

Yes, the pipeline matters

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

February 21, 2013

[Joe Nocera thinks](#) that everyone protesting the Keystone pipeline is pretty silly. He makes a series of weak arguments, and I'll direct you to others to explain why [the pipeline isn't about a U.S. geopolitical advantage](#), why [the environmental cost of tar sands oil extraction isn't small](#) just because Nocera says so, why [activism is more important than wonky incrementalism](#), and why [a carbon tax wouldn't make tar sands extraction more viable](#).

I'm more interested in Nocera's overall point: that we need to reduce *demand* for fossil fuels, not *supply*. Until demand goes way down, he argues, we still need the oil wherever we can get it.

It's a familiar refrain. But it implies, wrongly, that demand for oil is an absolute that stands in isolation from other factors. It's like how whenever I argue in favor of passenger trains, someone counters that we Americans made our choice: we like cars better. What could anyone do?

Well, the federal government could have *not* systematically invested in federal highways while also divesting from rail infrastructure, for one. Nowadays, the government keeps promoting fossil fuel production—promotion that includes not just regulatory green lights but also [financial investment](#)—while moving far too slowly on clean energy.

[Germany produces more than 20 times as much solar power per capita as we do](#). Not because they have more sunshine; [they don't](#). Because [they have enacted ambitious public policies that make this possible](#). Here in the States, the president wants to get serious about clean energy investment, but the politics make it unlikely—while the two parties stand united in their ongoing support for the fossil-fuel status quo. As long as this is the case, how will we shift toward a sustainable energy future? Not by counting solely on dramatic drops in demand.

Averting climate catastrophe requires changes in government priorities and consumer behavior alike. That's why the Keystone pipeline protesters also promote change at the consumer level. (For someone alleged to be fixated on the pipeline, Bill McKibben sure talks about electric cars a lot.) Yes, lower demand for oil would reduce the pressure to get it from whatever source is available. But the government could be doing so much more to reduce that demand—and so much less to encourage it.