

The Enduring Allure of ‘Clean Coal’

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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.