Artistic Rendition of
Future Gen (From DOE)

The U.S. Department of Energy announced today that it will restart FutureGen, a large-scale demonstration project to determine the feasibility of capturing and sequestering carbon dioxide generated from coal-fired power plants. As Dan described in an earlier post, the Bush Administration had cancelled FutureGen based on cost-overruns, overruns that turned out to be based in large part on a mathematical error.

The DOE announcement makes good on Energy Secretary Steven Chu's commitment to carbon capture and sequestration (CC&S) and adds to $2.4 billion he has already committed to fund CCS research. The idea behind CCS is to first capture carbon dioxide produced during the combustion of fossil fuels (primarily coal) and then bury it underground in geographical formations. If successful, CCS would allow for continued reliance on coal-fired power plants and presumably make the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions more politically palatable to regions of the country heavily reliant on coal, like the southeast.

CCS is not without controversy. Some environmentalists worry that the long-term storage of large amounts of carbon dioxide could be dangerous. And the siting of new plants outfitted with CCS technology is already raising the same sort of local opposition that I've earlier described about the siting of some renewable energy plants. By contrast, an interdisciplinary team of researchers at MIT is optimistic about the future of CCS but advocates government investment in CCS demonstration projects and changes to the DOE research program in CCS in order to spur the development of CCS technology. Secretary Chu appears to be heeding the MIT recommendations.