

The New York Times

Sunday, September 19, 2010

Week in Review, Op-Ed

Aren't We Clever?



By [THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN](#)

Tianjin, China

What a contrast. In a year that's on track to be our planet's hottest on record, America turned "climate change" into a four-letter word that many U.S. politicians won't even dare utter in public. If this were just some parlor game, it wouldn't matter. But the totally bogus "discrediting" of climate science has had serious implications. For starters, it helped scuttle Senate passage of the energy-climate bill needed to scale U.S.-made clean technologies, leaving America at a distinct disadvantage in the next great global industry. And that brings me to the contrast: While American Republicans were turning climate change into a wedge issue, the Chinese Communists were turning it into a work issue.

"There is really no debate about climate change in China," said Peggy Liu, chairwoman of the Joint U.S.-China Collaboration on Clean Energy, a nonprofit group working to accelerate the greening of China. "China's leaders are mostly engineers and scientists, so they don't waste time questioning scientific data." The push for green in China, she added, "is a practical discussion on health and wealth. There is no need to emphasize future consequences when people already see, eat and breathe pollution every day."

And because runaway pollution in China means wasted lives, air, water, ecosystems and money — and wasted money means fewer jobs and more political instability — China's leaders would never go a year (like we will) without energy legislation mandating new ways to do more with less. It's a three-for-one shot for them. By becoming more energy efficient per unit of G.D.P., China saves money, takes the lead in the next great global industry and earns credit with the world for mitigating climate change.

So while America's Republicans turned "climate change" into a four-letter word — J-O-K-E — China's Communists also turned it into a four-letter word — J-O-B-S.

"China is changing from the factory of the world to the clean-tech laboratory of the world," said Liu. "It has the unique ability to pit low-cost capital with large-scale experiments to find models

that work.” China has designated and invested in pilot cities for electric vehicles, smart grids, LED lighting, rural biomass and low-carbon communities. “They’re able to quickly throw spaghetti on the wall to see what clean-tech models stick, and then have the political will to scale them quickly across the country,” Liu added. “This allows China to create jobs and learn quickly.”

But China’s capability limitations require that it reach out for partners. This is a great opportunity for U.S. clean-tech firms — if we nurture them. “While the U.S. is known for radical innovation, China is better at tweak-ovation.” said Liu. Chinese companies are good at making a billion widgets at a penny each but not good at complex system integration or customer service.

We (sort of) have those capabilities. At the World Economic Forum meeting here, I met Mike Biddle, founder of MBA Polymers, which has invented processes for separating plastic from piles of junked computers, appliances and cars and then recycling it into pellets to make new plastic using less than 10 percent of the energy required to make virgin plastic from crude oil. Biddle calls it “above-ground mining.” In the last three years, his company has mined 100 million pounds of new plastic from old plastic.

Biddle’s seed money was provided mostly by U.S. taxpayers through federal research grants, yet today only his tiny headquarters are in the U.S. His factories are in Austria, China and Britain. “I employ 25 people in California and 250 overseas,” he says. His dream is to have a factory in America that would repay all those research grants, but that would require a smart U.S. energy bill. Why?

Americans recycle about 25 percent of their plastic bottles. Most of the rest ends up in landfills or gets shipped to China to be recycled here. Getting people to recycle regularly is a hassle. To overcome that, the European Union, Japan, Taiwan and South Korea — and next year, China — have enacted producer-responsibility laws requiring that anything with a cord or battery — from an electric toothbrush to a laptop to a washing machine — has to be collected and recycled at the manufacturers’ cost. That gives Biddle the assured source of raw material he needs at a reasonable price. (Because recyclers now compete in these countries for junk, the cost to the manufacturers for collecting it is steadily falling.)

“I am in the E.U. and China because the above-ground plastic mines are there or are being created there,” said Biddle, who just won The Economist magazine’s 2010 Innovation Award for energy/environment. “I am not in the U.S. because there aren’t sufficient mines.”

Biddle had enough money to hire one lobbyist to try to persuade the U.S. Congress to copy the recycling regulations of Europe, Japan and China in our energy bill, but, in the end, there was no bill. So we educated him, we paid for his tech breakthroughs — and now Chinese and European workers will harvest his fruit. Aren’t we clever?