

THE ONLY TERRIFYING MATH THAT GETS ANY ATTENTION IS DEFENSE SPENDING

Bill McKibben had a long piece on climate change this week, "Global Warming's Terrifying New Math," that has justifiably gotten a lot of attention. The terrifying math of the title is this:

- Almost the entire world agreed in 2009 that we must keep global temperature increases below 2°C
- Since then, the 0.8°C increase in temperature we've hit has brought far more damage than scientists expected
- Humans can introduce no more than 565 gigatons of carbon into the atmosphere if they want to keep the temperature from rising that 2°C which now seems too high
- Fossil fuel companies already have in reserve—and plan to develop—2,795 gigatons of carbon fuels

The math means, McKibben explains, that to keep global warming within the consensus but already too high limit of 2°C, we've got to find some way to force the fossil fuel companies not to develop their existing reserves.

At this point, effective action would require actually keeping most of the

carbon the fossil-fuel industry wants to burn safely in the soil, not just changing slightly the speed at which it's burned.

[snip]

According to the Carbon Tracker report, if Exxon burns its current reserves, it would use up more than seven percent of the available atmospheric space between us and the risk of two degrees. BP is just behind, followed by the Russian firm Gazprom, then Chevron, ConocoPhillips and Shell, each of which would fill between three and four percent. Taken together, just these six firms, of the 200 listed in the Carbon Tracker report, would use up more than a quarter of the remaining two-degree budget. Severstal, the Russian mining giant, leads the list of coal companies, followed by firms like BHP Billiton and Peabody. The numbers are simply staggering – this industry, and this industry alone, holds the power to change the physics and chemistry of our planet, and they're planning to use it.

From this McKibben proposes a solution: Tax carbon to make it cost prohibitive to develop these reserves. To tax carbon you've got to undercut the fossil fuel industry's power, and to do that you've got to villainize them, but heck that's easy because they really are villains, since their business model will kill the planet. And so a movement like the South African divestment campaign can make it toxic to own fossil fuel stocks.

That's a gross oversimplification—please do read the full article for a nuanced version.

Now, there's nothing in the article that I disagree with. I'm all for making fossil fuel companies pay for the waste their industry creates. I'm all in favor of villainizing them

to make that more likely.

But I'll note that McKibben doesn't utter the words that would both make it easier to villainize the fossil fuel industry and explain some of the underlying reasons why that's not going to be enough.

"National security." Or even "security."

In that silence, McKibben is a mirror image of the same fault in Obama's own strategy and discussions more generally about threats to this country, even fairly realistic ones.

Sure, all the details McKibben cites about evident and likely effects of climate change imply this is a security issue: 356 homes gone in Colorado Springs, spiking food prices, even entire countries disappearing.

But until we start using the language of national security, we won't properly demonstrate the treachery of those who refuse to deal with this. It is politically toxic not to treat terrorism (a far tinier threat to our country) as a war, but no one pays a political price for ignoring the much graver threat climate change poses to our country and way of life. And yet refusing to do things to protect against climate change are similar to Bush telling a CIA briefer, "you've covered your ass," while ignoring the hair-on-fire warnings about an imminent al Qaeda attack.

Furthermore, thinking of this in terms of national security gets at some of the underlying reasons behind what McKibben labels as the hypocrisy of the governing elite. Why does Hillary fight for Arctic drilling rights on the same trip when she bemoans visible climate damage in Norway; why does Obama approve Shell drilling in the Arctic even while paying greater lip service to climate change than previous Presidents? Because the US believes increasing our own reserves is necessary to minimize the risk that Middle East volatility will threaten our hegemony. Why does Hugo Chavez preach Rosa Luxemburg while developing the Orinoco? Because

not only do petro-politics keep Chavez politically viable in his own country, but it's the leverage Bolivarian regimes have used to foster a populism that challenges the Washington consensus.

Even McKibben falls into this trap. He suggests if we tax carbon China and India will follow.

At this point, what happens in the U.S. is most important for how it will influence China and India, where emissions are growing fastest.

But he makes that suggestion at a time when the Administration's claimed primary strategic goal (it's not: they're still fighting for stability and access to resources in the Middle East and Africa) is an "Asian pivot" to combat China's challenge to US hegemony. But given that the Administration explicitly regards Chinese competition as a greater threat than losing entire towns to extreme weather and the destabilizing effects of spiking prices in our core crop, what are the chances that we'll tax carbon to set a good example for China?

The fossil fuel companies' imperative to find and develop ever more carbon reserves stems not just from a desire to deliver astronomical profits for its stockholders. On the contrary, even more, it stems from the partnership between our government and oil that presumes that oil is the cornerstone of our national security.

And yet that supposed cornerstone of our national security is leading to more deaths and property damage within the US than China or Islamic terrorists or cyberattacks put together (though the wars we're fighting in the name of combating Islamic terrorism are definitely causing a greater number of deaths and destruction overseas, though climate change probably has war on terrorism beat there too).

Climate change isn't even among the threats considered a national security threat (though some of our national security experts study how

it will exacerbate all other threats, though primarily overseas). Until it is, we're never going to even balance the danger of fossil fuel production as a trade off that must be weighed in other national security decisions, to say nothing of generating the kind of urgency that will keep that oil and coal in the ground.

Update: I originally our wars on terror have killed more people in other countries than climate change. Given climate change related famine, that's probably not true (or soon no longer will be), even considering the larger estimates of Iraqi casualties.