

Carbon Delirium

Michael Klare, TomDispatch | APR 1, 2014



Of all the preposterous, irresponsible headlines that have appeared on the front page of the New York Times in recent years, few have exceeded the inanity of [this one](#) [1] from early March: “U.S. Hopes Boom in Natural Gas Can Curb Putin.” The article by normally reliable reporters Coral Davenport and Steven Erlanger suggested that, by sending our surplus natural gas to Europe and Ukraine in the form of [liquefied natural gas](#) [2] (LNG), the United States could help reduce the region’s heavy reliance on Russian gas and thereby stiffen its resistance to Vladimir Putin’s aggressive behavior.

Forget that the United States currently lacks a capacity to export LNG to Europe, and will not be able to do so on a significant scale until the 2020s. Forget that Ukraine lacks any LNG receiving facilities and is unlikely to acquire any, as its only coastline is on the Black Sea, in areas dominated by Russian speakers with loyalties to Moscow. Forget as well that any future U.S. exports will be funneled into the international marketplace, and so will [favor](#) [3] sales to Asia where gas prices are 50% higher than in Europe. Just focus on the article’s central reportorial flaw: it fails to identify a single reason why future American LNG exports (which could wind up anywhere) would have any influence whatsoever on the Russian president’s behavior.

The only way to understand the strangeness of this is to assume that the editors of the Times, like senior politicians in both parties, have become so intoxicated by the idea of an American surge in oil and gas production that they have lost their senses.

As domestic output of oil and gas has increased in recent years -- largely through the use of [fracking](#) [4] to exploit hitherto impenetrable shale deposits -- many policymakers have concluded that the United States is better positioned to throw its weight around in the world. “Increasing U.S. energy supplies,” [said](#) [5] then-presidential security adviser Tom Donilon in April 2013, “affords us a stronger hand in pursuing and implementing our international security goals.” Leaders in Congress on both sides of the aisle have voiced similar views.

The impression one gets from all this balderdash is that increased oil and gas output -- like an extra dose of testosterone -- will somehow bolster the will and confidence of American officials when confronting their foreign counterparts. One former White House official cited by Davenport and Erlanger caught the mood of the moment perfectly: “We’re engaging from a different position [with respect to Russia] because we’re a much larger energy producer.”

It should be obvious to anyone who has followed recent events in the Crimea and Ukraine that increased U.S. oil and gas output have provided White House officials with no particular advantage in their efforts to counter Putin’s aggressive moves -- and that the prospect of future U.S. gas exports to Europe is unlikely to alter his strategic calculations. It seems, however, that senior U.S. officials beguiled by the mesmerizing image of a future “[Saudi America](#) [6]” have simply lost touch with reality.

For anyone familiar with addictive behavior, this sort of delusional thinking would be a sign of an advanced stage of [fossil fuel addiction](#) [7]. As the ability to distinguish fantasy from reality

evaporates, the addict persists in the belief that relief for all problems lies just ahead -- when, in fact, the very opposite is true.

The analogy is hardly new, of course, especially when it comes to America's reliance on imported petroleum. "America is addicted to oil," President George W. Bush typically [declared](#) [8] in his 2006 State of the Union address (and he was hardly the first president to do so). Such statements have often been accompanied in the media by [cartoons](#) [9] of Uncle Sam as a junkie, desperately injecting his next petroleum "fix." But few analysts have carried the analogy further, exploring the ways our growing dependence on oil has generated increasingly erratic and self-destructive behavior. Yet it is becoming evident that the world's addiction to fossil fuels has reached a point at which we should expect the judgment of senior leaders to become impaired, as seems to be happening.

The most persuasive evidence that fossil fuel addiction has reached a critical stage may be found in official U.S. data on carbon dioxide emissions. The world is now emitting one and a half times as much CO₂ as it did in 1988, when [James Hansen](#) [10], then director of the NASA Goddard Institute for Space Studies, [warned](#) [11] Congress that the planet was getting warmer as a result of the "greenhouse effect," and that human activity -- largely in the form of carbon emissions from the consumption of fossil fuels -- was almost certainly the cause.

