I am beginning to wonder. If the answer for making solar energy cheaper than coal were to pass our way, would we see it coming? Would we recognize it, and rally to help it to succeed?

Stan Ovshinsky and His Photovoltaic
Production Line

The fact is, I think I may have seen it, already. It is tough to discover how hard it is to get our policy leaders to figure it out.

About a year ago, Berkeley Law's Dean Christopher Edley traveled to Detroit to meet with Stan Ovshinsky, a man who for more than 50 years has been a pioneer in the field of amorphous materials. Along the way, Stan has invented many things, including the battery used in most hybrid vehicles, and laid the groundwork for flat-screen televisions and computer flash drives. He also invented a commercially-successful type of thin-film photovoltaic material. His finished product can be rolled out onto a roof for installation. It is nearly indestructible (bullet holes won't make it flinch), and has done service on the exterior of the U.S. space station. The manufacturers of his product sell it as fast at it comes off of the assembly line.

Dean Edley was inspired by his trip and encouraged me to visit Stan Ovshinsky, as well. I did, and was excited by what I saw. Recently, New York Times columnist Bob Herbert made the same pilgrimage and wrote about it in the Times.

Stan Ovshinsky says he can make photovoltaic material that will be cost-competitive with coal. There is every reason to believe that he knows what he is talking about — over 50 years of reasons, including a demonstrated ability to make commercially-viable photovoltaics. I have been privileged to get to know Stan, and can say with confidence that he is the real deal. Not only is the case he makes for inexpensive photovoltaics convincing, what is also evident is his unencumbered motivation to use this technology for the betterment of the planet. He would link pervasive use of photovoltaics to the separation of hydrogen for water, and then use that hydrogen as a transporation fuel. He has invented an efficient means for storing hydrogen in a vehicle for use as a combustion fuel. Did I mention that he is creating jobs in Detriot?

What is missing is the kind of financial support he needs to complete the "proof-of-concept" phase for his advanced photovoltaics, and then achieve full commercial operation.

The agony is that despite the ambitious funding opportunities in the recent stimulus legislation, and despite the government's ability to guarantee hundreds of millions in loans for the high-end Tesla electric vehicles, Stan's project is falling through the cracks. There is something wrong about this, with an inventor whose record of success is so strong, and with climate stakes that are so high. There must be a way to have key people in Washington notice what is going on, and help make this new opportunity happen. Stan Ovshinsky is not about to give up, and neither should anyone else.