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ENERGY: Go Nukes

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The energy proposal released by congressional Republicans the other day doesn't have a snowball's chance of passage. But that very fact has liberated the GOP from having to muddy the waters with compromise and horse-trading.

Unlike the ridiculously complex and regulation-heavy Waxman-Markey cap-and-trade bill, or the pie-in-the-sky fantasies of the Obama administration, the GOP proposal contains realistic, practical ideas for improving the nation's production of energy. It would increase oil and gas production offshore, where vast reserves may lie. It would open the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to drilling that would do no more harm than drilling has done in Prudhoe Bay.

And -- most important -- it would spur the construction of a hundred new nuclear power plants over the next two decades.

Renewable energy sources such as solar, wind, and geothermal certainly should play a larger role than they do now. But even under the most optimistic scenarios they cannot begin to compete with nuclear power in the displacement of carbon-based energy sources. Barring a miraculous scientific breakthrough, only nuclear reactors can provide energy on a scale sufficient to meet rising demand.

A Lynchburg company, Babcock & Wilcox, might make nuclear power even more practicable. Large reactors cost billions to construct. Babcock

& Wilcox is developing a smaller, scalable, modular design one-tenth the size of existing reactors, which would encourage the use of nukes by smaller utilities. As energy demands rose, companies could add more of the prefab units as needed.

It's an intriguing concept. And though it won't move the Republican energy proposal forward, it might ease Americans' irrational fears about nuclear energy. The U.S. will never become France, which gets more than 75 percent of its electricity from nuclear power. But if Americans want to reduce their carbon footprint, go nukes should replace no nukes as an environmental rallying cry.