point where its price is competitive with power from coal-fired utilities. Likewise, advances in lithium-ion batteries will soon allow electric cars to travel 100 miles before recharging, with the electricity cost per mile far cheaper than Exxon is charging for gasoline.

But alternatives are already cheaper than fossil fuels when we factor in the tremendous savings they provide in the health and environmental costs we are now paying for oil and coal. The carbon giants cavalierly pass on their multibillion-dollar annual pollution costs to society. This means we're handing them a massive price subsidy (in addition to

THE GREAT AMERICAN BANK HEIST

Because of today's bad economy, consumers have been shifting from credit cards to debit cards as a way to control their spending. Debit transactions come right out of your bank account, and if there isn't enough money on deposit, the bank's computers cancel your purchase.

But now, banks have created "overdraft protection" programs that let debit-card customers charge more money to the card than they have in their accounts. They can do this without telling you.

Thus, you might buy a $50 thingamajig with your card, when you have only $40 in your account. The transaction goes through, but—*Pow!*—your bank automatically hits you with a $35 overdraft fee. Do that three times in a day and you've lost $105. And if you don't pay off that overdraft on time—*Pow!*—a $35 late fee.

How about bounced-check fees? This giant money-maker yielded about $32 billion for the banks last year. But these days, folks are being more careful not to bounce checks, so banks have cranked up their bounced-check fees to as high as $39.

Meanwhile, Bank of America has doubled its basic checking-account fee, and Citibank charges up to 29.99% interest on credit cards.

Why have the big banks become such fee-grubbers? Because they've failed at the core business of banking, which is to make good loans. The fees they charge you and me now total 53% of the industry's annual income!

Bank bosses should wear masks to work!

For more information, contact Americans for Financial Reform at *www.ourfinancialsecurity.org.*

the billions of dollars annually that they also get from us in regulatory, tax, and direct subsidies). If the dirty-fuel corporations had to account for their pollution costs, there's no way they could be competitive with clean-energy producers today.

One other big plus of going green is that it will give a beautiful blue-green hue to our economy—a hue derived from something that old energy can't match: the money that will come with the jobs green energy will generate. Good jobs, and great numbers of them.

This goes counter to the political B.S. that the fossil-fuel lobby has been putting out. Oh, they wail, this rush to renewables will hurt America's workers by eliminating jobs in oil refineries, strip mines, etc. "*Save the workers!*" they cry. Such a show of compassion for labor might be heartwarming if these same corporate interests had not spent the past couple of decades ruthlessly slashing hundreds of thousands of jobs while relentlessly busting the wages, benefits, and unions of the declining workforce that remains.

While those corporations have been cutting workers as fast as they can, the new energy pioneers have been creating thousands of new jobs, with the promise of millions more to come. Even though solar, wind, geothermal, biomass, battery power, and other alternatives are fledgling energy sources that are just now taking flight, they are already a bright spot for job creation. Researchers at the Pew Center for the People and the Press, for example, recently did a hard count of actual jobs created in all 50 states in the past decade, finding that clean-energy jobs grew nearly two-and-a-half times faster than those produced by all other sectors.

More specifically, the Apollo Alliance, a grassroots coalition working with state and local governments to implement renewable policies, reported in a May 2008 article that financial investment in solar and wind projects creates 50% more jobs than the same amount of money put into coal projects. A similar study by the Center for American Progress found that renewable investments create four times as many jobs as does an equivalent level of capital put into the oil industry.

Aggressively displacing workers with computerized facilities and high-cost machinery, today's extractive-energy corporations have been making their industry extremely capital-intensive. Green energy, on the other hand, is labor-intensive, employing not only engineers and scientists but also huge numbers of skilled steelworkers, machinists, electricians, pipe fitters, operating engineers, sheet-metal workers, carpenters, laborers, and others. This is why such worker advocates as the United Steelworkers union are so enthusiastically in support of the new green economy.

"Union members are already working to build the clean-energy economy, whether producing wind turbine blades in Pennsylvania or producing solar panels in Tennessee," said David Foster, executive director of the Blue Green Alliance, a national partnership of labor unions and environmental organizations working to expand the number and quality of jobs in the clean-energy economy. "Transitioning to a clean-energy economy will create good jobs here in the United States using the skills that factory workers already have, while fighting global warming and reducing our dependence on foreign oil."

