

God-Terms as Exigence in the Rhetorical Battle over Keystone XL

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This essay analyzes the rhetoric used by opponents and supporters of the Keystone XL Pipeline in an attempt to understand the ways in which the issue has become so polarizing. Drawing upon Kenneth Burke's terministic screens and god-terms, along with Richard Weaver's own analysis of god-terms, I conduct a close reading of the media surrounding the debate over the proposed pipeline, paying close attention to the two god-terms I identify as key to the debate: *safety* and *progress*. My analysis reveals that opponents of the pipeline have constructed the issue into a symbolic battle over the future of North American clean energy, and I conclude that Keystone XL, while an important issue to debate, does not merit treatment as an exigency so great as to decide the future of our nation's energy.

"When we try to pick out anything by itself," writes John Muir in *My First Summer in the Sierra*, "we find it hitched to everything in the universe" (211). Thus, one seemingly contained project, like the construction of an oil pipeline, can have implications for a whole country, a whole continent and even the whole world. The Keystone XL Pipeline, whether built or not, could mark the beginning of an energy independent North America. It could mean energy would be extracted from resources on our own continent, without dependence on foreign suppliers. But there is a question hovering on everyone's lips: what type of energy independent North America will it be? One that relies on oil or one that relies on sustainable energy?

The Keystone XL Pipeline consists of two phases of TransCanada Corporation's four-phase Keystone Pipeline system. The first Keystone XL phase, known as the Cushing MarketLink, would stretch from an oil hub in Cushing, Oklahoma to refineries and processing facilities in Texas. The second phase would stretch from Alberta, Canada to Steele City, Nebraska, where it would join an existing pipeline that ends at the Cushing, Oklahoma oil hub (Lizza 3). In effect, the system would allow oil drilled in Canada to travel across the United States to Texas where it would ultimately be refined and either sent abroad or used domestically. The pipeline system was approved in Canada, South Dakota, and most recently Nebraska, but has faced challenges at the federal level in the United States. In March of 2013, the State Department concluded that the pipeline would not significantly increase the extraction of tar sands oil, and thus that Keystone XL should be approved; however, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) rebuked this claim, arguing that the State Department had relied on an outdated energy-economic modeling system in its analysis (Lizza 7-8). With President Obama's second term hampered by congressional inaction and with increased pressure from environmentalists to deliver on his promise of addressing climate change, the President has told sustainable energy advocates what Franklin D. Roosevelt told labor leaders: "I agree with you, I want to do it, now make me do it" (qtd. in Lizza 1). Taking this challenge to heart, climate change advocates have manipulated discourse around Keystone XL to focus the debate on a be-all, end-all symbolic battle meant not only to test Obama's promise of addressing climate change, but also to answer the ultimate energy question in America: Where should our energy come from?

While the other sections of the Keystone Pipeline were approved with relative ease, god-terms

and value-laden discourse surrounding Keystone XL have sparked a heated debate and opened the door to a nationwide discussion on sustainable versus nonrenewable energy. Using the values that god-terms evoke to their advantage, opponents have painted a picture of the pipeline as contributing to environmental harm and as hampering our progress towards a future of clean energy. Supporters, on the other hand, have used god-terms to appeal to more conservative values by portraying the pipeline as having the potential to decrease our reliance on foreign oil, putting us on a path toward economic progress. Thus, the question must be asked: How has something as seemingly uncomplicated as a pipeline sparked such intense feelings and debate in this country? I will argue that the heated controversy arises from the manipulation of god-terms on both sides, which has led to a symbolic battle for the future of North American energy policy—one that largely ignores our nationwide addiction to oil.

