From Sunrise to Sunset:

How the Reagan Administration Reappropriated Solar Energy Arguments

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June 27, 2025

Paper: 2499 words

Americans called it the “20 percent goal:” By the year 2000, 20 percent of the nation’s energy needs would be met by solar power.[[1]](#footnote-0) Pronounced as an aim by President Jimmy Carter in June 1979, some even felt the projection was too conservative.[[2]](#footnote-1) In an April 1979 survey, Americans predicted that solar energy would generate 32 percent of the county’s electricity in 2000.[[3]](#footnote-2) These estimates never came close to fruition; solar energy contributed less than 3 percent of total energy used in 2023, more than 20 years after the deadline.[[4]](#footnote-3) But the period that followed the 1970s energy crises was a unique, albeit brief, time in United States (U.S.) history where Americans collectively supported solar power. Within a state of normalized uncertainty, Americans and mass media alike looked toward solar as the energy source of the future. The 1970s energy crisis prompted bipartisan support for solar energy, as it promised foresight, abundance, freedom, and decentralization. Yet by the early 1980s, President Ronald Reagan co-opted these values to justify a free market approach that ended federal support for solar, splintering the once bipartisan movement.

The 1970s energy crises caused high volatility in energy prices, creating a perception that U.S. energy security was in constant danger. By the 1970s, the country relied heavily on oil, specifically from imports. U.S. consumption of oil had been accelerating since the end of World War II, and by 1973 the country consumed a third of the oil produced worldwide, despite representing 6 percent of the global population.[[5]](#footnote-4) About 17 percent of American energy was imported from the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in 1973.[[6]](#footnote-5) After the U.S. supported Israel in the Yom Kippur War, OPEC retaliated by imposing an oil embargo in October 1973. The price per barrel of oil shot up from $2 to $11 in six months.[[7]](#footnote-6) The embargo lasted a short and painful five months. The next oil shock came with the Iranian Revolution in 1979, which cut off a crucial oil supplier for the U.S. Prices jumped from $14 a barrel in 1978 to $35 a barrel in 1981.[[8]](#footnote-7) The second energy shortage suggested that the oil crisis just six years prior could not be dismissed as a one-time event; instead, U.S. energy security was in perpetual danger.[[9]](#footnote-8) The instability of oil prices throughout the 1970s affirmed the heightened uncertainty surrounding U.S. energy policy.

In response to such uncertainty, news media recommended a political framework of anticipation toward current energy policy. By casting the last decades as a long-gone golden age of fossil fuels, news articles stated that the future would diverge heavily from the past. Thus past and current energy policy was no longer applicable; instead, energy policy had to adapt so that it anticipated and met future challenges.[[10]](#footnote-9) Energy, as a field, naturally lent itself to an anticipatory framework. Energy policy must already predict long-term change, as the production of energy sources—including exploration of resources and construction of plants or pipelines—can span decades and require significant early investment.[[11]](#footnote-10) Still, energy policy, like other policies, typically considers the results of past initiatives. After the oil crisis, mass media found present context had shifted so dramatically that the past provided no insight into the future. A *New York Times* article recounted that energy had “used to be so cheap and so abundant that it was largely taken for granted,” as if it was in infinite supply.[[12]](#footnote-11) The current crisis was an inflection point in U.S. history; the era of easy oil and easy energy, spanning 1945 to 1973, had ended. A report by the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy found that the U.S. was now “in the ‘twilight’ of the fossil fuel age.”[[13]](#footnote-12) Updated policy that attempted to predict the future had to be created. As German historiographer Reinhart Koselleck described it, there was “pressure of time” to enact change, a “compulsion toward foresight… in order to prevent disaster or to search for salvation.”[[14]](#footnote-13) In an attempt to shift from the past, journalist James Wilford observed that the energy sector agreed: now was a time to be “husbanding the remaining fossil fuels and developing new sources of energy means.”[[15]](#footnote-14) As media normalized forming energy policy based solely on anticipation, many began looking beyond fossil fuels for energy sources of the future.

In particular, Americans across the political spectrum turned toward solar power. The Solar Energy Research, Development, and Demonstration Act of 1974, a bipartisan effort by 29 senators, created the Solar Energy Research Institute (SERI) and researched how to commercialize solar energy.[[16]](#footnote-15) Over the next three years, 62 bills were introduced to Congress that provided incentives for installing solar energy infrastructure in private residential units.[[17]](#footnote-16) A 1979 Roper poll found that eight-five percent of Americans supported steps to accelerate the development of solar energy.[[18]](#footnote-17) Meanwhile, the thermal industry, a sector of solar energy, expanded at record rates: where it had not existed in 1974, it soon grew at a compounded annual rate of 57 percent.[[19]](#footnote-18) According to the Department of Energy, 364 companies produced solar collectors or photovoltaics in 1981, with 30 going public since 1974.[[20]](#footnote-19) As the country rallied behind solar power, scholars articulated the justification underlying widespread appeal.