This new energy can create a full-employment economy, including training and work programs for unemployed and low-income folks in our inner cities and rural areas. Van Jones, who headed the grassroots Green For All advocacy group and is now Barack Obama's green-jobs advisor, succinctly expresses this exciting possibility: "We have an opportunity to connect the people who most need work with the work that most needs to be done, and fight pollution and poverty at the same time, and be one country about it."

DoSomething!

For more information, check out the following websites:

Some of the best work on the potential to decentralize and democratize America's energy supply is being done by the **Institute for Local Self-Reliance in Minneapolis**. Contact these good folks at: *www.ilsr.org* or at 612-379-3815.

Also, the **Rocky Mountain Institute** in Snowmass, Colorado, has done much visionary thinking and work on implementing "micropower" systems that return control of energy to the grassroots. Contact them at: *www.rmi.org* or at 970-927-3851.

Finally, the **Blue Green Alliance** has reports and action updates on efforts across the country to create green jobs. You can find them at *www.bluegreenalliance.org* or at 612-466-4479.

Global greenpower

Despite all of these plusses, Team USA is a laggard in the global reach for a green future. Even in technological innovation (an area we once owned), America's high-tech corporations, universities, and federal agencies are huffing and puffing well back in the pack today. For example, of the world's top 30 companies producing solar-photovoltaic systems, wind turbines, and advanced batteries, only six fly the red, white, and blue.

Who's out front? Some unlikely suspects. For example, incredible as it might seem, such oil-soaked monarchies as Abu Dhabi and Saudi Arabia are pouring billions of dollars into the design and deployment of clean-energy technologies. The crown prince of tiny Abu Dhabi is investing $15 billion in renewables—the same sum that Obama has proposed for the whole of our country. Abu Dhabi is also constructing a totally green $22-billion city in the desert. Named Masdar (The Source), this city is intended to have zero carbon emissions.

Even with Obama's recent commitments, the U.S. invests less in renewables than Germany—a country with one-third our population and an economy less than a fourth of our size. Most of Europe outpaces America's commitment to renewables, including such small nations as Denmark.

But sprinting ahead of all is—*surprise!*—a country that is so consumed by fossil fuels that its citizens are literally choking on coal contamination: China. To counter this extreme pollution, top government and business officials in the People's Republic are committing beaucoup billions of dollars a year for a national conversion to renewables, intending in the process to become the global superpower of green energy.

This year, China quietly zipped past the U.S. as the world's top consumer of wind energy. This is not by accident. Two years ago, the Chinese leadership set strict renewable mandates for utilities and poured capital into wind projects. The goal was to produce 5,000 megawatts of wind power (the equivalent of eight big coal-fired plants) by the end of 2010, and to achieve 30,000 megawatts of wind energy by 2020. However, this push has been embraced so enthusiastically by all involved that the 2020 goal will be reached next year, a decade ahead of schedule—and way ahead of our country.

Similarly, China is now the world's number-one manufacturer of solar panels. And here's another surprise—this year, China will overtake Japan as the world's largest automaker, specializing in small, well-built, fuel-sipping, cleaner-energy vehicles.

Last May, President Obama made a big show of announcing that by 2016, U.S. cars must average 35.5 miles per gallon. Chinese-made cars already exceed that. And only one week after Obama's big fuel-efficiency announcement, China one-upped him by declaring that its vehicles will average 42 miles per gallon by 2015. Chinese carmakers also expect to have a mass-market, plug-in electric vehicle on sale next year.

America must win!

The weak performance by our leaders has led to an eruption of "America First" cheerleading by many well-meaning politicians, pundits, profit seekers, and policy pushers. Most of them analyze the situation correctly—with so much at stake and so many resources at our disposal, it's damn near criminal that our leaders are doing so little to lead the development of a global green economy.

Too many of them, however, then proceed to trivialize the historic importance of such a shift by casting it as some sort of Green Superbowl that the home team must "win." Sounding like an over-the-top ESPN game-day announcer, *New York Times* columnist Tom Friedman keeps yelling that "we're in an Earth race," urging our team to defeat the rest of the world and dominate the green-technology market.

Likewise, venture-capital operator and high-tech guru John Doerr comes across as a frenetic football coach at halftime giving the "Gipper" speech to spur his charges to global victory. In recent congressional testimony, Coach Doerr declared that green energy is going to be "the mother of all markets" and that "what's at stake is whether America will be the worldwide winner."