If a reasonable concern over the fate of the planet were stronger than our reliance on fossil fuels, we would expect to see, if not a reduction in carbon emissions, then a decline at least in the rate of increase of emissions over time. Instead, the [U.S. Energy Information Administration](#) [12] (EIA) predicts that global emissions will continue to rise at a torrid pace over the next quarter century, reaching 45.5 billion metric tons in 2040 -- more than double the amount recorded in 1998 and enough, in the view of most scientists, to turn our planet into a living hell. Though seldom recognized as such, this is the definition of addiction-induced self-destruction, writ large.

For many of us, the addiction to petroleum is embedded in our everyday lives in ways over which we exercise limited control. Because of the systematic dismantling and defunding of public transportation (along with the colossal subsidization of highways), for instance, we have become highly [reliant](#) [13] on oil-powered vehicles, and it is very hard for most of us living outside big cities to envision a practical alternative to driving. More and more people are admittedly trying to kick this habit at an individual level by acquiring hybrid or all-electric cars, by [using public transit](#) [14] where available, or by bicycling, but that remains a drop in the bucket. It will take a colossal future effort to reconstruct our transportation system along climate-friendly lines. For what might be thought of as the Big Energy equivalent of the 1%, the addiction to fossil fuels is derived from the thrill of riches and power -- something that is far more difficult to resist or deconstruct. Oil is the world's most lucrative commodity on the planet, and a source of [great wealth](#) [15] and influence for ruling groups in the countries that produce it, notably Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Nigeria, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Venezuela, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States. The leaders of these "[petro-states](#) [16]" may not always benefit personally from the accumulation of oil revenues, but they certainly recognize that their capacity to govern, or even remain in power, rests on their responsiveness to entrenched energy interests and their skill in deploying the nation's energy resources for political and strategic advantage. This is just as true for Barack Obama, who has [championed](#) [17] the energy industry's drive to increase domestic oil and gas output, as it is for Vladimir Putin, who has sought to [boost](#) [18] Russia's international clout through increased fossil fuel exports.

Top officials in these countries know better than most of us that severe climate change is coming our way, and that only a sharp reduction in carbon emissions can prevent its most destructive effects. But government and corporate officials are so wedded to fossil fuel profits -- or to the political advantages that derive from controlling oil's flow -- that they are quite incapable of overcoming their craving for ever greater levels of production. As a result, while President Obama speaks often enough of his desire to increase the nation's reliance on renewable energy, he has embraced an "[all of the above](#) [19]" energy plan that is underwriting a boom in oil and gas output. The same is true for virtually every other major government figure. Obeisance is routinely paid to the need for increased green technology, but a priority continues to be placed on increases in oil, gas, and coal production. Even in 2040, according to [EIA predictions](#) [12], these fuels may still be supplying four-fifths of the world's total energy supply.

This bias in favor of fossil fuels over other forms of energy -- despite all we know about climate change -- can only be viewed as a kind of carbon delirium. You can find evidence of this pathology worldwide and in myriad ways, but here are three unmistakable examples of our advanced stage of addiction.

1. The Obama administration's decision to allow BP to resume oil drilling in the Gulf of Mexico.

After energy giant BP (formerly British Petroleum) [pleaded guilty](#) [20] to criminal negligence in the April 2010 Deepwater Horizon disaster, which resulted in the death of 11 people and a colossal oil spill, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) [suspended](#) [21] the company's right to acquire new drilling leases in the Gulf of Mexico. The ban was widely viewed as a major setback for the company, which had long sought to dominate production in the Gulf's deep waters. To regain access to the Gulf, BP [sued](#) [22] the EPA and brought other pressures to bear on the Obama administration. Finally, on March 13th, after months of lobbying and negotiations, the agency [announced](#) [23] that BP would be allowed to resume bidding for new leases, as long as it adhered to a list of supposedly tight restrictions