Burkean Rhetoric and God-Terms

Language constructs the ways in which we view the world, and the ways in which the world is presented to us. As Kenneth Burke argues, the terminologies we use form terministic screens, which direct our focus and effectively turn our attention in one direction and away from another. Burke argues, “even if any terminology is a *reflection* of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a *selection* of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a *deflection* of reality” (*Language as Symbolic Action* 45). Specific terminology directs our attention in a particular way; however, specific words or phrases are by no means equal. Burke claims “a focus on object A involves a neglect of object B” (qtd. in Slater), and Jarron Slater, in his blog post, “God-terms, Terministic Screens and the Rhetoric of ‘Marriage Equality,’” furthers this claim by arguing that “by choosing A *instead* of B, we also choose A *over* B and thus imply that A is *better* than B.” Therefore, the terms that we use must exist in a hierarchy of sorts, in that we have an inclination to choose some As over their B counterparts. Thus, the insinuation is that there are terms we are predisposed to favor over others.

The power of a word is dependent on how closely that word conforms to the agreed upon principles of a particular society (e.g., killing is wrong; democracy works; advancement of one’s self and country is good). The most powerful terms are “god-terms,” which Burke describes as “the universal title or all-inclusive epithet to which any less generalized terms would be related as parts to [a] whole” (*Grammar of Motives* 73), or put more simply, a word that “sums up a manifold of particulars under a single head” (*Rhetoric of Religion* 2). Following Burke’s lead, Richard Weaver writes that a “god-term” is “that expression about which all other expressions are ranked as subordinate and serving dominations and powers” (212). They embody concepts we live by and ideas we hold dear. They are terms that unite us and fill us with passion. They are locutions that sum up our beliefs and lead us to action. But more importantly, they are words that we must agree with, or otherwise risk the appearance of embracing their diametric opposites: devil-terms. Weaver describes these devil-terms as “terms of repulsion” (222), and the acceptance of devil-terms by an individual would entail associating a bit of this repulsion with the reputation of that individual. Consequently, god-terms are not taken lightly and are terms by which all but full acceptance is grounds for societal excommunication.

While Burke points to a plethora of modern and historical god-terms in many of his works (such as freedom, necessity, history, science, justice, duty, and money [Enos 741]), Weaver, writing in 1953, discusses six god-terms, or ultimate terms, that he has identified as key to the modern age: progress, fact, science, modern, efficiency and American. *Progress* is the ultimate god-term in that it “becomes the salvation man is placed on earth to work out” (Weaver 213). It is the term upon which the other five depend on for meaning because progress is the ultimate goal of mankind. “Just as there can be no achievement more important than salvation,” argues Weaver, “so there can be

no activity more justified in enlisting our sympathy and support than ‘progress’” (213). Therefore, for Weaver, to stand in opposition to *progress* would mean to stand in opposition to all that humankind is on this Earth to do: advance itself.

While progress may be the ultimate god-term, the others are no less potent in directing our attention. *Fact*, the second god-term, allows man to claim “he has the kind of knowledge to which all other knowledges must defer” (Weaver 215). Consequently, whoever controls fact controls knowledge, and thus controls the foundations of reasoned argument. *Science*, the third god-term, is “the methodological tool of ‘progress’” (Weaver 215), and much like progress, “satisfies a primal need” because “man feels lost without a touchstone of knowledge just as he feels lost without the direction-finder provided by progress” (Weaver 216). Therefore, science is the knowledge that can be controlled by fact, which in turn is used in the forward direction of progress. *Modern*, the fourth god-term, is powerful in that “to describe anything as ‘modern’ is to credit it with all the improvements which have been made up until now” (Weaver 217). Thus, anything modern is the epitome of progress, and a concrete result of it. *Efficient*, the fifth god-term, “is a good adaptation of means to an ends, with small loss through friction” (Weaver 217). Consequently, efficiency measures the gain-to-loss tradeoff on the road of progress. That which has a higher degree of gain over loss is considered more efficient, and thus a better form of progress. The final god-term, *American*, “is much the same as identifying it with the achievements of ‘progress’” (Weaver 218). In effect, Weaver identifies American as the tangible god-term of progress, much like “Rome” or “the West” before it. Something that is American is the fulfillment of that object—the result of progress.