Then, to rally the team of lallygagging lawmakers, he boomed out his punch line: "With your leadership we can do this. Yes we can. Yes we must."

Well, pep talks have their place, but chanting "USA! USA!" misses the point—and the opportunity—of green development. The U.S. most certainly should lead, but not because our corporations and speculators can commoditize, monetize, securitize, and monopolize the whole concept. This reduces "green" to its narrowest and most crass meaning: money. America will fail, and our nation's moral standing in the world will be further tarnished, if we approach the renewable revolution as nothing but a chance to win, to control, to sell more stuff. That's the Exxon/Pentagon model, and it makes a mockery of our country's most fundamental values of fairness, justice, and equal opportunity for all.

The greening of our earth is a matter of technology, carbon reduction, market share, and economic growth—but it's also (and especially) a matter of our society's values and vision. Breaking with America's addiction to fossil fuels gives us an extraordinary opportunity to break with a few other destructive habits as well, starting with these three:

WIN, OR YOU LOSE. What if the USA does not become the "Number One, Gold Medal, Blue Ribbon, Worldwide Winner" in green-technology sales? Does that make us a loser? No. And if we do become number one, does that make every other nation a loser? Of course not. Yes, we must compete, and we should get our share by doing our share, but let's stay focused—the goal is a green earth, which will make all of us winners. Our world will be a better place on many levels if we think less about win-lose and more about how we can cooperate for the benefit of all. This is an area in desperate need of American leadership.

BIGGER IS BETTER. Everyone from T. Boone Pickens to the communist leaders of China are viewing green energy in terms of the same old massive, centralized, corporatized structural model. The core of Obama's plan for renewables, for example, is to build a new, unified, and computerized national electricity grid of high-voltage transmission lines, and his economic-stimulus package provides $11 billion for a start on this.

From John Doerr to Al Gore, proponents of this national "smart" grid insist that it is key to bringing renewables "up to scale." By putting such a grid in place, they tell us, the electricity generated by huge wind farms centralized in the Northern Plains and huge solar installations centralized in the Southwest can be distributed as needed all across the country.

But why should we do that? Huge, centralized projects require equally huge corporations, owned by faraway speculators, to run them. This means that unaccountable, unreachable corporate giants would continue to control our essential sources of energy. That's not green… or smart.

For roughly the same price per kilowatt, you can produce renewable electricity with solar panels on your roof and wind generators in your community. Instead of building another centralized energy system that puts a handful of Exxons or Exelons in charge, the switch to green gives Americans a rare oppor-

The Hightower LOWDOWN

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THE INTERMINABLE PRICE OF WAR

On the last day of June, the U.S. commander in Iraq transferred military authority to the government of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, who held a day of national celebration. Then, America skedaddled. There was no "mission accomplished" moment, even though 4,300 American troops gave their lives for the mission—and things are still a big mess over there, both militarily and politically—but at least we're through with it.

Only…we're not. First, only about 30,000 of America's soldiers in Iraq have actually left, and the Pentagon says it plans to keep 50,000 troops stationed there for years to come.

Then there's the little matter of being stuck with the bill. Rather than paying for the war as we went, George W and Congress put the whole thing on the nation's credit card. According to two top economic analysts, Linda Bilmes and Joseph Stiglitz, the direct tab for that war is already at a trillion dollars. Add on the interest payments on the war debt, replenishment of military equipment, and long-term care for the 80,000 troops who've been wounded or traumatized, and the bill comes to some $3 trillion. We won't be "through" with Iraq for generations to come.

Meanwhile, after our military machine was diverted to Iraq in 2003, Afghanistan's Taliban was free to grow stronger than ever. Obama and Congress have committed about 60,000 U.S. troops and $24 billion this year to the carnage in that harsh land.

It's a hell of a price to pay for…well , for what, exactly?

HOOSIERS PAY FOR PRIVATIZATION

It was a proud day for the governor. In December 2006, he declared, "No decision we've made is more clearly in the public interest."

Gosh, if that was his best decision, I'd hate to see one of his bad ones.

He's Mitch Daniels, governor of Indiana and an ideological absolutist on privatizing government, and he was announcing his plan to outsource that state's administration of food stamps, Medicaid, and other welfare benefits for poor folks. No need for all those government caseworkers, Daniels declared. Their jobs can be done the corporate way—with efficient computers and call centers.

