

GOP consultant urges agreement on energy policy

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Seeking to give a boost to U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham's push for energy independence, a former policy advisor to U.S. Sen. John McCain says Republicans and Democrats need to agree on an approach to alternatives to petroleum imports.

Alternative fuels technology, if developed and built in this country, could lead a manufacturing renaissance and help pull the nation out of recession, said Douglas Holtz-Eakin, who advised McCain in his 2008 presidential campaign and is a former chief economist for the Council of Economic Advisors.

Speaking at a Greenville luncheon sponsored by Furman University's Riley Institute, Holtz-Eakin said Washington leaders need to follow Graham's lead on making the nation secure from spiking oil prices, Middle East wars, and the half of our import debt that is spent on petroleum.

"This is about mobilizing a wealth of expertise into a coherent national objective," Holtz-Eakin said. "In America, we always figure things out. I'm optimistic. South Carolina obviously is ahead in thinking about this."

Holtz-Eakin voiced the traditional GOP mantra that more regulation is bad, even on energy policy. But he was unequivocal in asserting that Democrats and Republicans can and should agree on some middle ground, some simple principles that will allow the nation to free itself of petroleum dependence.

Keep it simple, he said.

"Keep it a small bill that can receive bi-partisan support," he said. "Then let the marketplace decide what works. There is a tremendous power and flexibility in the economy that will tackle this."

Holtz-Eakin puts great faith in the ability of American ingenuity to resolve problems with plentiful energy sources such as coal and nuclear power plants.

"Coal is the research project of the 21st century, and we don't know how it will turn out," he said. "But don't give up on it."

And regarding nuclear power and associated waste issues, he said, "This is an innovation challenge."

"Nuclear is the one large-scale source of electricity that puts zero carbon into the atmosphere," he said. "We can't take it off the table."

Holtz-Eakin told the gathering of business and academic leaders that, as a Republican, it bothers him that his party has not been able to attract young voters for the last three election cycles. He wants Republicans to become more sensitive to environmental and energy independence issues.

"Conservatives should be interested in taking leadership on these problems," he said.