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“About That Clean Coal business…”
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As fact-checkers close out their reports on the second presidential debate — gargantuan task that it has proved to be — here's one more falsehood that deserves to be highlighted: Clean coal is a myth and more a marketing term than scientific reality. Technology can certainly take some of the worst pollutants out of coal emissions, but science has yet to produce a cost-effective way to eliminate or capture carbon dioxide, the major contributor to climate change, from burning coal.

Yet there was Republican nominee [Donald Trump](http://www.baltimoresun.com/topic/politics-government/donald-trump-PEBSL000163-topic.html) on the stage Sunday night talking about how President Barack Obama and, by extension, [Hillary Clinton](http://www.baltimoresun.com/topic/politics-government/government/hillary-clinton-PEPLT007433-topic.html), are waging a war on the energy sector and coal in particular. The [U.S. Environmental Protection Agency](http://www.baltimoresun.com/topic/environmental-issues/u.s.-environmental-protection-agency-ORGOV000048-topic.html) "is killing these energy companies." And he stressed "there's a thing called clean coal" and that under a Trump administration, he would restore coal mining jobs in states like West Virginia. (He also spoke about foreign companies buying up failing energy "plants" and "rejiggering" them, but nobody seems to know what he was talking about, so we'll just leave the gobbledygook alone).

This isn't the first time a member of the [GOP](http://www.baltimoresun.com/topic/politics-government/republican-party-ORGOV0000004-topic.html) ticket has been talking up clean coal. Indiana Gov. Mike Pence, his running mate, has been touting coal for years and spoke of a "war on coal" repeatedly during the vice presidential debate. The Republican platform promotes clean coal, too. It's become a mantra for many conservatives, even if it is an oxymoron.

Back in this circumstance called reality, what's actually happened in the energy sector is that much of the world has been moving away from coal for decades. U.S. mining jobs have been mostly in decline since the 1980s. The chief culprit isn't the EPA, it's competition within the energy sector. The rise of hydraulic fracturing and horizontal drilling has raised domestic production of natural gas and oil while OPEC countries have been producing more oil as well. Cleaner-burning natural gas is simply a cheaper, less-polluting option for power plants and manufacturers, and that's proven costly for the coal mining companies, as many have slipped into bankruptcy.

But this isn't a bad thing. While it's created economic hardship for unemployed miners, it's also created opportunity in states (including West Virginia, incidentally) with underground shale deposits that can be tapped by fracking. Recoverable oil reserves within the U.S. now surpass those of Saudi Arabia. That's already given the country a "big league" — to use a favorite Trump description — economic boost.

Still, the U.S. needs to take the threat from air pollution and climate change seriously. If we artificially boost demand for coal simply to put miners back to work, the country will pay through the nose — not only in higher energy costs but in human health and lives. The toxins produced by burning coal, such as sulfur dioxide, ground-level ozone, heavy metals and particulates, contribute to four out of the five leading causes of death, including heart disease and cancer. And climate change could prove just as life-threatening as rising sea levels, record-breaking heatwaves, droughts, floods, declining food production and other related effects take hold.

None of those problems go away if we simply refuse to believe in them. Coal's decline isn't a product of politics, it's a function of chemistry. Perhaps science can produce the means to tap the benefits of coal without its enormous shortcomings, but it can't right now. A clean coal plant under construction in Mississippi has gone $4 billion over budget and doesn't yet function. A costly project in Illinois has been abandoned. China is investing in the concept, and we ought to wish them luck, as the chances for success appear slim. At this stage, it would surely be cheaper to simply plant trees to offset carbon production than expect coal to burn cleanly.

Now, perhaps the blatant lies candidates like Mr. Trump spout about energy won't make screaming front page headlines or breathless cable TV news cut-ins like shocking videos or hateful anti-immigration rants, but they should, considering the stakes involved. A [recent report](http://www.demos.org/publication/price-tag-being-young-climate-change-and-millennials-economic-future) concludes that if no further action is taken, climate change will cost the millennial generation $8.8 trillion. That makes global warming the single greatest economic threat facing young people today, and they (including the now-famous, red-sweater-clad Kenneth Bone who posed the question about energy policy at the St. Louis debate) deserve to hear the truth about it.