GIVE TRUMP COAL; MINERS' JOBS LONG GONE

Last year, my Christmas column suggested putting a lump of coal into your kids' stockings to signify the increasing rarity of coal, and to celebrate the success of the United Nations climate change conference in Paris. More so than toys or trinkets, this would be a "true gift to the children of the future."

Little did I know that one of those children would be Donald Trump, who made campaign pledges to withdraw from the Paris climate treaty and to make coal common again. Given his success, I've since changed my mind, and now hope Santa will put a lump of coal in his stocking to signify naughty behavior.

Trump's presidential campaign made empty promises to bring coal jobs back because miners and their families cast real votes. Wearing a hard hat and campaigning "bigly," he blamed lost mining jobs on people like me who are concerned with climate change. His successful, albeit duplicitous, strategy gave him huge wins in West Virginia, Kentucky, Pennsylvania and Ohio, and contributed to his wins in other coal states.

Trump behaved this way knowing that industry analysts from both sides of the political spectrum understand that those jobs will not come back. In fact, free-market indicators for coal's demise are so compelling that environmentalists continue to be upbeat even though the Cabinet room of the White House will soon be scented with the odor of fossil fuels clinging to the suits of climate obstructionists such as Rex Tillerson for secretary of state, Scott Pruitt for the Environmental Protection Agency, Ryan Zinke for secretary of interior and Rick Perry for secretary of energy.

Automation killed those coal jobs. Diesel-powered strip-mining shovels weighing more than 10 million pounds shave scoops the size of houses and replace the work of hundreds of gangs of men with pickaxes. One excavator working underground can shave coal seams more efficiently than a whole crew of miners. Underground mining robots can work in perilous situations without fear of lost lives. During the early 1980s, there were more than 250,000 coal mining employees in the United States. By October 2016, that number had plunged to just above 50,000.

Energy markets killed those coal jobs. The surge of natural gas in the last three decades has driven the spot price of coal down to the basement: approximately half a dollar per million British thermal units. Despite this cheapness, utilities are shuttering coal-fired power plants at a heightened pace. In the United States last year, nearly 100 such plants closed, thereby lowering the demand for coal to the sub-basement.

Health and wellness concerns killed those coal jobs. Burning coal releases soot and asthma-inducing aerosols. Sulfurous exhaust causes acid rain, which leaches toxic metals. Airborne mercury is a neurotoxin. Methane released by mining and carbon by combustion are warming the planet at an unprecedented rate. The climate disruption from coal per unit of energy is significantly higher than that of petroleum, and twice that of natural gas.

Federal policy killed those coal jobs. The first major review of U.S. coal policy on federal lands since 1982, a Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement, was recently highlighted in the Dec. 2 issue of the journal Science. It reflects the nonpartisan expertise of nine academic analysts from Yale, Harvard and Stanford universities, MIT, the University of Chicago, and the University of California campuses of Berkeley and Davis. They describe a virtually bid-free leasing process that drives the cost of mining coal on federal lands from the Powder River Basin in Wyoming and Montana to about one-third that of other large basins where different regulations apply, and where more voters live.
This federal coal is "substantially underpriced relative to its societal costs." And here's the real kicker. With respect to CO2 emissions alone, "the monetized climate damages from [Powder River Basin] coal combustion are about six times the spot price of coal." In other words, the bad things about coal cost voters about six times more than the good things gained by the private mining interests.

Finally, consider this irony. A policy turn back to "burn baby burn" will strengthen our long-standing adversary Russia, which stands to gain more from climate change than any other nation on earth.