A coalition of industries that sell or depend on coal handed out promotional fans at the Democratic National Convention and is headed to the Republican gathering now. The group’s blog says this is Cynthia Harris of Huntsville, Ala. I’d love to hear from her. (Credit: American Coalition for Clean Coal Electricity)

The vision that “clean coal” will play a significant role in the country’s energy future was on display last night in Barack Obama’s acceptance speech, and you can be sure it will be highlighted when John McCain speaks next week, as well.

This enduring notion — that the world can have its coal and climate, too, by pumping the carbon dioxide from combustion into the earth — has been promoted by institutions including Peabody Energy, the world’s biggest coal company (see its coal-sales ticker here), and the Natural Resources Defense Council.

A group that pushed the clean-coal theme at the Democratic convention, the American Coalition for Clean Coal Electricity, will be heading to the Republican convention next week. Environmentalists have attacked the group as the latest in a string of industry propaganda mills.
Behind the gloss, experts who have run the numbers still say that at a scale the atmosphere would notice, capturing and burying CO2 remains a pipe dream. I have yet to see a serious challenge to the math on this done by Vaclav Smil of the University of Manitoba, who has noted that handling just 10 percent of today’s carbon dioxide emissions would require more pipelines and other equipment than is now used worldwide to extract oil — a precious commodity — from the ground.

Anything is possible at great cost, but is there evidence yet that the world — particularly China, with its mountains of coal — is willing to foot the bill? Many experts say the world’s wealthy nations will probably have to compensate China and India if those countries are to move to curtail emissions. Can you see Congress signing such a check?

In 2005, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change was enthusiastic about gas-capturing technology, while noting its high cost. Right now, the most ambitious efforts to stash carbon dioxide are handling the gas at amounts totaling little more than a million tons a year. To have a discernible impact on the growth in emissions from coal burning, carbon dioxide disposal would have to get to the billion-tons-a-year level. In a widely cited study on “The Future of Coal,” M.I.T. experts said that an enormous increase in investment in industrial-scale demonstration plants would be required now even to know in 10 or 15 years if the technology can work at a meaningful scale.

For now, you’ll be hearing lots more about lofty plans for “clean coal” technology (America’s Power will be in Minneapolis-St. Paul), but I encourage you to watch for actual dollars spent on actual plants in actual places.