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Coal, Not Oil, Could Be Defining Issue of 2008 Election

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We think of coal as a 19th century fuel, but it could well be an important part in solving one of the most pressing problems of the 21st century – the growing demand for energy in a time when there are severe constraints on the production of petroleum fuel stocks. At a time when Energy Independence is a political issue of increasing importance, the United States sits on the world's largest coal deposits – our nation has been called “the Saudi Arabia of Coal” - and the Air Force has developed technology for converting coal to liquid fuel that is highly efficient. Indeed, the Air Force hopes to convert its entire fleet to CTL (Coal To Liquid) fuel blends, and hopes to be flying half of its missions with the blend by 2016.

Such an achievement would have tremendous positive impact on national security, energy security, and the economy as a whole. In addition to its use by the military, CTL based jet fuels could provide an important price break to the struggling commercial airline industry. If the Air Force and the airline industry – two extremely large energy consumers - converted to CTL, there would likely be significant downward pressure on fuel prices across the entire industry, including the prices we pay at the pump. It would provide a significant boost to the coal industry, to the states where the conversion plants would be built (where new jobs constructing the plants and running them after they are built would be created), and to the airline and tourism industries.

CTL fuels burn as clean as or cleaner than traditional fuels. However, the conversion process creates additional greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions that make CTLs greater GHG emitters than petroleum based fuels. For this reason, environmentalists oppose CTL and their powerful allies in the Congress, led by House Oversight Chairman Henry Waxman, refuse to grant the Air Force a waiver to pursue their CTL goals, despite the Air Force's insistence that technology that can capture and sequester the CO2 emissions exists, and even better technology is nearing development. Another roadblock are the significant startup costs in creating the fuel – a new plant would cost \$4 to \$5 billion to construct, and multiple plants would be required. A possible political compromise would surmount this particular obstacle – acquiescing to Democrats' desire for a form of windfall profits tax on oil companies so long as the revenue was spent on building CTL plants (and other alternative fuel projects).

In an election year, the CTL issue could be a deciding one for a candidate who takes the lead on the issue. Barack Obama could use CTL to get to the right of John McCain on the energy issue. It would require that he buck the environmental establishment that is strong in his party, but that might be a good thing in the current electoral climate. Also, as opposed as the environmentalists are to coal, it provides a solution that does not rely on nuclear power or offshore drilling, which are other energy choices that McCain is championing.

That being said, CTL is a much more obvious issue – and a much stronger one - for John McCain. McCain could use the issue to decisive advantage in an Electoral College race, not only in such well known coal-mining states as West Virginia and Pennsylvania, but also in potential swing states in the 2008 election such as New Mexico, Colorado and Ohio which are, respectively, the 9th, 12th and 13th largest coal producing states in the Union. If CTL provided him with a winning margin in all five of these states, it would be very difficult if not impossible for Senator Obama to put together a winning electoral coalition.

Regardless of whether CTL becomes an election issue, it will remain an important issue for national discussion. The need for alternative energy sources demands that we consider the trade offs between the perfectly “green” energy sources that do not exist in ample quantities, and the less than perfectly green but clearly abundant resource right beneath our feet. CTL is a fuel whose time has come.

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