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The Spill and Energy Bill

The nation's political leaders have had a lot to say in recent years about America's addiction to fossil fuels and the need to find cleaner, more climate-friendly alternatives. In recent weeks, they have had a lot to say about the Gulf of Mexico oil spill. On Wednesday, President Obama put them together.

In a speech at Carnegie Mellon University, he invoked the spill to pound on Congress about its duty to pass a comprehensive energy bill that addresses oil dependency and global warming. The House has passed such a bill, but a companion measure in the Senate languishes, hostage to solid Republican opposition, exaggerated fears about its costs and timidity on the part of the Democratic leadership. "I will work with anyone from either party to get this done," he said.

Mr. Obama's task is to follow up that vow with action. We are not optimistic that his implacable Republican opposition will work with him on anything. But perhaps the spreading nightmare on the waters of the gulf will get a few to break with the party line.

The Senate bill is far from perfect. It coddles the coal companies, and its provisions for off-shore drilling will now have to be revised or at least tightened up with multiple safeguards. But for the first time, the bill would set a price on carbon-dioxide emissions, which are now dumped without penalty into the atmosphere. This is an essential prerequisite for shifting private and public investment to cleaner energy sources.

The oil savings would be substantial. According to a new study by the Peter G. Peterson Institute for International Economics, the bill's mandates for alternative fuels and more efficient vehicles would reduce oil imports one-third by 2035.

But instead of embracing this positive bill, the Senate is expected to vote soon on a measure that would move the country in exactly the wrong direction — a resolution sponsored by Lisa Murkowski, the Alaska Republican, that would undercut the government's authority to regulate greenhouse gases and reduce the anticipated oil savings from the tough new fuel economy standards the White House announced last April.

As this page has noted before, persuading the Senate to act is not only a matter of leadership, but a matter of international obligation. At the Copenhagen climate conference in December, Mr. Obama committed the United States to a 17 percent reduction in greenhouse gases by 2020 — the minimum that scientists believe necessary to begin steering the world away from the worst impacts of a warming planet.

Delivering on that pledge is even more urgent now than it was then. As he demonstrated at Carnegie Mellon, Mr. Obama knows how to hit all the right notes rhetorically. Passing a comprehensive bill would be good for the economy, by creating new jobs; good for the environment, by reducing emissions; and good for national security, by reducing our dependence on unstable oil-producing countries. The president's task now is to convert that rhetorical fervor into actual, filibuster-proof votes.