Weaver’s six god-terms may have held political sway in his era; however, god-terms are specific to a particular historical context. Bernard K. Duffy and Martin Jacobi argue that Weaver’s god-terms come from two categories: politics (*American*) and the community and culture in the political system (*science*, *progress*, *fact*, and *efficient*) (84). As a result, these god-terms not only depend on the political climate of Weaver’s time and the political views that his audience held, but also address the particular political exigency of Weaver’s era. Thus, the meaning signified by these god-terms is contingent on the exigency they address. Furthermore, as new exigencies arise, new god-terms do as well. For example, with the dawn of environmentalism in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a new lens with which to view the world emerged. This lens was born of a new focus on the environment, and the rhetorical struggle over demonstrating our impact on it. Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, which was a study of the harmful effects of the pesticide DDT and other chemicals, began to demonstrate our impact on the environment, and new groups such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth emerged to take up the cause as advocates for the planet. They used new god-terms like *health*, *sustainable*, and *safety* to direct people’s attention toward protecting the Earth and to living lives that would be good for our planet. These god-terms position the fight for environmentalism as a necessary cause for both humans and the planet and have been used consciously by environmental organizations to garner the attention of the American people. Yet, these new god-terms are not mutually exclusive of old god-terms such as progress. They exist in tandem and play off one another to direct attention. Thus, new god-terms become important and create new lenses in response to new exigencies.

It is the feeling that a god-term invokes that makes a god-term powerful; therefore, I contend that the indirect suggestion of these terms can be just as powerful as the word itself. While Weaver and Burke both focused on the power of god-terms, neither one of them deny the power of implying a god-term. For example, the argument that the “Keystone XL pipeline will pour capital into the economy” (Gardner) does not include any specific god-terms; however, one god-term is clearly implied: progress. The term progress was not explicitly used; however, it was still deployed, because it still directed attention in one way over another—creating new capital in the economy

means progress, which constructs a positive view of Keystone XL. Thus, this description does not direct the audience's attention to negative aspects of Keystone XL, but rather uses the essential meaning of progress to position the pipeline in a favorable light.

All god-terms are potentially powerful tools by which publics can be persuaded to act or acquiesce. While our predisposition to these god-terms may be subconscious, the power to control and deploy these god-terms is a conscious act used to position a particular argument favorably for an audience, while also downplaying negative aspects of the same argument. Therefore, a particular person, company, or group can consciously deploy god-terms to guide an audience's position on a certain issue. Thus, this person, company, or group uses god-terms as tools to get an audience to choose A over B every time. And it is upon these god-terms, specifically safety and progress, that both supporters and opponents of the Keystone XL Pipeline heavily rely.

Proponents of Protection: The Role of "Safety"

Supporters and opponents of Keystone XL argue for or against the safety of the pipeline in two senses: safety for the environment and safety for the people living near it. Supporters of the pipeline stress the pipeline itself, not the oil it is carrying, in an attempt to position the basic elements of the pipeline (e.g., a steel tube) as safe in the general public's mind. Opponents of the pipeline stress the risk to the environment and to the people living around it in an attempt to portray Keystone XL as essentially unsafe. Together, both sides rely on this newly constructed god-term to turn the public's attention towards their overall argument.

Keystone XL supporters' first plan of action has been to debunk assertions that the pipeline is unsafe for the environment by attempting to break the mental link between Keystone XL and tar sands. For example, Robert Rapier in *The Christian Science Monitor* asserts that the State Department has found that "approval or denial of the proposed project is unlikely to have a substantial impact on the rate of development in the oil sands, or on the amount of heavy crude oil refined in the Gulf Coast area" (qtd. in Rapier). In effect, tar sand oil will continue to be extracted from Canada regardless of Keystone XL. The business is booming, and without the pipeline other ways will be found to transport the oil. Keystone XL is merely one possible mode of transportation for the oil, and therefore has nothing to do with the environmental harm associated with the extraction process.