Scholars saw key American values embedded within the notion of solar energy. As one government report stated, it came down to three characteristics: “Solar energy holds the promise of a resource to meet these needs that is non-polluting, inexhaustible, and supportive of national and individual freedom of action.”[[21]](#footnote-20) With the rise of environmentalism, a non-polluting resource grew to greater significance. This concern was not partisan; it was President Richard Nixon who signed the Clean Air Act of 1970 and created the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).[[22]](#footnote-21)[[23]](#footnote-22)

Due to a perceived national security crisis, an inexhaustible energy source had heightened significance. Energy policy was embroiled in a greater national security campaign towards reducing foreign energy dependence, or achieving “national freedom of action.” The Energy Security Act, which included the stated purpose to “encourage solar energy,” was an extension of the Defense Production Act of 1950. The act easily passed the Senate in 1980 with a vote of 78 to 12.[[24]](#footnote-23) As President Carter articulated in a May 1978 speech, “Nobody can embargo sunlight. No cartel controls the sun. Its energy will not run out… The sun's power needs only to be collected, stored and used.”[[25]](#footnote-24) The threat that OPEC posed to unlimited energy consumption stood as Carter’s primary reason for subsidizing solar energy. National security worries that surged during the energy crises propelled support for solar energy. As an inexhaustible energy source, solar was a rally behind economic growth and American excess.

Lastly, solar energy supported individual freedom of action, becoming a symbol of the decentralized, Jeffersonian ideal. The resource consisted of individual solar panels, which were small-scale and locally controlled. Nuclear power, on the other hand, required a central station, and oil was distributed by large, publicly-despised companies.[[26]](#footnote-25) Social conservative Wendell Berry explained that an economy based on solar power would contain the “resources of culture that also must be kept renewable.”[[27]](#footnote-26) These virtues of honesty, thrift, good work, and generosity—as academic Amory B. Lovins listed in 1976—were traditional and called back to the Jeffersonian ideal of a decentralized republic.

Not only was solar power decentralized, but it also undermined the power of distant bureaucrats who controlled large public utility companies. Lovins urged the government to reform its regulations and invest in “soft technologies,” including solar power, in an issue of *Foreign Affairs*.[[28]](#footnote-27) Lovins pitched the fight for solar power as one against large electrical plants, who were oppressors of individual liberty:

Siting big energy systems pits central authority against local autonomy in an increasingly divisive and wasteful form of centrifugal politics that is already proving one of the most potent constraints on expansion. In an electrical world, your lifeline comes not from an understandable neighborhood technology run by people you know who are at your own social level, but rather from an alien, remote, and perhaps humiliatingly uncontrollable technology run by a faraway, bureaucratized, technical elite who have probably never heard of you.[[29]](#footnote-28)

His piece garnered more reprint requests than any article published by *Foreign Affairs* before. As a critic later recounted, he became an “instant celebrity.”[[30]](#footnote-29) Others appealed to the same virtues. Joseph Lindmayer, inventor of the first solar cell, explained to Congress in 1979 that most did not desire access to solar power on environmental grounds; they only “wanted to become more independent from the utility company.”[[31]](#footnote-30) In a 1977 poll, 15 percent of Americans listed “reduced dependence on utility companies” as the most important factor when determining whether to purchase a solar system.[[32]](#footnote-31) Solar power quickly became a symbol of decentralization and local, community control.

However, Ronald Reagan, inaugurated as president in 1981, saw solar power as opposing his free-market philosophy; under his administration, government support for the energy source fell drastically. Reagan explained that he was returning solar energy to private industry. The administration proposed eliminating solar, alcohol, and coal synthetic fuels demonstration programs, arguing that they should be taken over by private enterprise.[[33]](#footnote-32) In 1982, he recommended cutting the solar budget by $380 million, a significant drop from the $707 million requested by the Carter administration in 1981.[[34]](#footnote-33) Denis Hayes, organizer of the first Earth Day in 1970, announced in June 1981 that Reagan’s Secretary of Energy had “declared open war on solar energy.”[[35]](#footnote-34)

But the new administration had learned the political lessons of solar energy. Its arguments reflected what had been the social appeal of solar power, despite disavowing the energy source. As outlined in his official energy policy document, *Securing America’s Energy Future*, the free market would be the new guarantee of inexhaustible energy and individual freedom of action to Americans.[[36]](#footnote-35) Free markets, as the summation of individuals’ choices, allowed consumers to chart their own future. Reagan explained that free markets were “a continuing plebiscite” conducted by “the American people themselves.”[[37]](#footnote-36) It was “up to them how to decide how much energy that is, and in what form and manner it will reach them.”[[38]](#footnote-37) If solar energy was appealing due to being inexhaustible, Reagan, too, insisted on the endless renewability of energy—unleashed, this time, by market forces. He unlocked nature’s abundance, so to say, as he leased out Federal lands for oil and coal to the private sector.[[39]](#footnote-38) As Reagan shifted solar energy to private industry, he justified the change with a parallel rhetoric of endless energy and personal freedom.

