

Project FREE: The Next Manhattan Project Both Candidates Should Embrace

By Eric Greenberg and Karl Weber

Since the oil crunch of the 1970s, America's unsustainable reliance on fossil fuels has hovered at the fringes of national consciousness. But not until this year has it taken center stage in a presidential race. Today, with gas over four dollars a gallon, a sputtering economy, oil-linked wars threatening the Middle East, and climate change heating up, voters are finally demanding action.

Unfortunately, both presidential campaigns are allowing energy issues to get sucked into the black hole of simplistic gimmicks and short-term thinking that makes most Americans disgusted with politics-as-usual. Are media-hyped spitting matches over tire gauges, a summer gas-tax holiday, and Paris Hilton's "energy plan" really the best we can expect?

We need to invent our way out of the energy mess, and soon. But it's not the first time we've faced a seemingly impossible technological challenge. In 1962, John F. Kennedy set the daunting goal of sending a man to the moon and returning him safely to Earth within a decade.

Kennedy was taking a page from the playbook of World War Two. Like the Apollo moon landing project, the Manhattan Project was an audacious technological challenge that an earlier generation of Americans had met, keeping us free by developing atomic weapons just months ahead of our Nazi enemies.

The next administration should implement Project FREE, a massive national program, like the Apollo Space Program or Manhattan Project, to innovate the next generation of carbon-emission-free energy based on hydrogen, fusion, or other technologies.

The ultimate goal is to take Americans "off the grid" in the next 15 years; to end our dependence on centralized energy in favor of power sources generated at the point of consumption—the car, home, business, or factory—thereby liberating us from the limiting factors introduced by long-distance transmission and its regulatory roadblocks.

Project FREE must be a national program driven by the president, created with cabinet-level authority, endowed with \$30 to \$40 billion in funding per year, and, like the Federal Reserve, independent of partisan machinations. It should be established with powers akin to those granted high-priority wartime programs, so as to remove all clearance and cooperation impediments that might otherwise slow its progress. But it should be temporary, as permanent bureaucracies tend to become special interests, intent on prolonging their own existence rather than on getting the job completed. The legislation creating the project must mandate its dismantling either upon fulfillment of its commission or after fifteen years have passed, whichever comes first.

Forty billion dollars may sound expensive. But it barely equals the 2007 after-tax profits posted by Exxon Mobil (\$40.61 billion), and it's dwarfed by the hundreds of billions being spent on the war in Iraq and the \$700 billion we are currently paying foreign oil suppliers, many of which are enemies.

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Project FREE is not about incremental technology, like improving the 100-plus-year-old coal, gas, and oil platforms we use today. It's about innovations that can free us of foreign oil dependence and conflict, restore the environment by eliminating carbon emissions, make energy cheap and plentiful, and provide an incredible growth and job engine for the American economy. The United States has an intrinsic innovation advantage over the rest of the world, and we must not squander the opportunity to lead and own the most important inventions in energy.

Perhaps the most exciting possibility is energy based on hydrogen or on fusion reactions, the source of the sun's own energy. Science-fiction fantasy? Not really. Fusion power is one of 14 "Grand Challenges for Engineering" selected by the National Academy of Engineering in February 2008, as top priorities for the 21st century.

For politicians, who are always looking over their shoulders at the next election, Project FREE would also be a winning political move. It could capture the long-term allegiance of the future's most potent political force—the largest generation in American history, the 95 million youth often called the Millennials. According to a massive research study that I sponsored and was conducted by the respected Gerstein | Agne research organization, the Millennial generation is primed to rally around Project FREE.

Ninety-four percent of the Millennials we surveyed agreed that, "Our country must take extreme measures now, before it is too late, to protect the environment and begin to reverse the damage we have done." Seventy-four percent agreed that, "We must make major investments now to innovate the next generation of non-fossil fuel based energy solutions." And seventy percent endorsed the idea that America should, "Launch a concerted national effort, similar to the Apollo Program that put a man on the moon, with the goal of moving America beyond fossil fuels and inventing the next generation of energy, based on new technologies such as hydrogen or fusion."

Project FREE is ambitious, and except for the opposition it will attract from entrenched interest groups, it is *not* controversial. Plus, as our study showed, it will be eagerly supported by the greatest generational power bloc of the next several decades.

Project FREE has the potential to be the cornerstone of a powerful bipartisan agenda, embodying goals both liberals and conservatives can embrace: energy independence, enhanced national security, economic revitalization, and environmental protection, all produced by American ingenuity.

Maybe it takes a life-or-death threat to mobilize a great national effort. We are at that point today. Whichever party promotes and implements Project FREE will seize the moral and political high ground from which to command the allegiance of the Millennial generation for decades to come. It's a winning gambit available for the asking. Any takers?

Eric Greenberg and Karl Weber are authors of the forthcoming book Generation We: How Millennial Youth Are Taking Over America and Changing the World.

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