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Will pigs fly?

By Thomas Friedman

WELL, it wasn't exactly Nixon to China. But it wasn't bean bag either. I'd say the president's State of the Union speech, when it came to calling for an end to our oil addiction and a real push to improve our educational competitiveness, was more like Nixon goes to New Mexico. It was an important change in direction and tone — but still a long way from China, a long way from a definitive change in policy and implementation.

"Oh, come on, Friedman, get real! The president throws a few paragraphs your way and you go all weak in the knees. Show some spine, man! You need to trash this thing. You know these guys are not serious. This is a president who once called for putting a man on Mars and then just dropped it. You assumed they were going to do the Iraq war right — remember? Look where that got you, you moron. You should have listened to your wife!"

Yeah, I know all that. But here's what else I know: George Bush is going to be president for the next three years. We do not have three years to lose — not on climate change, energy efficiency or improving math/science education.

I heard the president use language about the necessity of breaking our oil addiction through innovation on renewable technologies — without mentioning drilling in Alaska — which I've never heard before.

"All you talk about is talk. How do we lock in some action?" One way is to write your senator and congress representative and tell them to support the Vehicle and Fuel Choices for American Security Act. Already supported by key Republicans and Democrats, this draft bill aims to reduce oil consumption by 2.5 million barrels a day by 2015 and by 7 million barrels a day by 2025 — much more than the president's proposal. The bill offers ailing U.S. automakers loan guarantees and other incentives on the condition they use the money to retool their assembly lines to sharply increase their production of flex-fuel cars, which run on any combination of alcohol and gasoline, as well as hybrid and plug-in hybrid cars.

The bill is a way to save large amounts of oil quickly, bail out Detroit today before it goes totally bust tomorrow and give Americans real fuel choices. "If you want to send your dollars to the worst regimes in the Middle East, use gasoline — if you want to send your dollars to the best farms and communities in the Middle West, then use alcohol made from the agricultural resources we grow at home," said energy expert Gal Luft.

The technology we need to make a huge reduction in our gasoline consumption is already here, hybrid cars that run on flex-fuels. What's needed are more buyers. While enticing

Detroit to make these more fuel-efficient vehicles is a good idea, we also need a gasoline tax to entice every consumer to buy one. The president rejects a gasoline tax. He's wrong. He can't end our oil addiction unless he ends his tax-cutting addiction.

"Good luck, pal. These guys never connect the dots. The president doesn't see that his global democracy-promotion agenda is going to be stymied unless America leads the world away from oil. We are heading into an era we've never seen before: \$50- to \$60-a-barrel oil for a long time. Five years of that will strengthen the worst regimes and worst corruption trends across the globe, and everyone is just going to coddle these oil regimes to get their crude."

You're right: addicts never tell the truth to their pushers. So here's my bottom line: I'm glad the president is changing his rhetoric on energy and says he is changing his funding priorities. But he has to go much further if he wants to make a great difference. There's no pain-free solution. Remember how President Kennedy ended his May 25, 1961, State of the Union speech calling for a moon shot? He said: "I have not asked for a single program which did not cause one or all Americans some inconvenience, or some hardship, or some sacrifice."

"Pigs will fly before Bush says that."

You may be right. And if he fails to carry through with this energy initiative, I'll be the first to rip him for it. In the meantime, I prefer to give him a new reputation to live up to. And by the way, pal, you got a better horse to ride right now?