IBM was given a $1.1 billion contract from the state to take charge. Taxpayers, boasted the governor, will reap "a billion dollars in savings," while low-income families will enjoy the stellar service of the private sector.

Now, more than two years into the task, IBM's accomplishments include lost paperwork, frustrating runarounds, poorly trained staff, inadequate equipment, and rejection of qualified applicants. The rate of mishandled food-stamp cases, for example, has more than tripled since IBM took over.

To fix this mess, the state has now issued a list of 200 reforms that IBM must achieve, giving it until September to shape up. The changes include hiring additional staff and managers, which will eliminate much of the highly touted "savings" that privatization was to bring. A state official said: "It's possible we'd have to cancel the contract."

The so-called "efficiencies" of privatization are actually achieved by short-changing service and eliminating the personal touch.

tunity to restructure and democratize the energy economy so ownership is localized, financial benefits are broadly shared, and economic power is decentralized. If we've learned anything from our national experience with the oil and coal industries, it is that bigger has not been better for America—and here's the chance to break with it.

WE MUST GROW THE ECONOMY. So much damage (environmental, economic, ethical, and other) has been done by our leaders' insistence that we march in lockstep under this false flag of "progress." George W, for example, professed that his tinkle-down economic policies were wholly justifiable because they would "make the pie higher." Sure enough, the pie grew during his term, but the people's slice shrank. Yes, America grew wealthier, but Americans did not. *This is progress?*

Yet the growth imperative still pervades our culture and clouds rational thinking. One startling example is the current push by giant food corporations to adulterate the meaning of our national organic-food label by using a broad array of nonorganic, synthetic ingredients—and still label their stuff "organic."

You'd think that the food industry would view this label as a means of earning the trust of consumers. But no. Barbara Robinson, a Bush holdover who still heads the U.S. Agricultural Department's organic certification program, has declared that the label's main purpose is to "grow the industry." A consultant to Kraft Foods chimed in with the wide-open thought that the concept of "organic" must be broadened to include ever-heavier doses of synthetics because "we don't want to eliminate anyone who wants to be part of the organic community."

Be your own electric utility

IN 2002, PETER BUCKNER bought an **all-electric Toyota Rav4EV** for his daily commute across the San Francisco Bay Bridge. To "fill up," he simply plugs the vehicle into a wall socket in his garage, and the batteries are charged overnight. Freed from fluctuating gasoline prices, and having a near-zero maintenance car, Pete has since invested in rooftop solar panels to offset the increase in his electricity bill. He had figured out that the family's house, which he shares with his wife and two daughters, has a roof area of about 1,000 square feet—enough to accommodate **an array of 24 photovoltaic cell panels**. These panels weigh no more than asphalt shingles, and the full array cost him about **$20,000 after rebates**. It took only three days to install the panels and connect a conduit from the roof to the meter in Pete's garage. The solar system now powers not only the electric SUV, but also the whole house, including the usual complement of TVs, computers, video games, and other electronic gizmos. During the day (even foggy San Francisco days), the excess electricity for their home coming from the solar panels turns the utility meter backwards. Last year, **the family's net cost for all household electricity and for powering their car was $300**.

I see. They want organic production to grow, even if it's not organic! This Alice-in-Wonderland perversion of logic is yet another expression of the "we want it all" ethic that is knocking America for a loop.

The Earth itself is telling us that there are very real physical limits to growth and that the planet's "carrying capacity" for human activity is fast being surpassed. We can no longer allow economists, corporate chieftains, politicians, the business media, and others to tell us that every increase in our country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is happy news.

The unrestrained consumption of those products is steadily consuming our planet. Americans are by far the most voracious of consumers, but people worldwide are becoming more demanding, and the number of people on the globe is increasing by a billion every 15 years. The switch to green energy will ameliorate Earth's decline, but we (especially we Americans) must finally address our species' addiction to unsustainable and ultimately suicidal consumption.

Please note that we're not talking about plunging into a retro-Stone Age, becoming a nation of mass deprivation, but simply of being sensible in our use of the Earth and our accumulation of things. It requires us to think a bit differently and—on the upside—to recognize that less really can be more. After all, most of us would concede that constant leaps in the GDP have hardly increased our Gross Domestic Happiness.

Going green clearly can reinvigorate our economy and begin to nurture our Earth, but it also presents a favorable moment for us to reinvigorate our democracy and revive the "pursuit of happiness" as a national goal.

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