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OP-ED COLUMNIST

Mr. Bush, Lead or Leave

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Two years ago, President Bush declared that America was “addicted to oil,” and, by gosh, he was going to do something about it. Well, now he has. Now we have the new Bush energy plan: “Get more addicted to oil.”

Actually, it’s more sophisticated than that: Get Saudi Arabia, our chief oil pusher, to up our dosage for a little while and bring down the oil price just enough so the renewable energy alternatives can’t totally take off. Then try to strong arm Congress into lifting the ban on drilling offshore and in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

It’s as if our addict-in-chief is saying to us: “C’mon guys, you know you want a little more of the good stuff. One more hit, baby. Just one more toke on the ole oil pipe. I promise, next year, we’ll all go straight. I’ll even put a wind turbine on my presidential library. But for now, give me one more pop from that drill, please, baby. Just one more transfusion of that sweet offshore crude.”

It is hard for me to find the words to express what a massive, fraudulent, pathetic excuse for an energy policy this is. But it gets better. The president actually had the gall to set a deadline for this drug deal:

“I know the Democratic leaders have opposed some of these policies in the past,” Mr. Bush said. “Now that their opposition has helped drive gas prices to record levels, I ask them to reconsider their positions. If Congressional leaders leave for the Fourth of July recess without taking action, they will need to explain why \$4-a-gallon gasoline is not enough incentive for them to act.”

This from a president who for six years resisted any pressure on Detroit to seriously improve mileage standards on its gas guzzlers; this from a president who’s done nothing to encourage conservation; this from a president who has so neutered the Environmental Protection Agency that the head of the E.P.A. today seems to be in a witness-protection program. I bet there aren’t 12 readers of this newspaper who could tell you his name or identify him in a police lineup.

But, most of all, this deadline is from a president who hasn’t lifted a finger to broker passage of legislation that has been stuck in Congress for a year, which could actually impact America’s energy profile right now — unlike offshore oil that would take years to flow — and create good tech jobs to boot.

That bill is H.R. 6049 — “The Renewable Energy and Job Creation Act of 2008,” which extends for another eight years the investment tax credit for installing solar energy and extends for one year the production tax credit for producing wind power and for three years the credits for geothermal, wave energy and other renewables.

These critical tax credits for renewables are set to expire at the end of this fiscal year and, if they do, it will mean thousands of jobs lost and billions of dollars of investments not made. “Already clean energy projects in the U.S.

are being put on hold,” said Rhone Resch, president of the Solar Energy Industries Association.

People forget, wind and solar power are here, they work, they can go on your roof tomorrow. What they need now is a big U.S. market where lots of manufacturers have an incentive to install solar panels and wind turbines — because the more they do, the more these technologies would move down the learning curve, become cheaper and be able to compete directly with coal, oil and nuclear, without subsidies.

That seems to be exactly what the Republican Party is trying to block, since the Senate Republicans — sorry to say, with the help of John McCain — have now managed to defeat the renewal of these tax credits six different times.

Of course, we’re going to need oil for years to come. That being the case, I’d prefer — for geopolitical reasons — that we get as much as possible from domestic wells. But our future is not in oil, and a real president wouldn’t be hectoring Congress about offshore drilling today. He’d be telling the country a much larger truth:

“Oil is poisoning our climate and our geopolitics, and here is how we’re going to break our addiction: We’re going to set a floor price of \$4.50 a gallon for gasoline and \$100 a barrel for oil. And that floor price is going to trigger massive investments in renewable energy — particularly wind, solar panels and solar thermal. And we’re also going to go on a crash program to dramatically increase energy efficiency, to drive conservation to a whole new level and to build more nuclear power. And I want every Democrat and every Republican to join me in this endeavor.”

That’s what a real president would do. He’d give us a big strategic plan to end our addiction to oil and build a bipartisan coalition to deliver it. He certainly wouldn’t be using his last days in office to threaten Congressional Democrats that if they don’t approve offshore drilling by the Fourth of July recess, they will be blamed for \$4-a-gallon gas. That is so lame. That is an energy policy so unworthy of our Independence Day.

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