BP officials viewed the announcement as an enormous victory, allowing the company to resume a frenetic search for new oil deposits in the Gulf's deep waters. "Today's agreement will allow America's largest investor to compete again for federal contracts and leases," [said](#) [23] BP America Chairman and President John Mingé. Observers in the oil industry predict that the company will now acquire many additional leases in the Gulf, adding to its already substantial presence there. "With this agreement, it's realistic to expect that the Gulf of Mexico can be a key asset for BP's operations not only for this decade but potentially for decades to come," [commented](#) [23] Stephen Simko, an oil specialist at Morningstar investment analysts. (Six days after the EPA announced its decision, BP [bid \\$42 million](#) [24] to acquire 24 new leases in the Gulf.)

So BP's interest is clear enough, but what is the national interest in all this? Yes, President Obama can claim that increased drilling might add a few hundred thousand barrels per day to domestic oil output, plus a few thousand new jobs. But can he really assure our children or grandchildren that, in allowing increased drilling in the Gulf, he is doing all he can to reduce the threat of climate change as he [promised](#) [25] to do in his most recent State of the Union address? If he truly sought a simple and straightforward way to renew that pledge, this would have been a good place to start: plenty of people remember the damage inflicted by the

Deepwater Horizon disaster and the [indifference](#) [26] BP's top officials displayed toward many of its victims, so choosing to maintain the ban on its access to new drilling leases on environmental and climate grounds would certainly have attracted public support. The fact that Obama chose not to do so suggests instead a further surrender to the power of oil and gas interests -- and to the effects of carbon delirium.

2. The Republican drive to promote construction of the Keystone XL pipeline as a response to the Ukrainian crisis

If Obama administration dreams about pressuring Putin by exporting LNG to Europe fail to pass the credibility test, a related drive by key Republicans to secure approval for the Keystone XL tar-sands pipeline defies any notion of sanity. Keystone, as you [may recall](#) [27], is intended to carry carbon-dense, highly corrosive diluted bitumen from the Athabasca tar sands of Alberta, Canada, to refineries on the Gulf Coast. Its construction has been held up by [concerns](#) [28] that it will pose a threat to water supplies along its route and help increase global carbon dioxide emissions.

Because Keystone crosses an international boundary, its construction must receive approval not just from the State Department, but from the president himself. The Republicans and their conservative backers have long favored the pipeline as a repudiation of what they view as excessive governmental deference to environmental concerns. Now, in the midst of the Ukraine crisis, they are suddenly [depicting](#) [29] pipeline approval as a signal of U.S. determination to resist Putin's aggressive moves in the Crimea and Ukraine.

"Putin is playing for the long haul, cleverly exploiting every opening he sees. So must we," [wrote](#) [30] former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in a recent Washington Post op-ed. "Authorizing the Keystone XL pipeline and championing natural gas exports would signal that we intend to do precisely that."

Does anyone truly believe that Vladimir Putin will be influenced by a White House announcement that it will allow construction of the Keystone XL pipeline? Putin's government is already facing significant economic sanctions and other punitive moves, yet none of this has swayed him from pursuing what he appears to believe are Russia's core interests. Why, then, would the possibility that the U.S. might acquire more of its oil from Canada and less from Mexico, Nigeria, Venezuela, and other foreign suppliers even register on his consciousness?

In addition, to suggest that approving Keystone XL would somehow stiffen Obama's resolve, inspiring him to adopt tougher measures against Moscow, is to engage in what psychologists call "magical thinking." Were Keystone to transport any other substance than oil, the claim that its construction would somehow affect presidential decision-making or events on Russia's borders would be laughable. So great is our reverence for petroleum, however, that we allow ourselves to believe in such miracles. This, too, is carbon delirium.

