

Vermont’s Rumsfeld Strategy

In his 2004 book “Against All Enemies,” President George W. Bush’s counter-terrorism advisor Richard Clarke described a meeting with Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld that took place shortly after the 9/11 attacks. Rumsfeld complained that there were no decent targets for bombing

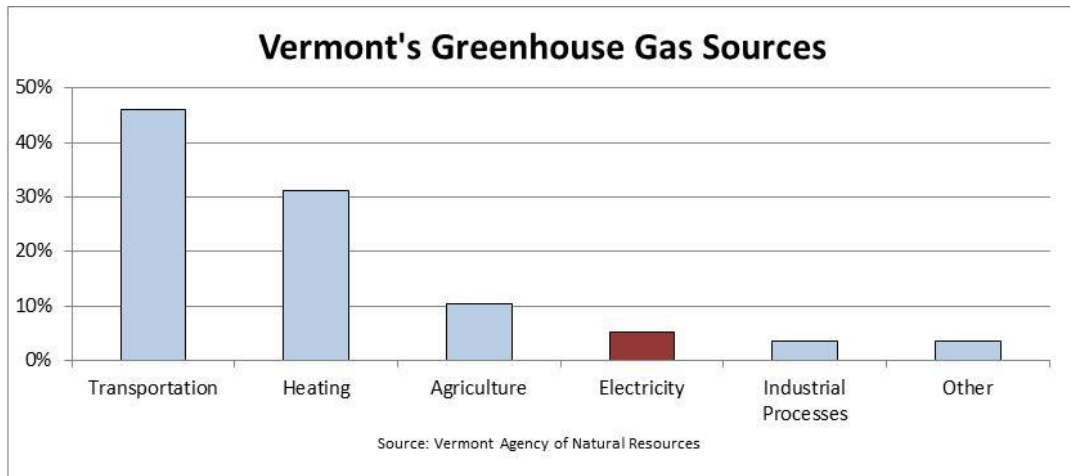
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in Afghanistan, so the United States should consider bombing Iraq, which, he said, had better targets.

Mr. Clarke observed that Rumsfeld’s strategy of bombing Iraq in response to the 9/11 attacks “would be like our invading Mexico after the Japanese attacked us at Pearl Harbor.”

Vermont’s approach to combating climate change might have been designed by Donald Rumsfeld. We are bombing the wrong targets.

According to the Vermont Agency of Natural Resources, the top three sources of greenhouse gas emissions are transportation, heating, and agriculture. Together, they account for 88% of the state’s emissions. The carbon footprint of our electricity consumption is puny, accounting for only 5% of our emissions.



Why is it that we obsess about electricity’s 5%? It’s because electricity has better targets.

“Better targets” means there’s more big money for utilities, developers, and equipment manufacturers in large-scale electricity generation and transmission projects than there is in working on our heating or transportation footprints. These corporate interests have lobbied hard to persuade Vermonters that electricity’s 5% is more important than the other 95% of our carbon footprint. Elected officials and the state’s biggest “environmental” groups have fallen in line to help whip the public into such a frenzy that many accept that destroying our mountains by building industrial power plants on them will reverse climate change and prevent another Tropical Storm Irene.

The Big Green Alliance of Green Mountain Power, politicians, and “environmentalists” tell us that if we bomb enough of the wrong targets, we will achieve our objectives. But, the primary objective of GMP is not reduction of carbon emissions; it is increased sales, profits, and perpetuation of their business model. The apparent objective of politicians is to avoid the tough truths about the way we live by telling us we can plug all of our wastefulness into a different electrical outlet—an outlet that’s powered by unreliable electricity from ridgeline wind turbines. The objectives of our so-called environmental groups? The composition of their boards of directors might give a clue.

Here’s the sales pitch. Let us (the utilities and energy developers) put 500-foot tall turbines and massive solar fields wherever we want—on sensitive ridgelines, in wetlands, and on prime agricultural soils. We’ll string transmission lines all over the place. We will encroach upon whatever neighbors happen to be in the way. Don’t worry, it probably won’t be you. In exchange, you can step up your electricity consumption, power your car, and heat your home guilt-free, using “clean” electricity.

What? You don’t have an electric car? That’s not surprising. Electric vehicles are too expensive, take too long to charge, and get very few miles per charge. Cold weather degrades their performance. The most enthusiastic promoters of EVs are scaling their sales forecasts back. Way back. Automakers are preparing to leapfrog electric vehicles with fuel cell vehicles. Anybody want a second-hand EV charging station? How ‘bout a Betamax? Hardly been used.

What about electric heat? GMP is pushing ductless air-source heat pumps. Such a heat pump can heat an individual room by operating like an air conditioner in reverse. Here’s what the U. S. Department of Energy says about air-source heat pumps:

They do not generally perform well during extended periods of sub-freezing temperatures. In regions with sub-freezing winter temperatures, it may not be cost-effective to meet all your heating needs with a standard air-source heat pump.

For many of us, a pellet boiler may be a far better solution: they cost less to operate, can heat entire houses (not just rooms), and can provide domestic hot water (as can solar hot water

systems). Converting oil and propane users to pellets would provide economic as well as environmental benefits to Vermonters.

So, should we continue to bomb the wrong targets by continuing to build massive wind and solar facilities in anticipation of widespread adoption of EVs and heat pumps?

Absolutely not.

Even if electric transportation and heating technologies were to become suitable for use in Vermont, it would take an additional 10 to 15 years for them to penetrate the market to the point where they'd factor into our energy planning. By then, the Sheffield, Lowell, and Georgia Mountain turbines will have reached the ends of their lives and will have been torn down. They won't be replaced because better, cheaper, less harmful energy alternatives will be available. The turbine sites will have been permanently damaged and we will wonder why we were in such a hurry to destroy our mountains for a few years of intermittent, very expensive electricity.

Our state government's obsession with electricity guarantees that our progress toward reducing carbon emissions will be meager, at best. Furthermore, government's blind support of utility-scale "renewables" assures that our progress, meager as it will be, will also be expensive, destructive, divisive, and slow.

High electricity prices and the corrosive drip-drip-drip of bad news will continue to undermine public confidence in the state's energy policies: curtailments, a \$10M synchronous condenser, disappointing electricity production, double-counting RECs, shoddy treatment of neighbors, noise violations, adverse health impacts, permits to kill endangered species, poor siting choices, storm water runoff catastrophes, forest fragmentation, degradation of wetlands and ag soils, rewards for poor business decisions, a revolving door between government and the energy industry, and on and on and on.

So, the next time you hear someone promoting emissions reduction through a large-scale, high-impact power project—a politician, a utility spokesman, an energy developer, or someone who claims to represent "the public interest"—remember that electricity accounts for a tiny portion of our carbon footprint. Think about what we could accomplish if we were really serious about carbon reduction. Then remember all the great times we had bombing the wrong targets with Don Rumsfeld.

This commentary is by Mark Whitworth, Energize Vermont's Executive Director. It appeared in Vermont news outlets in July and August, 2014.