



Posted on Thu, Dec. 10, 2009

Progress in American spirit

The United States used to be the can-do country. A respect for science married to the entrepreneurial spirit propelled America to the forefront of global progress and made it rich. But a late-20th century malaise had crept in, fueled by a conservative hostility to modern science and public investment.

On the fight against global warming, only a few Republican leaders have stepped up to the plate. One of them, Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, is being savaged for it.

Smiting Democrats in 2010 should not be more important than saving a third of Florida from going underwater by 2090. (And no, the poor behavior of some scientists at the University of East Anglia did not alter the consensus among top climatologists that global warming is a very big threat.)

The Copenhagen meeting on climate change has produced predictably dyspeptic responses to the host country's extraordinary progress cutting its chains to fossil fuels. Wind turbines now account for 20 percent of Denmark's power production. And Denmark is making a huge investment to move from gasoline- to electric-powered cars.

Future earthlings will regard fossil fuels as a relic of a primitive age. And they'll smile at today's defeatist proclamations on why clean energy sources, such as wind power, aren't practical.

For example, Cato Institute's Will Wilkinson writes, "If wind power were more efficient than the alternatives, we'd already be using more of it."

And over at the conservative Heritage Foundation, former Oklahoma Rep. Ernest Istook explains that "wind power provides less than one-tenth of 1 percent of U.S. electricity because it costs more to produce." Of course it's expensive, and there's not much of it. That's always the case for something new.

By the way, Iowa now generates 15 percent of its electricity from wind, a staggering rise from 5 percent three years ago. And the cost of making electricity from utility-scale wind systems has fallen by more than 80 percent over the last 20 years.

You could imagine these guys standing around the pickle barrel, agreeing that automobiles will never replace the horse. "How you gonna drive those things on our rutted, dirt roads?" one would say.

And the statistically minded one would add, "If automobiles were more efficient than the alternatives, we'd already be using more of them."

Yep, in 1911 the United States still had fewer than half a million cars but over 23 million horses. And America had yet to cement its first mile of rural highway.

The horseless carriage was such a rich-man's toy that President Woodrow Wilson said in 1906, "Nothing has spread socialistic feeling in this country more than the automobile."

There were a million reasons why the automobile would not work in America, but a can-do American named Henry Ford set about answering them. He started mass producing the affordable Model T. He pushed for the building of gas stations everywhere and for good roads. He created dealerships that would service as well as sell cars.

Denmark is now engaged in a Henry-Ford-style makeover to become a society fueled by wind power. Working with a Silicon Valley company called Better Place, Denmark plans to wire the country with charging poles and establish battery changing stations to make the electric car a practicality. Are Danish taxpayers subsidizing this? They sure are, but Henry Ford didn't pay for our roads, either.

Ford's ghost is no doubt toasting Denmark's can-do determination. And he's wondering why the very people who talk most about American greatness just sit around whining why this country shouldn't or can't do what it must.

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