Not only is the pipeline merely a mode of transportation for the oil, it also happens to be the safest one for the environment. Ryan Lizza, a reporter for *The New Yorker*, claims that "in a market analysis the State Department concluded that, one way or another, the Canadians would find a way to sell their oil" (7). In effect, the oil will be shipped off somehow, whether that is through a pipeline, a ship, or a train. However, moving oil by rail or ship rather than by pipeline would cause more pollution and consume more oil in the transportation process. The consumption of the fuel used to transport the oil by these methods would add yet more carbon emissions to our atmosphere, and the impact of an oil spill would be much greater (e.g., Exxon Valdez oil spill). Furthermore, when asked by *National Public Radio* reporter Audie Cornish about oil leaks in other pipelines, Alberta Premier Alison Redford responded, "What we know is that pipelines are the most effective and the most environmentally sustainable way to produce and to move product." In effect, the pipeline system may not be perfect, but it is the safest way to transport oil with the least chance of harming the environment in a major way. Therefore, supporters argue that the pipeline creates a solution, one which does not use more oil in transport and does not add to carbon emissions. The pipeline lessens the impact of the inherent risk in oil transportation of spills, thus avoiding environmental disaster.

Supporters of the pipeline maintain that Keystone XL is not only the safest method of transporting oil in terms of the environment but also for the general population. They "acknowledge the

fact that sometimes these unfortunate [spills] happen” (Redford), but they argue that what is needed are “sensible regulations to ensure that communities near well sites are safe” (“Environmentalists”). Supporters acknowledge that there is a risk of harm with Keystone XL, but that through regulations coupled with the successful mitigation of oil leaks, those around the pipeline will be as safe as they can be. In essence, they emphasize the safety measures they have in place to minimize any harm. Furthermore, TransCanada relies heavily on safety to help sell its pipeline to the American people. According to the TransCanada website, the company’s “policies, processes and practices are designed with one principal goal in mind: to prevent pipeline leaks or incidents” (“Safety in Action”), and that it “use[s] the safest steel available...[and] the Keystone Pipeline has safely delivered more than 300 million barrels of oil since it began operations in 2010” (“Safety in Action”). Consequently, TransCanada positions itself as standing by a commitment to safety. They want Americans to rest easy knowing that Keystone XL will be built by a company that has their security in mind.

Opponents of the pipeline also construct an argument for safety in terms of the environment and of those living around the pipeline. They start by arguing that producing tar sands oil is not safe for the environment in that it wastes precious resources. For example, the process requires using “three barrels of water to extract each single barrel of oil,” or “roughly 400 million gallons of water a day,” because “vast amounts of water are needed to separate the extracted product, bitumen, from sand, silt and clay” (“Friends of the Earth”). This water is then dumped into large ponds containing harmful chemicals and could potentially mix with clean water that neighboring towns drink. Therefore, the process of extracting this oil is not only inefficient but also extremely wasteful and potentially harmful. In pointing out this waste, attention is turned to the serious harm that is being done to the planet.

Not only is producing tar sands oil wasteful, it is also extremely detrimental to our atmosphere. Pipeline critics point to “the fact that the extraction of petroleum from the tar sands creates far more greenhouse emissions than conventional production does” (“Tar Sands”). They argue that “refining tar sands oil is dirtier than conventional oil...and cause[s] smog and acid rain,” which contribute to climate change (Friends of the Earth). Therefore, this pipeline would contribute to pollution as a result of the risk of spills and the dirty extraction process. Moreover, “a report published . . . by a coalition of environmental groups estimated that the pipeline will carry and emit the equivalent of at least 181 million metric tons of carbon dioxide each year” (Peoples), and the Canadian environmental ministry found that extracting tar sands oil will cause “greenhouse gas emissions for the oil and gas sector as a whole [to] rise by nearly one-third from 2005 to 2020” (“Tar Sands”). The pollution emitted will not be small, but rather will be enough to potentially put the environment on an irreversible path to destruction. Therefore, Keystone XL is not safe for our planet and is counter to our best interests.

Opponents of the pipeline also argue that while the safety of our planet is important, it is the safety of our neighbors that should invoke a moralistic sense of duty among us to help one’s fellow human beings. At a State Department meeting in Nebraska, “farmers, ranchers, Native Americans and other critics . . . stepped forward to share . . . reasons to reject the project—ranging from drinking water and clean air to indigenous rights and climate change” (Peoples). They demonstrated that the people of the United States have a responsibility to look within their own borders and see the potential catastrophe that might lie ahead for fellow Americans living around the pipeline, and they remind us that we have a duty to protect our fellow citizens’ right to safety. Furthermore, the grassroots environmental network Friends of the Earth claims that indigenous “communities living downstream from tailing ponds have seen spikes in rates of rare cancers, renal failure, lupus, and hyperthyroidism.” Increased rates of disease and illness clearly show that

Keystone XL Pipeline cannot guarantee the health of American citizens and is not a safe means of getting oil. The challenge now is for Americans to choose morality over money and guarantee the safety of their neighbors who live around the proposed Keystone XL Pipeline.

