

# Forget Wind. Pickens Turns Focus to Gas.

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DALLAS — Arabic script is about to appear on television sets across the country, with the Texas oilman [T. Boone Pickens](#) helpfully reading an English translation.



Matt Nager for The New York Times

A plan by T. Boone Pickens called for expansion of wind energy to displace natural gas, freeing the natural gas for use in vehicles.

“Go back to sleep, America; the oil crisis is over,” Mr. Pickens intones, deadpan, in the new video. Seductive Middle Eastern music plays in the background.

But suddenly, the picture switches to American troops on a desert battlefield as flames leap skyward, and Mr. Pickens declares, “I don’t think so!”

What, exactly, is he up to now?

The Texas billionaire spent much of the last two years, and \$62 million of his fortune, on an advertising and public relations offensive in which he tried to persuade Americans to embrace his Pickens plan. It called for a vast expansion of [wind energy](#) to displace [natural gas](#), freeing the natural gas for use in vehicles, thus displacing foreign oil.

No American with a television set could escape Mr. Pickens’s argument last year. But somehow, a mass conversion to natural gas cars failed to ensue.

So now Mr. Pickens is turning up the volume, and changing his pitch with some extra alarm bells. He is opening his wallet to spend millions more on a new campaign, with the first advertisements scheduled to be broadcast Thursday on cable stations across the country.

His aides hope that a stronger message, focused on national security, will be effective after the attempted Christmas Day airliner bombing and other terrorist actions. They say they discussed whether using the Arabic lettering might be viewed as incendiary or offensive, but concluded that any added attention would be good for the cause.

“We’re infidels with most of these people and they have no use for us,” the 81-year-old oilman said in an interview on the way to a speech here recently. “We’re getting more and more dependent on the wrong people.”

The Pickens campaign has been suspended since October, when Mr. Pickens decided that health care was drowning out the energy debate. But he says he thinks the energy policy will soon move back to the top of Washington’s agenda.

This time, he has tweaked the Pickens plan in a way that just happens to conform with his changing business interests.

The man who made much of his fortune on oil, then in recent years turned to wind power, is now underplaying wind as a possible solution, while continuing to promote natural gas. Some of his stakes in companies would be more valuable if natural gas consumption were to rise.

Natural gas is the cleanest fossil fuel, emitting fewer greenhouse gases than coal or oil. Many experts say they think it is underused as a power and transportation fuel, especially after new technologies recently unlocked huge reserves in shale gas fields across the country.

Proponents of natural gas took a back seat when the House of Representatives passed a climate bill last year, as lawmakers from coal-producing states dug in to keep coal as the nation’s principal fuel for electricity production. Natural gas may get a warmer hearing in the Senate, but its prospects there are also in doubt.

Skeptics say putting in the infrastructure for natural gas vehicles would be too expensive, and battery-powered [electric cars](#) and hybrids are a better alternative. And worries are growing that the techniques used to blast through shale rock to release gas could pollute drinking water.

“It’s very hard to move mountains on energy policy, and Pickens has not yet even moved a hill,” said Amy Myers Jaffe, an energy expert at [Rice University](#) in Houston. “The problem that Pickens faces is that in this country if you are from the oil industry, people are naturally suspicious of what you say on energy policy.”

Since Mr. Pickens began his campaign in 2008, he has been on the road for 178 days, visiting 37 states and 80 cities. He has amassed 1.6 million signatures on a Web site.

For the new effort, he has developed three television commercials with a toughened emphasis on national security. He is preparing to tour the country again to inspire his “army” of citizens to lobby Congress for tax incentives. He will not disclose how much he expects to spend on the effort this time.

In the old version of the plan, Mr. Pickens called on the country to build thousands of wind turbines from Texas to Canada and install transmission lines to deliver the new power to cities across the country. Now,

he is playing down wind because he says it has become almost impossible to finance a wind project, largely because cheap gas has made wind power less competitive. His focus is now almost entirely on gas.

He wants the president to convert the entire federal automobile fleet to natural gas. Then he wants Congress to give large tax credits to companies that use natural gas vehicles, and filling stations that install the necessary equipment. By Mr. Pickens's estimate, just fueling a small percentage of the country's trucks and buses with gas could displace as much as 8 percent of oil imports within seven years.

"All you need to do is get the oar in the water," he said. "Then you are on your way to get off [OPEC](#) oil."

Mr. Pickens has not been winning many battles lately. His natural gas fueling company spent an estimated \$3 million on an unsuccessful 2008 California ballot initiative that would have authorized the state to borrow \$5 billion to invest in natural gas and alternative energy. Then his multibillion-dollar wind project in the Texas panhandle fizzled because of the [credit crisis](#), regulatory issues and other problems. He was forced to put the project on the back burner last year.

Mr. Pickens made his fortune as a buyout artist and raider, jostling the industry when he set his sights on companies like Gulf Oil and Unocal. He lost about \$2 billion when oil prices tanked in 2008, but is still worth an estimated \$1.2 billion.

Mr. Pickens drew ire on the left when he helped finance attacks on Senator [John Kerry](#)'s war record during the 2004 presidential campaign. But these days, some Democrats and environmentalists have made peace with Mr. Pickens. "It's been valuable to have Boone as part of the team," said Carl Pope, executive director of the [Sierra Club](#). This week Mr. Pickens held a news briefing with [John Podesta](#), a former Clinton White House chief of staff, to promote natural gas legislation.

Mr. Pickens talks on the stump about eating cheeseburgers with former Vice President [Al Gore](#) and, while he stands by the attacks on Mr. Kerry, he said he was now willing to work with the senator.

"That's a long time ago," he said. "When you're old, you can't remember that far back."