



Open Pit Coal Mine (Getty Images)

President Obama's trip to China (noted [here](#) yesterday by Dan Farber) refocused world attention on China's mushrooming contributions to global warming. Many have declared that China has eclipsed the United States as the number one emitter of greenhouse gases, and it is evident that its emissions grow by the day. Perhaps the most devastating examples of China's "progress" are the Three Gorges Dam and the rapid-fire introduction of new coal-fired power plants. It may be easy to forget that when it comes to these two icons of environmental excess, the United States did much more than simply lead by example. When Chinese leaders declared the intent to pursue these projects, the official U.S. response was to ask, "How can we help?"

In early November 1978, as President Carter prepared to sign his five-part National Energy Act of 1978, his Energy Secretary James Schlesinger traveled to China to represent the interests of American industry. The November 6th New York Times characterized Schlesinger as saying that U.S. coal firms "might help dig the mines, build coal-preparation plants and help the Chinese manufacture coal-mining machinery." The Chinese also reportedly "discussed American technical help" in building the Three Gorges Dam, including "site investigation, foundation design and training the Chinese in the construction of hydroelectric plants and power-transmission systems." Perhaps U.S. oil magnate Armand Hammer was among those encouraging Schlesinger to make the trip. Six months later, Hammer signed a deal to assist China in its coal exploration activities. Six years after that, his Occidental Petroleum signed a deal to undertake open-pit mining in the Shanxi Province. Two years later, they began to dig in earnest.

The late 1970s and early 1980s were a different time. Although the National Energy Act of 1978 did spur the development of the modern renewable energy industry, the objectives were not primarily environmental. The dominant goal was to reduce reliance on oil from the Middle East. It was considered consistent with this objective to find ways to increase the use of coal - as a boiler fuel, and as feedstock for synthetic gas production (at the time, natural gas supplies were tight). Even in environmentally-conscious California, regulators would implement economic incentives for its utilities to burn more coal. And tapping into the vast economic development potential in China was a major U.S. foreign policy objective.

Nonetheless, as we close in on climate talks in Copenhagen, it may be helpful to remember that there are many reasons that the United States ought to carry a big part of the load.