

# SOTU: Parsing Obama's 'Clean Energy' Promises

Thursday 17 March 2011, by [WYSHAM Daphne](#) (Date first published: 26 January 2011).

**The sound of the president's silence on climate change and the BP oil disaster was deafening.**

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Tellingly, President Barack Obama didn't utter the two words "climate change" once in his State of the Union speech. He did, however, mention "clean energy" several times.

Read these sentences carefully:

*"So tonight, I challenge you to join me in setting a new goal: by 2035, 80 percent of America's electricity will come from clean-energy sources. Some folks want wind and solar. Others want nuclear, clean coal, and natural gas. To meet this goal, we will need them all — and I urge Democrats and Republicans to work together to make it happen."*

What's happening behind the scenes is that Democrats and Republicans believe that a so-called "clean energy standard" is the way forward on climate change. It takes the word "standard," which environmentalists had successfully paired up with the two words "renewable energy" — as in "renewable energy standard," and perverts its meaning. What once meant a renewable energy target that the nation should shoot for — reliance on wind, solar, and other truly clean, renewable energy — is now becoming conflated with the same old dirty energy of the past: coal, nuclear power, and natural gas.

## **Code for 'Clean Coal'**

But what Obama suggests is that this is a divide to be bridged, that we can move forward with all the old, dirty forms of energy, and maybe add in some wind and solar. The truth is that "clean energy" in this instance is code for "clean coal" (an oxymoron if there ever was one), gas and nuclear power. And "clean coal" and nuclear power are so expensive that they'll starve truly clean energy options in the cradle, and will saddle future generations with debt, radioactive waste, and climate chaos.

The other goal Obama mentioned that has climate implications is high-speed rail. As oil becomes more expensive, this form of transportation will be desperately needed. So hearing this commitment — "within 25 years, our goal is to give 80 percent of Americans access to high-speed rail, which could allow you go places in half the time it takes to travel by car" — is welcome news. Will Congress follow through with funding for such a bold initiative? Don't hold your breath.

So, too, his mention of “one million electric cars” coming online is good news, but only if we have a grid that’s largely powered by clean and renewable energy. Otherwise, it simply means a greater growth in greenhouse gas emissions.

It’s worth noting that Obama made no mention of the state of scientific integrity and openness within his administration, despite making clear in his inaugural address two years ago that science had become politicized to the point of interference with sound scientific policy. Today, scientific openness remains almost as constrained as it was under the previous administration, when climate scientists were muzzled by their media handlers. Obama must take this issue on from his bully pulpit, and not leave it to the Office of Management and Budget to determine what science passes the “cost-benefit” evaluation of economists and what remains off limits for public discussion.

## **Scrapping Subsidies**

Obama did propose ending subsidies for oil companies, adding, “I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but they’re doing just fine on their own.” He also offered a catchy slogan: “Instead of subsidizing yesterday’s energy, let’s invest in tomorrow’s.”

However, as long as the Citizens United Supreme Court ruling stands allowing unlimited campaign contributions from corporations, including large oil companies, it’s unlikely that Congress will embrace this proposal.

Obama made no mention of the worst oil spill in U.S. history which occurred less than a year ago. It’s also worth noting that the recommendations that emerged from the oil spill commission’s findings on the BP oil disaster will require a Congress not beholden to the oil industry to act on those recommendations. Without action, a catastrophe like the BP disaster is likely to recur, according to the commission.

Yet by staying silent on this spill, on the commission’s findings, as well as on the disastrous public health and environmental fallout that persists today as a result of the EPA’s decision to allow dispersants to be used in the Gulf of Mexico, Obama has let down thousands of fisher-folk and others in the region who are paying for this disaster with their livelihoods and their health.

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**P.S.**

\* The Huffington Post, Posted: January 26, 2011 01:30 PM:

[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/daphne-wysham/sotu-parsing-obamas-clean\\_b\\_814144.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/daphne-wysham/sotu-parsing-obamas-clean_b_814144.html)

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