

A blown opportunity

By Eileen McNamara, Globe Columnist | October 17, 2004

It has been a season of outrageous intimations. That the lame will walk if John Kerry wins the presidency. That the terrorists will attack if George Bush does not. For sheer offensiveness, though, it is tough to beat the suggestion that fewer American soldiers will die in Iraq if a private developer gets to build windmills in Nantucket Sound.

The hyperbole came last week in a message from Cape Wind urging supporters to help torpedo a perfectly sensible proposal by US Senator John W. Warner, Republican of Virginia, to delay construction of all offshore wind farms until Congress establishes rules to ensure that the public interest is protected.

"At a time when Americans are more concerned than ever about our dependence on Mideast oil, with our soldiers dying in Iraq and with record high oil prices, Senator Warner is attempting to block one of America's options for reducing our dependence on the Middle East -- developing clean, offshore, American wind power," huffed Cape Wind, the company seeking to build a wind farm on 24 square miles of public land off Cape Cod.

It is a distortion typical of the polarized nature of our politics at present to invoke dead soldiers in an attempt to characterize as callous obstructionism what was, in fact, a call for thoughtful deliberation about the use of our offshore resources. Warner's only mistake was trying to slip this piece of common sense into the Defense Authorization Act as an amendment. There should be nothing clandestine about a demand that offshore energy development wait until rules are established to guarantee environmental protection, competitive bidding, and compensation for use of public lands.

There are plenty of competing claims about the plan to erect 130 turbines, 147 feet tall, on Horseshoe Shoals. Opponents and developers disagree on everything from the amount of electricity that would be produced to the impact on the aesthetics of Nantucket Sound. What is not in dispute is that a nascent industry is asking for a green light to develop the coastline before a comprehensive process to oversee offshore wind farms is in place.

Warner's amendment would not have "blocked" the development of wind power; it would have regulated it, just as the federal government regulates offshore oil drilling and timber cutting in national forests. He was asking no more than the US Commission on Ocean Policy recommended last spring when it declared inadequate the current permitting process for offshore wind farms under which the ill-equipped US Army Corps of Engineers has oversight responsibility.

"First and foremost, it cannot grant leases or exclusive rights to use and occupy space on the Outer Continental Shelf," the commission wrote. "It is not based on a comprehensive and coordinated planning process for determining where, when, and how this activity should take place. It also lacks the ability to assess a reasonable resource rent for the public space occupied or a fee or royalty for the energy generated."

To insist on the necessity of firm guidelines for development is not a sign of indifference to US dependence on foreign oil. It is a responsible posture by an elected official trying to protect a natural and economic resource that belongs to the American people. For too long, the debate about the Cape Wind project has caricatured those who urge caution on offshore wind farms as shortsighted enemies of renewable energy or as self-interested property owners trying to preserve the view from their shorefront homes. The truth is, it is possible to embrace the promise of wind power and also to worry about the lack of controls now in place to regulate its development.

Nantucket Sound is not the only coastal resource up for grabs. Private companies are staking claims up and down the coast to cash in on the tax benefits available to those who develop renewable energy sources. Those tax credits are a good idea, but they need to be part of a broader policy that, with the defeat of Warner's proposal last week, now seems even further out of reach.

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