

# Playing offense: It's time to divest from the oil industry

by [Bill McKibben](#) in the [January 9, 2013](#) issue



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The pipeline blockaders in the piney woods of East Texas that Kyle Childress describes ("[Protesters in the pews](#)," *Christian Century*, January 9, 2013) are American exemplars—the latest incarnation of John Muir, Rachel Carson, John Lewis or Fannie Lou Hamer. They're playing defense with verve and creativity—blocking ugly and destructive projects that wreck landscapes and lives. And defense is crucial. As generations of sports coaches have delighted in pointing out, defense wins games.

But we're very far behind in the global warming game, so we need some offense too. And here's what offense looks like: going directly after the fossil fuel industry and holding it accountable for the rapid warming of the planet. It's the richest and most arrogant industry the world has ever seen. Call it Powersandprincipalities, Inc. And where once it served a real social need—energy—it now stands squarely in the way of getting that energy from safe, renewable sources. Its business plan—sell more coal, gas and oil—is at odds with what every climate scientist now says is needed for planetary survival.

If that sounds shocking, sorry: a lifetime of Exxon ads haven't prepared us for the reality that Exxon is a first-class villain, any more than a lifetime of looking at the

Marlboro Man prepared us to understand lung cancer. In fact, our first task is to turn the fossil fuel industry into the equivalent of the tobacco industry, making people understand that it plays a destructive role in society. Yes, we all use fossil fuel. But most of us would be just as happy using sun and wind power. It's only the fossil fuel industry that works every day to make sure that doesn't happen.

And our first tool to do that job: divest institutions (schools, churches and municipalities) of stock in those companies. Sell the stock. The fossil fuel companies care about money.

It won't be an easy fight. Still, here's the first sign that it's going to work: beginning the night after the presidential election, a crew from the 350.org movement spent 21 nights crisscrossing America on a biodiesel bus (with Johnny Cash's old driver) and holding nightly gatherings that sold out big theaters and enormous churches. We found people eager to dig into this issue. By the time we were done, students on 182 campuses had active divestment fights under way—our battle was the most e-mailed story in the *New York Times*, and *Time* magazine said: "University presidents who don't fall in line should get used to hearing protests outside their offices. Just like their forerunners in the apartheid battles of the 1980s, these climate activists won't stop until they win."

Better yet, the Massachusetts conference of the United Church of Christ, with veteran climate activist and conference minister Jim Antal in the lead, passed a resolution demanding that the denomination divest immediately. As they put it, "We can't continue to profit from wrecking God's creation—not through our pensions, not through our endowments, not by our personal investments. As Jesus said: 'Where your treasure is, there is your heart also.'"

Let's begin with the problem. It's the greatest problem human beings have ever faced. And if you had some sense that global warming was distant or abstract or safely in the future, 2012 should have convinced you otherwise.

The year began with that summer-in-March heat wave that meteorologists called the most statistically freakish weather event in our history. In lots of places across the Midwest the *low* temperature for the day beat the old all-time high. That was a foretaste of what would come: a summer of record heat (July was the hottest month in any month of any year in American history), marked by record wildfires and a drought so intense that barges ran aground on the Mississippi. And there was that

Sandy thing: the lowest barometric pressure ever recorded north of Cape Hatteras as well as the largest storm ever measured, with tropical storm-force winds stretching 1,040 miles out from the center and the cold Atlantic pouring into New York subways. Exactly how many signs do we require?

If we thought that this was occurring only in the United States, consider that during this past summer the Arctic was melting so fast that it smashed every record in the books. By mid-September NASA's James Hansen was describing it as "a planetary emergency." Meanwhile, after a fall gathering devoted to a discussion of ocean acidification, leading researchers concluded that the seas would soon be "hot, breathless and sour." Then a study funded by the least developed countries and released this fall found that climate change was already killing 400,000 people a year, not to mention undercutting developing economies. The relentless drought was enough to raise world grain prices 40 percent in a matter of weeks—and if you're getting by on a few dollars a day, that was definitely the biggest thing to happen in your world this past year.

We've known for 25 years what's been going on. When human beings burn coal, oil and gas, they pour carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, and the molecular structure of that CO<sub>2</sub> traps heat that would otherwise radiate back out to space. So far we've raised the planet's temperature one degree—enough, remember, to melt the Arctic. But the same scientists who told us that would happen now tell us with sober confidence that the one degree will become four or five degrees before the century is out unless we change our ways. That's not a world that will support our civilizations. Agronomists at Stanford warned last year that from now on each degree rise in global temperature will cut grain yields 10 percent. Imagine our planet yielding 40 percent fewer calories.

So why don't we change our ways? It's not impossible. Germany, the one large country to take this problem seriously, announced in November that it would soar past its targets of producing a third of its energy with renewable sources by 2025. In fact, the energy minister of the conservative Angela Merkel government declared that Germany will be above 50 percent and perhaps at two-thirds.

Is this because Germany has an unfair advantage in sunshine? Probably not, since Munich is north of Montreal. It's because the Germans have assembled the necessary political will. And it's not just Germany. China, while it has made serious energy mistakes in recent years—such as building too many coal-fired power

plants—has installed more solar hot water arrays than any nation on Earth. At this point, 250 million Chinese—more than 25 percent of the country—get their hot water from the sun. In this country less than 1 percent heat water via the sun—and that’s mostly to heat swimming pools.

