

Pipeline to disaster: Obama and the Alberta tar sands

by [Bill McKibben](#) in the [October 18, 2011](#) issue



An unbuilt stretch of pipeline in Manitoba. [AttributionShare Alike](#) [Some rights reserved](#) by [Loozrboy](#).

Sunday morning in jail was harder than I had imagined it would be. For one thing, no one had slept much. The central cell block in the Washington, D.C., jail has steel slabs with no mattresses, no pillows, no sheets. It was stifling hot and noisy, and we were all hungry—we'd each been given one baloney sandwich over the last 18 hours. And we were uncertain what the future held. When we'd been arrested the day before in a peaceful environmental protest outside the White House, the best guess was that we'd be processed and released by nightfall. But the guards were saying (correctly as it turned out) that we'd be lucky to be out by Monday evening.

I could feel my own courage flagging a bit along with that of the 40 or so other men up and down our cell block. I knew we represented a very wide range of faiths, including a pretty good showing for "none at all," so a regular church service was not in order. But for some reason I remembered one of my favorite spirituals. It's a classic call-and-response song, so simple that even someone who can't carry a tune can lead it: "Have you seen the Light? / Certainly, Lord / Have you seen the Light? / Certainly, Lord / Have you seen the Light? / Certainly, Lord / Certainly, certainly, certainly, Lord."

It's also endlessly adaptable, as singers demonstrated in the civil rights movement (under much harsher conditions than we were facing). So here's how it sounded that morning in late August: "Have you been to the jailhouse? / Certainly, Lord" and "Have you been in cuffs? / Certainly, Lord" and "Would you do it again? / Certainly, Lord."

Spare no sympathy for us. We got out eventually, and what we went through is nothing compared to what people in many communities in this country endure regularly. You can't even call us brave: we hadn't known what we were facing.

The brave people were the ones who showed up the next day, and the day after that—they knew what the risks were. Over two weeks, 1,253 people were arrested in what was the largest civil disobedience protest in several decades in this country. These were completely normal people, and most of them had never been arrested. (We asked demonstrators who had been president when they were born: the largest cohort came from the FDR and Truman years.)

Their protest was an expression of impatient love. For 20 years the world's scientists have been warning us about global warming. We've heard appeals from the National Academy and the Royal Academy and one collection of Nobel Prize-winning scientists after another. And nothing has happened except that our addiction to fossil fuel has grown deeper and more profound.

So when news came out that President Obama would, by himself, get to approve or block the building of a giant pipeline linking Texas refineries to the tar sands of Alberta, some of us thought the time for more than words had finally arrived.

We should have been outraged about the tar sands long ago: mining them for oil has already moved more earth than the Great Wall of China and the Suez Canal, making life all but impossible for the native communities that have long inhabited the land. But it took an alert from another scientist—NASA's James Hansen—to really get us going. His team calculated how much carbon actually lies in that pool of oil mixed with sand. The answer: it is the second largest reservoir of carbon on earth, second only to the oil fields of Saudi Arabia. Burning Saudi Arabia has already raised the temperature of the planet a degree. Knowing what we now know, it would be folly to repeat the operation in Canada. This oil should be left in the ground and the temptation to mine it avoided. If we burn it all up, says Hansen, it's "essentially game over for the climate."

In our day, some of the signs of the times come from physicists and chemists. They're the ones able to tell us what's happening to creation—though increasingly our own eyes can do the trick. The year 2010 was the warmest year ever recorded on this planet. In 2011, before August was over, the U.S. had recorded more billion-dollar weather disasters than in any year in our history. Texas has been drying up, blowing away and catching on fire; much of the rest of the nation has been under water. During the Washington protests, my own state of Vermont endured the most intense rains in its history—it was a kind of agony not to be home to help my neighbors dig out from under the mud. But a busload of Vermonters showed up a few days later to join the protests. "Too late to stop that storm," was the basic Yankee sentiment. "Better make sure there aren't too many more."

Making sure there aren't many more entails changing the way we power our lives, and that requires political action. If we just hook ourselves up to the next pool of oil, then it's predictable that we won't make the transition to solar and wind very fast. (There's a reason they don't hold AA meetings in liquor stores.) We needed to ask President Obama to make good on what he said during his campaign—like on the night he was nominated, when he said that in his administration "the rise of the oceans will begin to slow and the planet begin to heal."

If you don't mean it, you shouldn't say it. We've all cut the president some slack because he's dealing with a Congress that seems bent on substituting ideology for chemistry and physics—a Congress that seems certain that its laws can somehow upend the laws of creation. But when the president can do what needs doing all by himself—well, that's when he has to act. He'll either sign or reject a "presidential certificate of national interest" for the pipeline, and he's said he'll do it by year's end.

It won't be easy for him to turn it down. The forces on the other side are the most powerful on earth. (The fossil fuel industry makes more money than anything humans have ever done.) Which is why we've needed to find other currencies.

For a couple of weeks in August, we spent our bodies. Now we need to spend our spirit, our compassion, our feeling for the future. On November 6—exactly one year before the presidential election—some of us will spend the afternoon circling the White House. I'm not sure that's ever been done before. There won't be arrests this time. Depending on your perspective, we'll either be making a giant hopeful "O" around the president or performing a symbolic house arrest. In either case, the

message to the president is clear: Keep your word.

November 6 is a Sunday. I'm not telling you to skip church to come to D.C. that day. But I can promise that, just like that Sunday morning in jail, church will be there if you come.