Those affected by the pipeline would potentially have to cope with not just one disastrous spill, but frequent ones that could happen without warning. It is no secret that oil pipelines are susceptible to leaks, and many opponents cite recent spills as examples of the disastrous effects Keystone XL could have (Friends of the Earth; Gross; Peeples). Friends of the Earth found, “in summer 2010, a million gallons of tar sands oil poured into the Kalamazoo River in Michigan from a pipeline run by another Canadian company” and “Keystone I pipeline has spilled more than a dozen times in less than a year of operation.” The approval of Keystone XL would add to the growing problem of a dangerous network of oil pipelines unsafe for Americans living around them and unsafe for the planet we depend on for life. Therefore, adding another two pipelines to this already faulty system would be the immoral thing to do for both our fellow citizens and our planet.

As supporters construct a safety argument around regulations and mitigation, opponents clearly argue for safety in symbolic and moralistic terms. It is not right to damage our planet. It is not right to waste our precious resources. And it is not right to put our fellow citizens at risk. In effect, it is clear that through this argument, opponents of the pipeline are building this issue up to represent more than just a pipeline. Keystone XL has been chosen above all other environmental concerns, as the battle for the safety of our earth and its population against big oil. For opponents, approving Keystone XL would send the message that our government has turned a blind eye towards the dangers of big oil and climate change as a whole, not just the dangers of a pipeline.

Appropriating Advancement: The Role of “Progress”

What progress means for both sides is important in understanding just how effective the deployment of this god-term has been and continues to be. Supporters of the pipeline argue that Keystone XL presents North America and the United States in particular, with an opportunity for unrivaled economic progress. The pipeline would allow for a North American energy source that would decrease our dependence on foreign oil. Opponents on the other hand argue that real progress can only be found through clean energy because true progress in this respect can only come in the form of a mutually beneficial partnership between humans and the environment. It is only through a respect of our environment that we can attain long-term progress. Each side has its own version of progress, and neither side is willing to budge on its vision for the future of North American energy.

Supporters of the pipeline argue that the real benefit of Keystone XL is in its potential for American economic progress, which given the 2008–09 recession will come in the form of jobs and revenue. For example, Republican Study Committee chairman Steve Scalise asserts, “with one stroke of the pen . . . the president could create over 25,000 jobs” (qtd. in Linkins). Timothy Gardner of *The Huffington Post* writes, “backers say the pipeline would bolster North American energy security and usher in thousands of new jobs,” and Keystone-XL.com claims that the pipeline “will support the creation of 9,000 jobs on the American portion of the pipeline and about 2,200 on the Canadian side” (“Approval”). While the number of jobs may vary in each claim, the argument does not: Keystone XL means jobs for Americans. These jobs may only come from building the pipeline, inspecting the pipeline, and refining the oil, but in the end supporters of the pipeline rely heavily on job creation, however temporary, in arguing for the economic progress that the pipeline will bring.

Supporters of Keystone XL see the pipeline as a further marriage between Canadian and American economic interests. “We have an integrated economy,” Premier Redford argues in regards to Canada and the United States, “and we’ve both thrived on that” (Gross). The pipeline

would solidify a Canadian-American partnership in the North American energy sector and would spell increased revenue for both countries. Furthermore, Keystone XL would help “relieve a glut building as a result of the drilling boom in North Dakota and Montana” (Gardner), and “will also support the significant growth of crude oil production in the United States” (“The Project”) by ensuring a steady supply of crude oil to American refineries. As Greg Gentry, general manager for Valero in Port Arthur, Texas claims, “reliability of a pipeline beats the costs and potential delays associated with tankers” (Lizza 9). As a result, each country wins, and the progress is shared by both.

