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OP-ED COLUMNIST

9/11 and 4/11

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I am reliably told by a Bush administration official that there is an old saying in Texas that goes like this: “If all you ever do is all you’ve ever done, then all you’ll ever get is all you ever got.”

Could anyone possibly come up with a better description of President Bush’s energy policy? America is in the midst of its worst energy crisis in years and what is the big decision our Decider has decided? Drum roll, please: Our Decider decided to lift the executive orders banning drilling for oil and natural gas off the country’s shoreline — even though he knew this was a meaningless gesture because a Congressional moratorium on drilling passed in 1981 remains in force.

The economist Paul Romer once said to me that “a crisis is a terrible thing to waste.” President Bush is well on his way to being remembered as the leader who wasted not one but two crises: 9/11 and 4/11. The average price of gasoline in the U.S. last week, according to the Energy Information Administration, was \$4.11.

After 9/11, Mr. Bush had the chance to summon the country to a great nation-building project focused on breaking our addiction to oil. Instead, he told us to go shopping. After gasoline prices hit \$4.11 last week, he had the chance to summon the country to a great nation-building project focused on clean energy. Instead, he told us to go drilling.

Neither shopping nor drilling is the solution to our problems.

What doesn’t the Bush crowd get? It’s this: We don’t have a “gasoline price problem.” We have an addiction problem. We are addicted to dirty fossil fuels, and this addiction is driving a whole set of toxic trends that are harming our nation and world in many different ways. It is intensifying global warming, creating runaway global demand for oil and gas, weakening our currency by shifting huge amounts of dollars abroad to pay for oil imports, widening “energy poverty” across Africa, destroying plants and animals at record rates and fostering ever-stronger petro-dictatorships in Iran, Russia and Venezuela.

When a person is addicted to crack cocaine, his problem is not that the price of crack is going up. His problem is what that crack addiction is doing to his whole body. The cure is not cheaper crack, which would only perpetuate the addiction and all the problems it is creating. The cure is to break the addiction.

Ditto for us. Our cure is not cheaper gasoline, but a clean energy system. And the key to building that is to keep the price of gasoline and coal — our crack — higher, not lower, so consumers are moved to break their addiction to these dirty fuels and inventors are moved to create clean alternatives.

I understand why consumers think we have a gasoline price problem — because they are immediately hurt by

higher gas prices and the pump is where most people touch our energy system. They tend not to see the bigger picture. But that is why you have a president: to explain that and lay out a response.

Alas, we have a president and a vice president who deny that climate change is hurting our environmental body, who refuse to see the connection between the dollars we are shifting abroad and the rise of petro-dictators, who do not care about biodiversity loss and who are apparently untroubled by the sharp decline in the dollar, partly because of all the money we are paying for oil imports. So, they have chosen to define this as a “gasoline price crisis” — not an-addiction-to-a-fuel-that-is-badly-hurting-us-as-a-nation crisis.

If you want to know what an alternative strategy might look like, read the speech that Al Gore delivered on Thursday to the bipartisan Alliance for Climate Protection. Gore, the alliance’s chairman, called for a 10-year plan — the same amount of time John F. Kennedy set for getting us to the moon — to shift the entire country to “renewable energy and truly clean, carbon-free sources” to power our homes, factories and even transportation.

Mr. Gore proposed dramatically improving our national electricity grid and energy efficiency, while investing massively in clean solar, wind, geothermal and carbon-sequestered coal technologies that we know can work but just need to scale. To make the shift, he called for taxing carbon and offsetting that by reducing payroll taxes: Let’s “tax what we burn, not what we earn,” he said.

Whether you agree or not with Gore’s plan, at least he has a plan for dealing with the real problem we face — a multifaceted, multigenerational energy/environment/geopolitical problem.

This moment — \$4.11 — represents Bush’s last chance for a legacy. It amazes me how inadequate his response has been. By hectoring the nation to simply drill for more oil, he has profoundly underestimated the challenges we face, misread the scale of the solutions required, underappreciated the American people’s willingness to sacrifice if presented with a real plan, and ignored the greatness that would accrue to our country if we led the world in clean power.

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