The Green New Deal proposal introduced by Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Senator Ed Markey is a call for drastic action to address climate change. Specifically, section 1(A) says that "it is the duty of the Federal Government to create a Green New Deal . . . to achieve net-zero greenhouse gas emissions through a fair and just transition for all communities and workers." Section 2(C) says this and other goals should be "accomplished through a 10-year national mobilization . . . that will require . . .meeting 100 percent of the power demand through clean, renewable, and zero-emission energy sources."

The ten-year timetable is implausible on many levels. You'll notice that the proposal is labeled a resolution, not a bill. No one has even thought through how to write such a bill. We don't know the level of funding, the types of regulation, or how the programs would be administered. Beyond that, there are bigger questions. We don't know whether, even with unlimited spending, the goal is achievable in this timeframe. Even the most ambitious state governments don't think they can achieve zero emissions in such a short amount of time. Just to scale up their programs to the national level would take enormous effort. There is also the question of how such a huge program would be financed and how that would impact the economy. Not to mention political feasibility. The Democratic Congress was unable to pass even the far more limited Waxman-Markey bill in 2010. It would take a political revolution to make this version of the Green New Deal achievable today.

Ocasio-Cortez is very new on the political scene, and she may or may not yet be aware of the barriers. Senator Markey surely is. Perhaps it is better to think of the resolution as a rallying cry rather than a serious policy proposal.

Rallying cries have their pros and cons. On the one hand, as the term indicates, they are really effective for rallying the troops. It's hard to generate a lot of public excitement over more pragmatic measures. I have yet to hear a crowd changing: "What do we want? A CARBON TAX. When do we want it? NOW!" And many of the actions we need to take to address climate change are harder to grasp and far less glamorous than a carbon tax. In contrast, the Green New Deal may succeed in generating the kind of public support and enthusiasm we need to overcome ideology and vested interests. And we really do need to rally the troops. The trouble with being reasonable and speaking in a well-modulated voice is that no one can hear you in a crowded, noisy room. Without idealists taking more dramatic stands, progress may never happen.

But while rallying cries are important, it is dangerous to confuse them with Implementable policies. “Repeal and Replace” sounded like a great slogan for Republicans until it came time to come up with actual legislation. In the end they achieved nothing. There is also the risk that aiming too high could splinter support for climate programs, again leading to no results. The unattainable perfect can be the enemy of the attainable good.

“To Dream the Impossible Dream” is a song from a Broadway musical about Don Quixote. It’s a stirring song. But the title also captures the line between being idealistic and being deluded: Like the singer, you actually have to know what’s an impossible dream and what isn’t. Without impossible dreams, progress may not happen, but confusing a dream with a plan is a shortcut to failure.