

Roundup: Media's Take

Scott Bittle & Jean Johnson: Three Flawed Ideas that Could Mean a Cold Homecoming from Copenhagen

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International conferences have one thing in common with vacations: they're great while you're there, but coming home to workaday reality can be painful.

The Copenhagen conference on climate change could turn out like that. The session will be full of world leaders, bold speeches, and promises to shift the world away from fossil fuels. When he's at the conference, President Obama will pledge a 17 percent cut in greenhouse gases for the United States, even though legislation is barely moving in Congress. Eventually he'll have to come home and sell the American public on all the hard work needed to make that happen.

The problem is that many Americans have latched onto three flawed ideas that sound good, but that in reality are improbable or just plain wrong. Left unaddressed, they could derail debate and make it extremely difficult to make progress. The scary thing is that most experts know these ideas are far-fetched, but politicians often embrace them anyway.

Here's a look:

Flawed Idea #1: We Should Be Energy Independent

For a country that got its start with the Declaration of Independence, it's easy to see why this phrase has an attractive ring to it, especially when it implies that we can show OPEC and Hugo Chavez the door. Unfortunately, policy organizations across the political spectrum, ranging from the Council on Foreign Relations to the Brookings Institution and the Cato Institute, all say actual independence is a pipe dream.

A little history is useful here. The last time the United States could supply all its oil needs was the year Elvis Presley got his draft notice: 1957. Almost all our cars, trucks, and planes run on petroleum-based fuels, and we import nearly 60 percent of the oil we use. This isn't going to change quickly. In fact, the federal government is projecting we'll still be importing

about 40 percent of our oil in 2040.

And don't expect having more domestic oil to protect us from price swings. There's a global market in oil, and that will continue whatever we do. U.S. energy companies buy and sell their products and services worldwide, as do oil companies elsewhere. Experts point out that Great Britain, which exports oil thanks to its North Sea offshore rigs, gets hit just as hard by world oil prices as we do.

The far better strategy, most experts say, to make sure we have lots of different sources of energy -- not just oil -- supplied by lots of different companies in lots of different places. It's that old "don't put all your eggs in one basket" thing, because even a U.S. basket full of U.S. eggs might have problems -- such as hurricanes in the Gulf of Mexico knocking out a chunk of U.S. oil production and refining. Then we might be happy to import a little oil from somewhere else.

Flawed Idea #2: Cheaper Is Better

In tough economic times, nobody wants to pay more for anything, especially gas. It hurts millions of people who are just trying to stay afloat, and makes everything from toasters to pop tarts more expensive, because nearly everything we buy gets shipped in something running on some form of oil. But really cheap energy has some worrisome downsides.

For a start, cheap energy means there's no incentive to change. Cheap gas leads normally reasonable people to buy cars that practically inhale the stuff. Not to mention the fact that when conventional energy prices are low, alternatives can't get off the ground because they can't compete. Really cheap oil prices even reduce investment in oil itself, especially oil in out-of-the-way places and "unconventional" forms.

Flawed Idea #3: We Can Fix This Fast If We Want To

Almost every day you hear about another fantastic new energy breakthrough -- new technologies, new sources of energy, new products that use energy much more efficiently. Some of them might very well work out nicely eventually, but just because something's on TV doesn't mean it's ready for prime time.

Take hydrogen fuel cells, for example. The technology dates back to the Apollo space program in the 1960s, and it could be a great source of electricity with little pollution. But experts say it will take years of research before you can make fuel cells light enough and practical enough for cars. Plus, just having the technology isn't enough. It's got to make sense economically. Yes, there are people out there who'll pay more because a product is "greener," but realistically most customers won't buy an electric car if it's significantly more expensive than a regular one -- and for the foreseeable future, they will be. Even things we know how to do take time. There may be wind turbines sprouting up all over Texas, but experts say a

reasonable goal is for the U.S. to get 20 percent of its energy from wind by 2030 -- 20 years from now. Countries like France rely on nuclear power to reduce emissions, but Watts Bar, one of the last nuclear plants built here, took 23 years to go from initial construction to actual operation. Clean coal is an option, but the best estimates are that we could have 40 percent of coal plants using technology that removes carbon dioxide by 2050.

Quick, cheap and made in the USA is a good slogan, but it's wishful thinking at best, and a dangerous distraction at worst. Solving energy problems means thinking realistically about what we can do -- and how quickly we can do it. If we don't, the President's pledge in Copenhagen may be a promise with no pay-off.

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