

## Watching China Run *(See the U.S. collapse)*

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It was primarily a symbolic gesture. Way back in 1979, in the midst of an energy crisis, Jimmy Carter had solar panels installed on the roof of the White House. They were used to heat water for some White House staffers. “A generation from now,” said Mr. Carter, “this solar heater can either be a curiosity, a museum piece, an example of a road not taken, or it can be a small part of one of the greatest and most exciting adventures ever undertaken by the American people, harnessing the power of the sun to enrich our lives as we move away from our crippling dependence on foreign oil.”

Ronald Reagan had the panels taken down.

We missed the boat then, and lord knows we’re missing it now. Two weeks ago, as I was getting ready to take off for Palo Alto, Calif., to cover a conference on the importance of energy and infrastructure for the next American economy, The Times’s Keith Bradsher was writing from Tianjin, China, about how the Chinese were sprinting past everybody else in the world, including the United States, in the race to develop clean energy.

That we are allowing this to happen is beyond stupid. China is a poor country with nothing comparable to the tremendous research, industrial and economic resources that the U.S. has been blessed with. Yet they’re blowing us away — at least for the moment — in the race to the future.

Our esteemed leaders in Washington can’t figure out how to do anything more difficult than line up for a group photo. Put Americans back to work? You must be kidding. Health care? We’ve been working on it for three-quarters of a century. Infrastructure? Don’t ask.

But, as Mr. Bradsher tells us, “China vaulted past competitors in Denmark, Germany, Spain and the United States last year to become the world’s largest maker of wind turbines and is poised to expand even further this year.”

China also has become the world’s largest manufacturer of solar panels and is pushing hard on other clean energy advances. As Mr. Bradsher wrote: “These efforts to dominate renewable energy technologies raise the prospect that the West may someday trade its dependence on oil from the Mideast for a reliance on solar panels, wind turbines and other gear manufactured in China.”

We’re in the throes of an awful and seemingly endless employment crisis, and China is the country moving full speed ahead on the development of the world’s most important new industries. I’d like one of the Washington suits to step away from the photo-op and explain the logic of that to me.

The truth, of course, is that there is no reason at all for this to be happening. The United States, in many ways, is very well prepared to move ahead on clean energy. It could and should be the world's leader. Many, if not most, of the innovations in this area were developed right here. But much of that know-how, as we are seeing in China (and have been seeing in Germany and other places), is being implemented overseas.

The conference that I attended in Palo Alto spotlighted the need to move to a low-carbon economy in the U.S. and exemplified some of the resources available to make it happen. It was sponsored by the Brookings Institution and Lazard, the investment banking advisory firm. The participants included the leaders of — and major investors in — companies that are making great strides in the alternative energy industry. But much of their business is done overseas because right now in America's wacky, dysfunctional public sector there is no clear vision of a viable clean-energy economy, and, thus, no clue about how to get there.

The network of world-class universities and advanced research institutions in the U.S. is by far the most impressive in the world: think Harvard and Stanford and Berkeley and M.I.T. and on and on. If you add to that the venture capital community in the U.S. with its vast experience and the willingness of investors to take risks, and the sheer entrepreneurial talent of the American business community, you end up with an array of resources fully capable of moving the U.S. into a low-carbon, high-growth and extraordinarily productive economy that would be the envy of the world.

But for that to happen — as Bruce Katz, a Brookings executive who was one of the organizers of the conference, pointed out — America's corporate, civic and political leaders will have to “articulate what's really at stake here.”

And what's at stake is the future of the American economy. The low-carbon era is coming. We can be dragged into that newer, greener world by leading countries like China; or we can take up the challenge and become the world's leader ourselves.

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