We’re stuck going nowhere because of politics. The oil industry alone spends \$440,000 a day lobbying Congress, which explains why endless delegations of scientists are not heard when they explain the stark facts of our predicament. When anyone deviates even slightly—when President Obama delayed action on the Keystone Pipeline for a year, for instance—the reaction is swift and predictable. The American Petroleum Institute promised “significant” political consequences and helped fund an endless series of ads. Days after the election, 18 senators demanded that the pipeline project be restarted. Between them they’d taken \$11 million in campaign contributions from the fossil fuel industry. And that’s only one pipeline.

A few numbers clarify our situation:

- Two degrees—that’s how much even the most conservative nations of the world think we should limit the rise in global warming. It’s high—twice the Arctic-melting level of one degree—but it’s where the world’s countries—the G-8, the G-20, China, the U.S.—have drawn the line.
- 565 gigatons—that’s how much more carbon dioxide the scientists say we can pour into the atmosphere between now and 2050 if we want to have any hope of staying below the two-degree limit. At current rates—we’re burning more than 30 gigatons annually and increasing 3 percent a year—it will take us 14 years to seal our fate.
- 2,795 gigatons—that’s how much carbon dioxide the fossil fuel industry has in its declared reserves, ready to burn. It’s still below the ground physically, but economically it’s already up on the surface. That’s how Exxon sets its share price. Oil reserves provide the collateral when Peabody Coal wants to borrow money. And it’s five times 565—five times what anyone thinks we can safely get away with burning.

But it will be burned unless we intervene. The numbers—first published a year ago by an obscure group of British financial analysts—mean there’s no longer any doubt about how this story comes out. There’s no room for wishful thinking. Exxon alone has 7 percent of the carbon necessary to take us past two degrees, followed closely

by Chevron, BP, Shell and the rest. These companies aren't outlaws against the laws of the state. They mostly get to write those laws. But they are outlaws against the laws of physics. Unless we intervene, the end of the story is written.

So what do we do? One tactic, of course, is to use less of their product. Every time we get more efficient, every time we screw in a better lightbulb or ride a bike, we make these companies a little less powerful. Alas, the key word is *little*. Given 100 years, slow changes in behavior would do the job. But since much of the Arctic has already melted, we need to move much faster. We need the kind of structural changes (a serious carbon tax) and international agreements (helping the developing world leapfrog past coal to sun) that the fossil fuel industry has proved so expert at blocking.

That's where the offense comes in. As individuals, we can't help burning some fossil fuel ourselves (you want to take the train, but if there isn't one . . .), but we can help ourselves from profiting from it. We can make sure our institutions divest from fossil fuel, and in the course of doing so we will have the chance we need to turn Exxon into the equivalent of Philip Morris and weaken its power dramatically. As I said before, this is the new tobacco industry, except that instead of killing us off one by one it's taking down the whole planet. We need to divest from it.

We've done this once as a society in a big way, during the battle to end apartheid in South Africa. One hundred and fifty campuses sold their stock, as did many cities and lots of churches. When Nelson Mandela finally got out of prison, one of the first places he went was California, to say thanks to students who had pressured their schools' trustees into selling \$3 billion in stock. Now Desmond Tutu has made a short video for our Do the Math tour calling for this kind of pressure again—and calling climate change the next great overriding moral issue on the planet's agenda.

Most of the time, we can pressure companies to change their bad practices other ways, through shareholder resolutions and the like. That's because most of the time those bad practices are a fairly minor part of the business plan. Author Naomi Klein points out that when we ask Apple to pay decent wages to its Chinese workers, we don't need the company to stop making iPhones. But the fossil fuel industry is different. At the moment, carbon and more carbon is its business plan. Exxon spends \$100 million every day looking for more hydrocarbons, even though we already have far more than we can safely burn. Someday these companies can be part of the solution, turning themselves into energy companies and using their skills to build a

planet full of solar panels. But that won't happen until they're beaten politically, until they can no longer use their power to ward off the future.

We need to go to work, and as we do, our practical survival instincts should kick in: No more Sandys. No more droughts. But this battle is so big and so tough that it will need to reach our moral core if we're going to work hard enough and fast enough to get the job done. Bob Massie, Episcopal priest and pioneer of the corporate responsibility movement, says: "If one is opposed to climate change, it is morally wrong to hold stock in—and thus to benefit from—corporations whose purpose is to make it worse. Many people have pointed out the painful hypocrisy of America's founders arguing for freedom at the same moment that many of them owned slaves. A similar form of hypocrisy—conveniently obscured, quietly justified—must now be exposed and challenged."

Virtually every college and every denomination I know is on record arguing that we must work hard to be good stewards. If we're called to green the campus and green the church, how can we not be called to green the portfolio?

It won't be easy. Fossil fuels often make up a big part of investment strategies. But we can't be like the young rich man who "went away sorrowful for he had great possessions." Already the trustees of Unity College in Maine have voted to sell every penny of their fossil fuel stocks. Already the student body of Harvard has voted—3 to 1—to tell their trustees to do the same. Already members of the United Church of Christ and the Unitarian Universalist Association have introduced resolutions instructing their denominations to do likewise.

Sometimes the fight seems hopelessly lopsided. When I told a TV reporter about plans to tame the Exxons of the world, he said: "This just seems impossible. It's a David and Goliath story." I was nodding my head and feeling glum, and then I thought: "Wait a minute. I know how that story comes out."

I can't promise that we'll triumph. But I do know that this is the greatest fight humans have ever had to engage in, that it's coming to a head and that the time to be counted is at hand.