

**August 13, 2008**

OP-ED COLUMNIST

## **Eight Strikes and You're Out**

By [THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN](#)

John McCain recently tried to underscore his seriousness about pushing through a new energy policy, with a strong focus on more drilling for oil, by telling a motorcycle convention that Congress needed to come back from vacation immediately and do something about America's energy crisis. "Tell them to come back and get to work!" McCain bellowed.

Sorry, but I can't let that one go by. McCain knows why.

It was only five days earlier, on July 30, that the Senate was voting for the eighth time in the past year on a broad, vitally important bill — S. 3335 — that would have extended the investment tax credits for installing solar energy and the production tax credits for building wind turbines and other energy-efficiency systems.

Both the wind and solar industries depend on these credits — which expire in December — to scale their businesses and become competitive with coal, oil and natural gas. Unlike offshore drilling, these credits could have an immediate impact on America's energy profile.

Senator McCain did not show up for the crucial vote on July 30, and the renewable energy bill was defeated for the eighth time. In fact, John McCain has a perfect record on this renewable energy legislation. He has missed all eight votes over the last year — which effectively counts as a no vote each time. Once, he was even in the Senate and wouldn't leave his office to vote.

"McCain did not show up on any votes," said Scott Sklar, president of The Stella Group, which tracks clean-technology legislation. Despite that, McCain's campaign commercial running during the Olympics shows a bunch of spinning wind turbines — the very wind turbines that he would not cast a vote to subsidize, even though he supports big subsidies for nuclear power.

Barack Obama did not vote on July 30 either — which is equally inexcusable in my book — but he did vote on three previous occasions in favor of the solar and wind credits.

The fact that Congress has failed eight times to renew them is largely because of a hard core of Republican senators who either don't want to give Democrats such a victory in an election year or simply don't believe in renewable energy.

What impact does this have? In the solar industry today there is a rush to finish any project that would be up and running by Dec. 31 — when the credits expire — and most everything beyond that is now on hold. Consider the Solana concentrated solar power plant, 70 miles southwest of Phoenix in McCain's home state. It is the biggest proposed concentrating solar energy project ever. The farsighted local utility is ready to buy its power.

But because of the Senate's refusal to extend the solar tax credits, "we cannot get our bank financing," said Fred Morse, a senior adviser for the American operations of Abengoa Solar, which is building the project. "Without the credits, the numbers don't work." Some 2,000 construction jobs are on hold.

Roger Efir is president of Suntech America — a major Chinese-owned solar panel maker that actually wants to build a new factory in America. They've been scouting the country for sites, and several governors have been courting them. But Efir told me that when the solar credits failed to pass the Senate, his boss told him: "Don't set up any more meetings with governors. It makes absolutely no sense to do this if we don't have stability in the incentive programs."

One of the biggest canards peddled by Big Oil is that, "Sure, we'll need wind and solar energy, but it's just not cost effective yet." They've been saying that for 30 years. What these tax credits are designed to do is to stimulate investments by many players in solar and wind so these technologies can quickly move down the learning curve and become competitive with coal and oil — which is why some people are trying to block them.

As Richard K. Lester, an energy-innovation expert at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, notes, "The best chance we have — perhaps the only chance" of addressing the combined challenges of energy supply and demand, climate change and energy security "is to accelerate the introduction of new technologies for energy supply and use and deploy them on a very large scale."

This, he argues, will take more than a Manhattan Project. It will require a fundamental reshaping by government of the prices and regulations and research-and-development budgets that shape the energy market. Without taxing fossil fuels so they become more expensive and giving subsidies to renewable fuels so they become more competitive — and changing regulations so more people and companies have an interest in energy efficiency — we will not get innovation in clean power at the scale we need.

That is what this election should be focusing on. Everything else is just bogus rhetoric designed by cynical candidates who think Americans are so stupid — so bloody stupid — that if you just show them wind turbines in your Olympics ad they'll actually think you showed up and voted for such renewable power — when you didn't.

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