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The Beautiful Wind of T. Boone Pickens

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By Dana Milbank
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T. Boone Pickens has his own way of saying things.

Over the clink of silver on china in a Mayflower Hotel ballroom yesterday, the oil billionaire greeted a crowd of energy executives with an account of a speech he gave a year ago in which he realized after a few minutes that his clip-on microphone was missing.

"I got up and I was sitting on it," he told the 250 luncheon participants. "So I took it and pinned it on at that point and I said if any press is here, they can put in the paper tomorrow that 'he talked out of his ass for the first five minutes.' "

A lot of people say he's doing the same thing now. A bad bet on oil prices caused the 80-year-old tycoon to lose about \$2 billion last year, and investors fled his hedge fund. His wife, Madeleine, had to rethink her plans to rescue thousands of wild horses from slaughter; she's now asking for federal funds. And Pickens's prize initiative -- a huge investment in wind power -- has been scaled back by 75 percent.

Now, Pickens is relying on the kindness of strangers. "I need you, all of you: Help me on this," the billionaire told the participants in the EnergyBiz magazine conference yesterday. Before leaving, he repeated: "Join with me on this. I need you. I seriously need you."

What he needs, specifically, is for the government to back a national energy grid and an expansion of natural gas vehicles -- policies that would dramatically increase the value of Pickens's holdings in wind, water and gas. That obvious self-interest, and Pickens's role in conservative causes such as the Swift boat veterans' assault on John Kerry, has made would-be allies on the political left suspicious of his motives.

But while there are quibbles over the particulars, parts of the Pickens Plan are -- or should be -- uncontroversial: a new transmission grid to move renewable power, better energy efficiency, and using natural gas as a "bridge" fuel to power trucks and fleet vehicles until alternatives become more plentiful.

With Pickens, the controversy rests more in the salesman than in the product. Pickens didn't mention global warming in his 45-minute talk at the Mayflower yesterday. In fact, he dismissed the "greenies," as in: "You don't want to turn it over to the greenies, or what'll happen is they'll want to shut down every coal plant . . . for power generation and our utility bills will go through the ceiling."

Rather, Pickens is all about national security, or, as he puts it: "People around the world think we're stupid to import as much oil as we do from people who don't like us. . . . We need to get on our own resources, sit on our own bottom."

References to that particular part of the anatomy are apparently a staple of the Pickens public address.

Probably the biggest hindrance to the Pickens Plan, in fact, is its spokesman. Like fellow Texan Ross Perot, Pickens lets his mouth become the message.

On his appearance on ABC's "The View": "Somebody said, 'God, you're not going to go on there with those five women, are you?' "

On the Danish energy minister: "I think the number one reason for her to come over here was to meet with me."

On the Bill Maher show: "That's an interesting show. . . . They don't care what they say."

His descriptions of would-be allies in government were equally piquant. He recalled Bob Dole's lack of interest in energy during the 1996 campaign ("It won't be a subject we're talking about") and his energy discussion with Rudy Giuliani during the 2008 campaign ("That went five minutes").

After meeting with John McCain, Pickens said, he concluded that "John McCain and Boone Pickens are too old to be president of the United States." He reported that during his meeting with McCain, he recommended that the Republican candidate use a "cram-down" to create by force an energy grid the way Eisenhower built interstate highways. "I said, 'Your personality kind of fits a cram-down.' "

Pickens had similar disdain for President Obama's energy plans when he met the Democratic candidate in a Reno hotel. "Two hundred fifty million cars and trucks in the United States and we're burping them out at 13, 14 million a year, and you're going to have 1 million -- in 10 years -- plug-in hybrids?" he recalled asking Obama. "He said, 'That's not very many, is it?' "

The oilman had a more solicitous view of the president yesterday as he made his pitch to create, by government mandate and fiat if necessary, a "beautiful wind corridor" stretching from Texas to Canada and more natural gas vehicles, "so fantastically good for the country."

"If we have the leader that I think we've got," Pickens said, "it's going to be a huge boost for the economy. There are going to be more ideas that are going to show up once the administration says we're going to do this. . . . Entrepreneurs will come up with ideas we never thought of."

Let's hope he's not just talking out of his bottom.

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