October 11, 2009

OP-ED CONTRIBUTORS

Yes We Can (Pass Climate Change Legislation)

By JOHN KERRY and LINDSEY GRAHAM

Washington

CONVENTIONAL wisdom suggests that the prospect of Congress passing a comprehensive climate change bill soon is rapidly approaching zero. The divisions in our country on how to deal with climate change are deep. Many Democrats insist on tough new standards for curtailing the carbon emissions that cause global warming. Many Republicans remain concerned about the cost to Americans relative to the environmental benefit and are adamant about breaking our addiction to foreign sources of oil.

However, we refuse to accept the argument that the United States cannot lead the world in addressing global climate change. We are also convinced that we have found both a framework for climate legislation to pass Congress and the blueprint for a clean-energy future that will revitalize our economy, protect current jobs and create new ones, safeguard our national security and reduce pollution.

Our partnership represents a fresh attempt to find consensus that adheres to our core principles and leads to both a climate change solution and energy independence. It begins now, not months from now — with a road to 60 votes in the Senate.

It’s true that we come from different parts of the country and represent different constituencies and that we supported different presidential candidates in 2008. We even have different accents. But we speak with one voice in saying that the best way to make America stronger is to work together to address an urgent crisis facing the world.

This process requires honest give-and-take and genuine bipartisanship. In that spirit, we have come together to put forward proposals that address legitimate concerns among Democrats and Republicans and the other constituencies with stakes in this legislation. We’re looking for a new beginning, informed by the work of our colleagues and legislation that is already before Congress.

First, we agree that climate change is real and threatens our economy and national security. That is why we are advocating aggressive reductions in our emissions of the carbon gases that cause climate change. We will minimize the impact on major emitters through a market-based system that will provide both flexibility and time for big polluters to come into compliance without hindering global competitiveness or driving more jobs overseas.

Second, while we invest in renewable energy sources like wind and solar, we must also take advantage of nuclear power, our single largest contributor of emissions-free power. Nuclear power needs to be a core component of electricity generation if we are to meet our emission reduction targets. We need to jettison...
cumbersome regulations that have stalled the construction of nuclear plants in favor of a streamlined permit system that maintains vigorous safeguards while allowing utilities to secure financing for more plants. We must also do more to encourage serious investment in research and development to find solutions to our nuclear waste problem.

Third, climate change legislation is an opportunity to get serious about breaking our dependence on foreign oil. For too long, we have ignored potential energy sources off our coasts and underground. Even as we increase renewable electricity generation, we must recognize that for the foreseeable future we will continue to burn fossil fuels. To meet our environmental goals, we must do this as cleanly as possible. The United States should aim to become the Saudi Arabia of clean coal. For this reason, we need to provide new financial incentives for companies that develop carbon capture and sequestration technology.

In addition, we are committed to seeking compromise on additional onshore and offshore oil and gas exploration — work that was started by a bipartisan group in the Senate last Congress. Any exploration must be conducted in an environmentally sensitive manner and protect the rights and interests of our coastal states.

Fourth, we cannot sacrifice another job to competitors overseas. China and India are among the many countries investing heavily in clean-energy technologies that will produce millions of jobs. There is no reason we should surrender our marketplace to countries that do not accept environmental standards. For this reason, we should consider a border tax on items produced in countries that avoid these standards. This is consistent with our obligations under the World Trade Organization and creates strong incentives for other countries to adopt tough environmental protections.

Finally, we will develop a mechanism to protect businesses — and ultimately consumers — from increases in energy prices. The central element is the establishment of a floor and a ceiling for the cost of emission allowances. This will also safeguard important industries while they make the investments necessary to join the clean-energy era. We recognize there will be short-term transition costs associated with any climate change legislation, costs that can be eased. But we also believe strongly that the long-term gain will be enormous.

Even climate change skeptics should recognize that reducing our dependence on foreign oil and increasing our energy efficiency strengthens our national security. Both of us served in the military. We know that sending nearly $800 million a day to sometimes-hostile oil-producing countries threatens our security. In the same way, many scientists warn that failing to reduce greenhouse gas emissions will lead to global instability and poverty that could put our nation at risk.

Failure to act comes with another cost. If Congress does not pass legislation dealing with climate change, the administration will use the Environmental Protection Agency to impose new regulations. Imposed regulations are likely to be tougher and they certainly will not include the job protections and investment incentives we are proposing.

The message to those who have stalled for years is clear: killing a Senate bill is not success; indeed, given the threat of agency regulation, those who have been content to make the legislative process grind to a halt would later come running to Congress in a panic to secure the kinds of incentives and investments we can pass today. Industry needs the certainty that comes with Congressional action.
We are confident that a legitimate bipartisan effort can put America back in the lead again and can empower our negotiators to sit down at the table in Copenhagen in December and insist that the rest of the world join us in producing a new international agreement on global warming. That way, we will pass on to future generations a strong economy, a clean environment and an energy-independent nation.

*John Kerry is a Democratic senator from Massachusetts. Lindsey Graham is a Republican senator from South Carolina.*