Progress not only comes from jobs and revenue but also from an American independence from foreign oil. Instead of spending money on importing our oil, Keystone XL provides a way for Americans to produce and consume North American oil. We can keep our money in this continent and use oil uncontrolled by the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). As Premier Redford argues, “This isn’t about one province producing a product. It’s about an economy that’s connected to the rest of North America.” Therefore, through a united North American energy system, the need for foreign oil would presumably decrease, while also allowing us to keep our money invested in our own continent. While opponents may claim that the oil will be sent abroad, supporters argue that “the idea of this product simply flowing through the United States isn’t true” (Gross), and that “crude oil generally is not exported from the U.S.” (“Since the U.S.”). Thus, supporters attempt to silence any arguments that most of the oil will be sent abroad, while simultaneously insinuating that opponents are making wild claims as to the destination of the oil.

Opponents want to turn our focus to progress as well, but the progress they advocate is not one that relies on more oil, but rather one that relies on clean energy—a type of progress that is long-term, requiring a mutually beneficial partnership between humans and the environment. For example, they argue, “investing in tar sands oil now will delay investments in clean and safe alternatives to oil” (Friends of the Earth), and that to expand this Keystone Pipeline would “mean cutting down some 740,000 acres of [Canadian] boreal forest—a natural carbon reserve” (“Tar Sands”). Approving Keystone XL would mean grounding our attempts at this partnership between humans and the environment and continuing our unequal relationship with the environment all for a trade-off of an increased dependence on oil.

While progress as a mutually beneficial relationship between humans and the environment will be hindered, pipeline critics highlight the fact that even the human side of the relationship is not benefiting. The jobs that would be created, according to Jason Linkins of *The Huffington Post*, will be “jobs that are ‘temporary’ and ‘non-local’” (Linkins). Even President Obama acknowledges that “2,000 jobs [will be created] during the construction of the pipeline, which might take a year or two, and then after that we’re talking about somewhere between 50 and 100 jobs in an economy of 150 million working people” (qtd. in Reuters). As a result, the jobs created will only provide a miniscule amount of work for a few lucky people.

Pipeline critics also argue that the oil being drilled spells progress for big oil, not for North America. For example, there is no conclusive evidence the oil will not be exported to other countries. According to the National Wildlife Federation, “because Keystone XL would deliver tar sands to the Gulf Coast . . . it would effectively open the entire U.S. market and international markets to tar sands crude.” Keystone XL would then be the missing link between Canadian oil and international markets. Strategically drawing on “everyday” language to evoke images antithetical to progress, the National Wildlife Federation argues that approving Keystone XL would mean “slic[ing] through America’s agricultural heartland,” while leaving everyday people to clean up the mess. Moreover, to argue this point, short animated videos by opponents of the pipeline have appeared on the video search engine YouTube explaining where this oil could potentially find itself. For example, in “Tar Sands Timmy” by Mark Fiore, tar sands oil is depicted as being shipped

straight to China, whereas “Tar Sands Pipelines: the Dirtiest Oil on Earth” by the National Sierra Club boldly states that “these pipelines don’t bring oil to America, they bring oil through America.” Consequently, “Americans take on all the risk while oil companies collect all the rewards” (“Tar Sands Pipelines”). According to these videos, oil companies posit Keystone XL as a means of economic progress for North America, but the reality is that there will be no progress for humans or the environment, just progress for big oil.

Both sides use progress effectively to make their point, but neither side is conclusively winning the debate. Supporters argue for progress in tangible terms (e.g., economics), whereas opponents once again rely on symbolic meanings. The long-term progress they seek is a partnership between humans and the environment—one that relies on humans to recognize the impact they are having on the environment and the symbolic choice involved in inflicting such damage. Even supporters of the pipeline have recognized this tactic of imbuing the issue with symbolic consequences, and they charge critics with illegitimately exploiting Keystone XL as a make-or-break project for the future of the environment. When in reality, its impact (whether built or not) would probably be minor. For example, Rapier claims, “the truth is that the Keystone XL Pipeline is symbolic. The environmental movement sees the pipeline as a continuation of a fossil-fuel dependent lifestyle that is leading to a climate catastrophe.” Therefore, the pipeline stands as a monumental struggle between clean energy demands and the mining of new oil, and is painted as a symbol of environmentalism. This symbol contains the values of clean energy, climate protection, and environmental justice, and if Keystone XL passes, opponents fear that setbacks to these issues will be a major consequence.