Reagan also adopted the media’s anticipatory framework; he agreed that the future was uncertain, and policy should not attempt to realize a predetermined future. “The one thing that is certain about the future is the exact path of energy developments and markets is uncertain,” the administration stated.[[40]](#footnote-39) The Carter administration’s intervention in the economy, he furthered, had impossibly aimed to realize a specific, stable future. Where Carter’s policy had advocated “positive and creation actions” to be “taken by the Government” to utilize solar and geothermal energy, as Carter had explained himself,[[41]](#footnote-40) Reaganomic energy policy offered a degree of “flexibility” that did not rely on achieving an articulated future.[[42]](#footnote-41) Thus, Reagan reframed the energy crises of previous years as issues not rooted in scarcity but in state intervention in the economy. The president adapted an anticipatory framework to reject the past administration’s support of solar energy and further his termination of funding for solar programs.

Republicans, even those who were solar energy advocates, justified the Reagan administration’s policies by painting solar energy incentives as the very symbol of bureaucracy; Reaganomic energy policy ultimately tore apart the bipartisan base for solar energy. “We seek to restore the family, the neighborhood, the community, and the workplace as vital alternatives in our national life to ever-expanding federal power,” said the 1980 Republican Party Platform.[[43]](#footnote-42) Such language mirrored solar advocates’ own push for anti-bureaucratic decentralization and individual freedom of action, but replaced distant technocrats with federal power. Solar energy incentives were made to be examples of inefficient and wasteful bureaucracy. ''We totally concur with the Federal Government's approach,'' explained J. Robert Maxwell, director of solar programs for the Westinghouse Electric Corporation. ''In the past, if a guy took out a piece of glass, poured some fluid on it, held it up to the sun and got some voltage off it, he made a headline and got some Government funds. Those days are over.”[[44]](#footnote-43) Republican Robert Walker, a member of the Subcommittee on Energy Development and solar energy supporter, referenced a federal grant of around $9,000 towards building a solar doghouse in one interview and said there were reports of taxpayer money directed to a solar outhouse and a solar beeswax melter.[[45]](#footnote-44) Walker argued that a deregulated energy policy, by lowering inflation and interest rates, could benefit solar energy in the long run by making capital investment cheaper.[[46]](#footnote-45) “I don`t think that the 20 percent has been abandoned at all,” he said in an interview.[[47]](#footnote-46) Paul Cronin, a former Republican Congressman and president of the Solar Energy Industries Association, also spoke of government inefficiency. He mentioned a U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) program that provided $500 grants to homeowners who put in solar domestic hot water systems. The government delayed the distribution of these grants, and potential customers had waited to buy until they received the money. Even when the program finally rolled out, homeowners had to pay at least $1,200 out of pocket—to comply with HUD rules and regulations—for their $500 grant.[[48]](#footnote-47) A 1977 HUD report acknowledged that “there may be a need for stringent controls” and “bureaucratic oversight” if the government instituted solar energy incentives.[[49]](#footnote-48) As incentives are a form of federal endorsement, the government must be able to ensure that the promoted products are safe, effective, and fairly marketed—to accomplish this, oversight is required. By painting solar energy incentives as representative of a wasteful, inefficient federal bureaucracy, Republicans backed Reagan’s energy policy, dividing the once bipartisan solar energy movement.

Following the 1970s energy crisis, Americans across the political spectrum looked toward solar energy as the future of U.S. energy. Reagan soon disbanded government support for the resource. Still, his arguments reflected what had been the social appeal of solar energy: only now, it was the free market, not solar power, that would guarantee inexhaustible energy, follow a framework of anticipation, and be anti-bureaucratic. What had been a bipartisan movement soon divided over whether solar energy subsidies were necessary to the industry; Republicans, backing Reagan, argued no. This shift reflected a greater reversal of Republicans—from supporting the environment and renewable energy to undermining it. A new faith in market forces was one of its most clear indicators, but as historians James Turner and Andrew Isenberg contended, skepticism in the technocratic elite—a view scholars like Lovins and Berry had shared—also prompted a shift away from environmental policy.[[50]](#footnote-49) In this way, the support for the solar energy movement in the late 1970s already highlighted the values that would make Republicans abandon it.

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