3. The Case of the Missing \$20 Billion

Finally, consider the [missing](#) [31] \$20 billion in oil revenues from the Nigerian treasury. In Nigeria, where the average income is less than \$2.00 per day and many millions live in [extreme poverty](#) [32], the disappearance of that much money is a cause for extreme concern. If used for the public good, that \$20 billion might have provided basic education and health care for millions, helped alleviate the AIDS epidemic, and jump-started development in poor rural

areas. But in all likelihood, much of that money has already found its way into the overseas bank accounts of well-connected Nigerian officials.

Its disappearance was first revealed in February when the governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria, Lamido Sanusi, [told](#) [31] a parliamentary investigating committee that the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC [33]) had failed to transfer the proceeds from oil sales to the national treasury as required by law. [Nigeria](#) [34] is Africa's leading oil producer and the proceeds from its petroleum output not claimed by the NNPC's foreign partners are supposed to wind up in the state's coffers. With oil prices hovering at around \$100 per barrel, Nigeria should theoretically be accumulating tens of billions of dollars per year from export sales. Sanusi was immediately fired by President Goodluck Jonathan for conveying the news that the NNPC has been reporting suspiciously low oil revenues to the central bank, depriving the state of vital income and threatening the stability of the nation's currency. The only plausible explanation, he suggested, is that the company's officials are skimming off the difference. "A substantial amount of money has gone," he [told](#) [35] the New York Times. "I wasn't just talking about numbers. I showed it was a scam."

While the magnitude of the scam may be eye-catching, its existence is hardly surprising. Ever since Nigeria began producing oil some 60 years ago, a small coterie of business and government oligarchs has controlled the allocation of petroleum revenues, using them to buy political patronage and secure their own private fortunes. The NNPC has been an especially fertile site for [corruption](#) [36], as its operations are largely immune from public inspection and the opportunities for swindles are mammoth. Sanusi is only one of a series of well-intentioned civil servants who have attempted to plumb the depths of the thievery. A 2012 report by former anti-corruption chief Nuhu Ribadu [reported](#) [37] the disappearance of a hardly less staggering \$29 billion from the NNPC between 2001 and 2011.

Here, then, is another, equally egregious form of carbon delirium: addiction to illicit oil wealth so profound as to place the solvency and well-being of 175 million people at risk. President Jonathan has now [promised](#) [38] to investigate Sanusi's charges, but it is unlikely that any significant portion of the missing \$20 billion will ever make it into Nigeria's treasury.

Curing Addiction

These examples of carbon delirium indicate just how deeply entrenched it is in global culture. In the U.S., addiction to carbon is present at all levels of society, but the higher one rises in corporate and government circles, the more advanced the process.

Slowing the pace of climate change will only be possible once this affliction is identified, addressed, and neutralized. Overcoming individual addiction to narcotic substances is never an easy task; resisting our addiction to carbon will prove no easier. However, the sooner we recast the climate issue as a public health problem, akin to drug addiction, the sooner we will be able to fashion effective strategies for averting its worst effects. This means, for example, providing programs and incentives for those of us who seek to reduce our reliance on petroleum, and imposing penalties on those who resist such a transition or actively promote addiction to fossil fuels.

[Divesting](#) [39] from fossil fuel stocks is certainly one way to go cold turkey. It involves sacrificing expectations of future rewards from the possession of such stocks, while depriving the fossil fuel companies of our investment funds and, by extension, our consent for their activities.

But a more far-ranging kind of carbon detoxification must come in time. As with all addictions, the first and most crucial step is to acknowledge that our addiction to fossil fuels has reached such an advanced stage as to pose a direct danger to all humanity. If we are to have any hope of averting the worst effects of climate change, we must fashion a 12-step program for universal carbon renunciation and impose penalties on those who aid and abet our continuing addiction.