How major of a setback would Keystone XL be? If Keystone XL was not approved, “The savings in carbon dioxide emitted to the atmosphere would amount to only 0.07%” which, according to Rapier, “wouldn’t even be measurable above the background noise of global temperature and carbon dioxide concentrations.” According to the *Washington Post*, the best-case scenario in stopping Keystone XL would mean to “reduce Canadian oil-sands production by only 2 to 4 percent by 2030” (“Environmentalists Are Fighting”). Thus, stopping the pipeline would not prevent the oil from finding its way to market, whether that is through rail or ship. Opponents should be commended for their dedication to a view of progress that relies on a human-environment partnership, but it seems obvious that they have inflated the issue to make a point: Keystone XL is a symbolic battle for the future of North American energy resources. Supporters see this as a losing battle, one in which the fate has already been decided. The fact is, tar sands oil will be extracted from Canada and refined in Texas, with or without Keystone XL.

Grasping at Thin Air: Failing to Turn Attention

Keystone XL can thus be read as the story of a relatively insignificant pipeline that has been turned into a nationwide symbolic battle. Bill McKibben, former staff writer for *The New Yorker* and leading climate activist, argues, “if we’re going to do anything about global warming, [tar sands is] the poster child for the kind of stuff that’s going to have to stay in the ground” (qtd. in Lizza 4). Tom Steyer, former hedge fund manager turned philanthropist and political activist, claims that climate change “is the issue we’ll get measured by as a country and a generation. If we blow this, it will be because we were very focused on the short term, on our pocketbooks, and we had no broader sense of what we were trying to do and what we were trying to pass on” (qtd. in Lizza 2). Clearly, the issue is not merely about a pipeline or even about oil itself. Keystone XL is about competing values—values important enough to both sides that they would manipulate god-terms to construct a symbolic exigency around the building of a pipeline.

However, there has been no reason to believe that Keystone XL is a greater exigency than any other climate change threat. The strategic use of god-terms on both sides may have drawn the atten-

tion of many Americans to Keystone XL, but only inasmuch as these god-terms brought about a defense of values that over-inflated the situation and ignored our country's addiction to oil. The truth is that not building Keystone XL will save some carbon emissions from being released into the air, but it will not stop the oil industry from extracting oil in other parts of the world. Not building Keystone XL will eliminate the risk of oil spills in the area surrounding the proposed pipeline, but it will not stop large tanker ships from spilling oil in the ocean. Not building Keystone XL will send a message, but it will not be *the* final word in the oil debate. In the end, not building Keystone XL has many advantages, but none that distinguish it from any other climate change threat.

What I argue, therefore, is that Keystone XL does not merit treatment as an exigency so great as to decide the future of our nation's energy. From both Burke and Weaver, it is clear that the potency, in fact the entire meaning of a god-term, relies on the exigency of a given issue, and the action that that exigency calls for. Opponents and supporters of the pipeline have attempted to make the exigency of Keystone XL more important than it actually is by strategically using god-terms to justify their arguments. They have used *progress* and *safety* to turn attention to a pipeline that is empirically indistinguishable from any other climate change threat. Moreover, these god-terms are no longer being used merely as tools of the argument, but rather as drivers of the rationale of the arguers on both sides. At what point has the deployment of these god-terms become more important than the exigency at hand? Put simply, Keystone XL lacks a powerful material exigency yet has a strong symbolic exigency fueled by god-terms, which justify the discourse on both sides. Without this symbolic exigency, what is Keystone XL really? The answer is simple: It is just another pipeline. It is time to see the battle over Keystone XL for what it really is: a political stalemate with no "happily ever after."

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