

OIL WARS

✘ The Hill reports that, rather than forcing John McCain and a lot of endangered Republican incumbents to vote against children's healthcare again, Democrats in Congress are going to work on an energy bill that will include some allowance for drilling.

House Democrats are ready to propose an expansion of offshore drilling as part of a broader energy bill they plan to introduce this month, according to a top Democrat.

Democratic Caucus Vice Chairman John Larson (Conn.) said the majority is prepared to back "responsible" offshore drilling through a bill that could be brought to the floor as early as next week.

[snip]

"We will consider responsibly opening portions of the Outer Continental Shelf for drilling while demanding that Big Oil companies use the leases they have already been issued or return them to the public," Larson said Saturday in the Democratic response to the President's radio address.

Larson said the legislation will also seek to curb excessive oil market speculation and call for a reinvestment of government royalties into alternative energy technology.

This is not actually news. When Obama said he would reluctantly accept more drilling as part of a package that included a lot of other, smarter energy policies, it became clear the party would follow his lead.

And, if it is done well, it might actually be brilliant jujitsu. If the bill were to define

"responsible" by requiring that states agree to the drilling and by demanding that the drilling actually look like it would do some good, it would result in very little new drilling at all—because drilling is, from a policy standpoint, not "responsible." And a package could take the Republicans' most successful (arguably, their only) policy recommendation, drilling, off the table for the election.

Of course, that all assumes this would be done well...

Meanwhile, in Alaska, the Caribou Barbie is trying to pull off her own energy jujitsu, though it's not yet clear what that jujitsu might entail. Andrew Halcro reports that Governor Palin is trying to get the oil companies onto a conference call this week, but it's not yet clear why she wants to talk.

Governor Sarah Palin has requested a conference call this week with the CEO's of the major oil companies playing a role in the potential development of Alaska's natural gas pipeline.

The requested participants include Tony Hayward from BP, James Mulva from ConocoPhillips, Rex Tillerson from Exxon along with others. According to my source, no one knows exactly what the purpose of the call is, but some have never the less speculated.

Last week in her address to the nation, Palin stepped far over the line of truthiness (thanks Steven Colbert) when she told the country, "I fought to bring about the largest private-sector infrastructure project in North American history. And when that deal was struck, we began a nearly forty billion dollar natural gas pipeline to help lead America to energy independence."

Halcro lists the following possible reasons

she's requesting the call:

- She has realized she actually has to deliver on the promise she made in her acceptance speech—so she has finally decided to make nice with the oil companies and start negotiating terms for the natural gas project that will be economically viable for the oil companies.
- She wants to persuade the oil companies to stop referring to the massive new taxes she levied against them as a "windfall profits tax" (which of course Democrats support but McCain and the Republicans oppose strongly).
- She has realized she has to at least be speaking to oil company executives if she wants to claim to be an energy expert—so she has decided to play nice to achieve, at least, some dialogue.
- She wants to publicly browbeat the oil companies again, to bolster the McCain campaign's claim to being ~~assholes~~ mavericks.

Mind you, that is all speculation from Halcro, not verified facts.

Now, Sarah Palin may be utterly inexperienced in

most things that pertain to being a Vice President; she may be a more interesting subject for stories about her false maverickness, her love of pork, and her lying. But she is definitely in a position to offer Republicans a story to tell about energy plans. We would do well to consider both these developments—Congress' negotiation of an energy package and Palin's attempts to do who knows what with the oil companies in AK—as two skirmishes in the battle over who gets to claim their party has a real plan to solve the current energy pinch.

This may be one of the policy issues that could decide this election—whether one or both of these sides successfully pulls off their jujitsu. I say "may," because who knows whether it will remain the one policy issue on which Republicans outpoll Democrats, what with the price of a barrel of oil down to \$107 but with OPEC threatening to cut production. But both sides are treating it as the one policy issue that one or another side might be able to show real progress on between now and the election.

Photo by kristen.