After listening to Obama's spill speech, enviro-businessman unveils his own plan

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After reading my article last month headlined "Allow me to share with you an excellent mass-transit plan," where I presented mass-transportation options for Madison using alternative fuel vehicles, a friend called and said, "Ken I never knew you were such an environmentalist."

To be honest, *I* never knew I was an environmentalist. I try to use this column to advocate for profitable business ventures, fiscal responsibility in government spending, partnerships between the public and private sectors, and sound long-range planning. These are not the usual foundations for tree-hugging, whale-saving, car-banning environmentalism.

I am an enviro-businessman. I believe in environmental causes when they make economic sense or benefit my grandchildren.

Fast forward to President Obama's speech on the environment and the gulf oil spill. What amazed me was how little he said that was actually beneficial either to the environment or to business. I understand the political tightrope he must walk and the impact taking sides would have on the economy, but he offered nothing to either side. No direction, no hope, no solutions. Now, without guidance, everyone is wondering what the future holds.

What we wanted was the JFK moon speech:

"*...We choose to go to the moon. We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one which we intend to win...*" — JFK, Sept. 12, 1962. The whole speech is at http://www.famousquotes.me.uk/speeches/John_F_Kennedy/3.htm.

Instead, we got...

"*...I'm happy to look at other ideas and approaches from either party — as long they seriously tackle our addiction to fossil fuels. Some have suggested raising efficiency standards in our buildings like we did in our cars and trucks. Some believe we should set standards to ensure that more of our electricity comes from wind and solar power. Others wonder why the energy industry spends only a fraction of what the high-tech industry does on research and development, and want to rapidly boost our investments in such research and development. All of these approaches have merit and deserve a fair hearing in the months ahead. But the one approach I will not accept is inaction...*" — BHO, June 15, 2010. The whole speech is at http://projects.washingtonpost.com/obama-speeches/speech/290/.

We are missing the goal, the vision, the synergy, and the outcome we need to move forward.

Here is what I believe the President should have said:

"*...By 2020, all vehicles sold in the U.S. will have electric motors as their primary source of propulsion. We have the technology, we have the expertise, we have the infrastructure and we have a mandate. The mandate comes from the knowledge that if we do not make this change for ourselves, someone else will make this change for us. To accomplish this goal, we will have to shift from our dependency on foreign resources to a dependence on the science, technology and productivity available from our universities and business community. This investment in our future will not come cheaply nor easily, but the failure to move forward is simply no longer an option...*" — KAH, June 30, 2010. The whole speech has yet to be written.

Actually much of the work is already done. Current hybrids and electric vehicles already demonstrate that the engines and drive-trains work. Europe is building electric buses and trucks, and Caterpillar has a diesel-electric (electric motor diesel generation) bulldozer in production. Most trains are electric today, and several emerging technologies in the field will advance the technologies. For example, laptop computers and cell phones have shown that we can rapidly respond to needs like improved battery performance as well as create entirely new technologies like wireless communication. We have seen exponential growth in areas where there is demand and economic feasibility, and we have both in the transportation industry.

The automobile is still using the same power plant it has since we replaced the horse. Imagine computers still using floppy disks for storage, all phones tied to cords, or all math done on an abacus. The best estimates are that we may have improved fuel economy twofold since 1970 (and for the record, my 1966 VW Bug got just over 28 MPG). Let's compare that to the several thousand times increase in storage capacity and speed for a computer in that same time frame. I suggest we need to change the major variables if we want to move autos forward at anything close to the pace of other technologies.

There are other advantages: The new electric vehicles will last longer, and auto manufacturers will have decades of demand for new vehicles as we replace the internal combustion engine. There are significant challenges we will need to address; battery capacity, the production of electricity, solar, wind and geothermal technologies, lighter structural elements, and the invention of new technologies not even on the radar screen yet.

Finally, as an enviro-businessman, I have to point out that the Nissan Leaf electric vehicle costs $15,000 more than a comparable gas vehicle, making the break-even point coming only after each vehicle has traveled 150,000 miles, and this assumes the electricity was free. This suggests that we do have major hurdles in our way. Of course, when JFK mentioned the moon, man had never left the pull of Earth's gravity, the costs were not even calculable, we had no prototype vehicle even hinting at the feasibility of such a venture, and I carry more computing power in my pocket than we had for the eventual spacecraft. We are way ahead of the game this time. 10...9...8... ■