

Enemies of the Sun

OCT. 5, 2015

Paul Krugman

Does anyone remember the Cheney energy task force? Early in the George W. Bush administration, Vice President Dick Cheney released a [report](#) that was widely derided as a document written by and for Big Energy — because it was. The administration fought tooth and nail to keep the process by which the report was produced secret, but the list of [people the task force met](#) was eventually leaked, and it was exactly what you'd expect: a who's who of energy industry executives, with environmental groups getting a chance to make their case only after the work was essentially done.

But here's the thing: by the standards of today's Republican Party, the Cheney report was enlightened, even left-leaning. One whole chapter was devoted to conservation, another to renewable energy. By contrast, recent speeches by Jeb Bush and Marco Rubio — still the most likely Republican presidential [nominees](#) — barely address either topic. When it comes to energy policy, the G.O.P. has become fossilized. That is, it's fossil fuels, and only fossil fuels, all the way.

Every weekday, get thought-provoking commentary from Op-Ed columnists, The Times editorial board and contributing writers from around the world.

And that's a remarkable development, because while it's true that fracking has led to a boom in U.S. gas and oil production, we're also living in an era of spectacular progress in wind and solar energy. Why has the right become so hostile to technologies that look more and more like the wave of the future?

Before I try to answer that question, a few facts about renewable energy.

Wind and solar used to have a reputation as hippie-dippy stuff, not part of any serious approach to our energy future, and many people still have that perception. But it's way out of date. The cost of wind power has dropped sharply — 30 percent in just the past five years, according to the [International Energy Agency](#).

And solar panels are becoming cheaper and more efficient at a startling rate, reminiscent of the progress in microchips that underlies the information technology revolution. As a result, renewables account for essentially all recent growth in electricity generation capacity in advanced countries.

Furthermore, renewables have become major industries in their own right, employing several hundred thousand

people in the United States. Employment in the [solar industry](#) alone now exceeds the number of coal miners, and solar is adding jobs even as coal declines.

So you might expect people like Mr. Rubio, who says he wants to “[unleash our energy potential](#),” and Mr. Bush, who says he wants to “[unleash the Energy Revolution](#),” to embrace wind and solar as engines of jobs and growth. But they don't. Indeed, they're less open-minded than Dick Cheney, which is quite an accomplishment. Why?

Beyond that, you need to follow the money. We used to say that the G.O.P. was the party of Big Energy, but these days it would be more accurate to say that it's the party of Old Energy. In the 2014 election cycle the [oil and gas industry](#) gave 87 percent of its political contributions to Republicans; for [coal mining](#) the figure was 96, that's right, 96 percent. Meanwhile, [alternative energy](#) went 56 percent for Democrats.

And Old Energy is engaged in a systematic effort to blacken the image of renewable energy, one that closely resembles the way it has supported “experts” willing to help create a cloud of doubt about climate science. An example: Earlier this year Newsweek published an op-ed article purporting to show that the true cost of wind power was much higher than it seems. But it turned out that the article contained major factual errors, and its author had [failed to disclose](#) that he was the Charles W. Koch professor at Utah State, and a fellow of a Koch- and ExxonMobil-backed think tank.

It's unlikely, I guess, that energy policy will play as big a role as other issues, such as tax policy, in the 2016 election. But to the extent it does, you need to know what's really at stake.

While politicians on the right may talk about encouraging innovation and promoting an energy revolution, they're actually defenders of the energy status quo, part of a movement trying to block anything that might disrupt the reign of fossil fuels.

Read Paul Krugman's blog, [The Conscience of a Liberal](#), and follow him [on Twitter](#).

Follow The New York Times Opinion section on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#), and sign up for the [Opinion Today newsletter](#).

A version of this op-ed appears in print on October 5, 2015, on page A23 of the New York edition with the headline: Enemies of the Sun.