BIG OIL MOVES IN WITH NEW ADMINISTRATION

Deal-making used to be done in smoke-filled rooms. Now it will be done in a cabinet room filled with the smell of big oil.

The parallels between the war on tobacco half a century ago and the current war on fossil fuel consumption are astonishingly close.

During the 1960s, my brief flirtation with smoking was typical teenage behavior. The adults we modeled ourselves after were seldom seen without something burning in their hands. Little did I know then that the tobacco companies were actively promoting a habit they knew to be dangerous, and were fraudulently hiding the truth about medical and societal costs. Eventually they were identified, tried, convicted and punished.

Something eerily similar appears to be taking place with petroleum. Last week, the attorneys general of Massachusetts and New York won a ruling against Exxon Mobil Corp. Suffolk County Judge Heidi Brieger ruled that the company must release 40 years worth of internal records related to climate change as part of a fraud investigation. On that very day, Exxon Mobil's CEO, Rex Tillerson, was refusing to answer questions about climate change being put to him by the U.S. Senate, which was grilling him as President-elect Donald Trump's nominee for secretary of state. As with the tobacco trials of yore, state attorneys general are investigating a deliberate cover-up, and the target corporation is responding with aggressive countersuits.

This is actually very old news. Seven years ago, Erik Conway and Naomi Oreskes highlighted the historic parallels between big tobacco and big oil in their powerful book "Merchants of Doubt." The alleged common thread between these industries is the use of corporate power to actively promulgate disinformation. Another common thread is the claim by both that they're merely meeting a market demand, rather than creating one.

Though the oil companies did not push us into oil addiction the way the tobacco companies did, they were certainly complicit in the process. Within a half-century, American culture was hopelessly addicted to petroleum for space heating, electrical generation, military applications and most important, the personal automobile. Car culture gradually became part of our national infrastructure in the form of personal garages, interstate highways, vast suburbs, and many others.

Winning the war on tobacco required that lawsuits name individual corporations as defendants. This is beginning to be the case for carbon-polluters, according to Carroll Muffett, president of the Center for International Environmental Law in Washington, D.C. His recent article in the "Bulletin of Atomic Scientists" credits the work of Richard Heede, which now allows us to identify "a discrete class of defendants."

Heede is an independent "carbon accountant" whose office is a rented houseboat in Sausalito, Calif., in San Francisco Bay. His accounting is a remarkable, unprecedented story of dogged perseverance and number crunching that's detailed in the Aug. 25, 2016, "Science." It covers Heede's 2013 report that nearly two-thirds of our cumulative global carbon emissions came from just 90 companies, eight of which are responsible for 20 percent of the total.

Third on that list of global polluters is Exxon Mobil. Fifth is Russia's state-controlled Gazprom. It's no wonder that Rex Tillerson and Vladimir Putin are close comrades. For all practical purposes, they are in the process of becoming co-defendants in the largest class action suit ever: a case of 7 billion world citizens vs. 20 powerful companies.
The direct link between petroleum and political power has never been more clear to me. The source of that power is an addiction to fossil fuels that's been promulgated by the energy companies and the states that support them.

Under the Obama administration we made great progress kicking the fossil fuel habit. This trend must continue, not because climate change is bad in and of itself, but because the human-created disruptions are already wreaking havoc.

With tobacco, the harm was breathed inward to our lungs. With fossil fuels, the harm is being breathed outward into Earth's lung, our atmosphere.