Our View

Here Comes the Sun: Will the United States Be Left in Darkness?

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Economic history abounds with examples of successful companies that failed by ignoring new innovations that would make their products or services obsolete and poach their customers. Eastman Kodak died because its executives refused to embrace digital photography, even though the company had pioneered the process and held many important digital photography patents. AT&T and the Regional Bell Operating Companies (RBOCs) disappeared because they ignored the cellular phone transformation.

Nations, too, have failed by protecting vested interests. Portugal under Oliveira Salazar and Spain under Francisco Franco recorded years of low growth because they blocked market liberalization. Such nations foundered not by rejecting innovation but by being slow to adopt it.

The United States is now following in the steps of Salazar's Portugal and Franco's Spain by rejecting low-cost sources of renewable electricity in favor of expensive and polluting generating facilities. **This "new" US policy emphasizes the old, the established, and the outdated.** Operators of coal-fired plants, for example, have been ordered to cancel retirement plans after President Trump declared an energy emergency.

In effect, the US is burdening industries with an energy "ball and chain" by imposing barrier after barrier to the development and expansion of solar and wind technologies as it pursues an "energy dominance" focused on high-cost fossil fuels. In doing so, it will unintentionally cede global supremacy to nations such as China that have embraced much less expensive means of producing electricity.

The Trump administration's decisions regarding electricity generation, if not reversed, could doom the United States to third-world status within a decade. A feasible alternative, the so-called "all of the above" energy policy, existed once and, to an extent, still does. By leaving energy-sector development to market dictates, this policy would have accelerated the adoption of a generating mix dominated by wind, solar, and batteries, not the hydrocarbons promoted by President Trump.

Activist and author Bill McKibben emphasizes the critical economic and environmental importance of solar power in *Here Comes the Sun,* a short, readable volume published last summer by Norton.[1] McKibben makes the point that the costs of producing energy through solar or wind power **decline sharply** as the cumulative output grows, while the costs of producing energy from fossil fuels **rise**

[1] Bill McKibben, *Here Comes the Sun: A Last Chance for the Climate and a Fresh Chance for Civilization*" (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, August 2025) [https://tinyurl.com/5n9awdwj]. (Click here for my full review of the book.)

with cumulative output. In a sentence that should be emblazoned on the book's jacket, McKibben declared, "**If we're ever going to get to the 1950s dream of electricity 'too cheap to meter,' it will come from that nuclear reactor parked high in the sky.**"[2]

The phrase "too cheap to meter" originated in a 1954 speech to science writers by Lewis Strauss, then chair of the Atomic Energy Commission. Seventy-seven years later, electricity is still far from free. Rates are rising rapidly today as data centers proliferate. Even Donald Trump, the world's greatest fossil fool, has taken note, calling on those building data centers to take steps to limit the impact on consumers.

Nations such as China, which now rely heavily on solar power, have gained an advantage over those like the US that continue to rely on fossil fuels. McKibben captured this alarming fact in a quote from investor Rob Carlson: "Continuing to burn fossil fuel is a self-imposed financial penalty" that will "ultimately degrade America's long-term competitiveness."[3]

After focusing on the economic section of McKibbon's book, I came to the concerning conclusion that in 25 to 50 years, historians will note how the nations that embraced solar power achieved economic superiority over those that shunned it. I worry that future historians will be describing America's collapse in the first half of the twenty-first century, much like they once chronicled the fall of the Roman Empire eighteen hundred years earlier. The downfall occurred, they will observe, because the United States failed to transition to inexpensive energy sources such as solar and wind.

[2] McKibben, p. 90.

[3] McKibben, p. 89.