

A SPUTNIK MOMENT WITHOUT THE MOON

✘ I laughed yesterday when I first saw the SOTU excerpts with Obama's description of a Sputnik moment. Mind you, he had already used—or rather, cribbed—the language before. So the language itself wasn't funny.

Rather, it was that he planned to use it as an urgent call to action on the day that Carol Browner announced her resignation. The only way calling this a Sputnik moment makes sense, IMO, is if you can paint in very concrete terms the security threat that demands such urgency. And the urgent threat facing us—one badly exacerbated because of the particular industries where China is kicking our ass—is climate change. But with Browner's departure also goes Obama's focus on climate change, replaced instead by a vaguely defined clean energy race.

As David Roberts lays out,

[C]onsider the larger analogy at the heart of Obama's speech: America is at a "Sputnik moment." Well, why was Sputnik a Sputnik moment? Not because Americans said, "Wow, the USSR is getting really good at technology! We're getting outcompeted!" No, what the public said was, "Holy sh*t! Our mortal enemy is putting stuff in *space*! They're going to rain rockets down on us and we're all going to die!" In other words, Sputnik was not some friendly challenge to see who can win the race to the future (or whatever). It was a *threat*. That's what lit a fire under America's ass and that's why America rose to the challenge. Obama wants to launch a clean energy race. And good for him. But what are the stakes? What is the threat? Where is the *urgency*? If it's just about international competition, why not focus on good macroeconomic policy – why go to

such lengths to build up *this* economic sector, *these* technologies? Why not just leave it to the market?

Here's why: The U.S. needs to get at or close to zero carbon emissions by the middle of this century or there will be severe and possibly irreversible changes in the climate, leading to massive, widespread human suffering. That's why we don't have time to wait for the invisible hand of the market. That's why we need massive investments, tighter regulations, and a price on climate pollution. *That's the threat.* Without it, a push for clean energy is a nice slogan that can easily be shunted aside when, oh, gas prices are rising, or there's a recession, or Joe Manchin need to get reelected.

The threat of climate change is what justifies and animates the clean energy race. That's the substantive need. [DR's emphasis]

A Sputnik moment only works if you've laid out a compelling threat that demands the country work together to solve it. We are facing such a moment. But Obama won't even name that threat by name.