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Links:

- [1] <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/06/world/europe/us-seeks-to-reduce-ukraines-reliance-on-russia-for-natural-gas.html>
- [2] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liquefied_natural_gas
- [3] <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/wp/2014/03/25/can-u-s-natural-gas-rescue-ukraine-from-russia/>
- [4] <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-14432401>
- [5] <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/04/24/remarks-tom-donilon-national-security-advisor-president-launch-columbia->
- [6] <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424127887323894704578114591174453074?mg=reno64-wsj&url=http%3A%2F%2Fonline.wsj.com%2Farticle%2FSB10001424127887323894704578114591174453074.html>
- [7] <http://www.cnn.com/2008/US/07/23/america.oil.addiction/index.html>
- [8] <http://dallasmorningviewsblog.dallasnews.com/2012/08/president-bushs-america-is-addicted-to-oil-speech.html/>
- [9] <http://www.spaulforrest.com/2011/03/us-must-finally-end-its-addiction-to.html>
- [10] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Hansen
- [11] <http://www.nytimes.com/1988/06/24/us/global-warming-has-begun-expert-tells-senate.html>
- [12] <http://www.eia.gov/forecasts/ieo/>
- [13] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Automobile_dependency
- [14] <http://www.npr.org/2014/03/22/292633629/commuters-ditch-cars-for-public-transit-in-record-numbers>
- [15] <http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/green/news/2013/11/05/78807/big-oil-big-profits-big-tax-breaks/>
- [16] <http://www.businessinsider.com/new-petro-states-2010-4>
- [17] <http://finance.fortune.cnn.com/2012/01/27/the-biggest-winners-of-obamas-natural-gas-push/>
- [18] http://www.academia.edu/2626552/Energy_the_Russian_geopolitical_weapon
- [19] <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2012/01/26/everything-you-need-know-president-obamas-blueprint-american-made-energy>
- [20] <http://ens-newswire.com/2012/11/16/bp-pleads-guilty-to-criminal-charges-in-gulf-oil-spill/>
- [21] <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/29/business/energy-environment/united-states-suspends-bp-from-new-contracts.html>
- [22] <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/15/business/global/bp-sues-us-over-contract-suspensions.html>
- [23] <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/14/business/energy-environment/epa-to-lift-suspension-of-oil-leases-for-bp.html>
- [24] <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/03/19/usa-energy-leases-idUSL2N0MG19A20140319>
- [25] <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/01/28/president-barack-obamas-state-union-address>
- [26] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reactions_to_the_Deepwater_Horizon_oil_spill
- [27] <http://www.tomdispatch.com/blog/175648/>
- [28] <http://www.foe.org/projects/climate-and-energy/tar-sands/keystone-xl-pipeline>
- [29] <http://www.nationaljournal.com/energy/republicans-ukraine-crisis-builds-case-for-natural-gas-exports-keystone-20140303>
- [30] http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/condoleezza-rice-will-america-heed-the-wake-up-call-of-ukraine/2014/03/07/cf087f74-a630-11e3-84d4-e59b1709222c_story.html
- [31] <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/21/world/africa/governor-of-nigerias-central-bank-is-fired-after-warning-of-missing-oil-revenue.html>
- [32] <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-17015873>
- [33] <http://www.nnpcgroup.com/>
- [34] <http://www.eia.gov/countries/cab.cfm?fips=NI>
- [35] <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/10/world/africa/nigerians-ask-why-oil-funds-are-missing.html>
- [36] <http://www.revenuewatch.org/news/blog/nigeria-missing-50-billion-some-considerations>

- [37] <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/9968e666-34b1-11e2-8b86-00144feabdc0.html>
[38] <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/03/12/us-nigeria-oil-idUSBREA2B1PL20140312>
[39] <http://www.tomdispatch.com/blog/175775/>
[40] http://www.tomdispatch.com/blog/175806/tomgram%3A_michael_klare,_in_the_carbon_wars,_big_oil_is_winning/
[41] <http://www.amazon.com/dp/1250023971/ref=nosim/?tag=tomdispatch-20>
[42] <http://www.mediaed.org/cgi-bin/commerce.cgi?preadd=action&key=124>

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