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Obama's catastrophic pipeline cop-out;

The U.S. president has handed a victory to Occupy protesters and Hollywood hipsters over common sense

David Wilkins

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The proposed Keystone XL pipeline offers nothing but promise: tens of thousands of desperately needed jobs, and a big step toward ensuring North American energy security.

But last week, promise gave way to politics when U.S. President Barack Obama punted on the pipeline permitting decision, delaying it until after the November 2012 election. The Wall Street Journal called the decision a "Keystone Cop-Out." I have gone a step further and called it a catastrophic cop-out, one with certain economic and diplomatic consequences. The decision on the KXL permit was expected before the end of this year and elected officials from Prime Minister Stephen Harper to a bipartisan mix of members of Congress rightly called it a "no-brainer." After all, what could be easier than supporting energy exported from a steadfast friend, an ally in the war on terror, and a country deeply committed to environmental stewardship?

What could make more sense than approving a project that means 20,000 new jobs in the U.S.? These jobs come as the United States is struggling to recover from a deep recession, with unemployment continually exceeding nine per cent. Add to this that only last month, the president's own White House Jobs Council cautiously supported the KXL project, and the environmental impact statement found the pipeline would not cause undo harm, KXL approval seemed not just an easy decision, but an obvious one.

So what turned common sense on its head?

Environmental radicals in the U.S., which include the various "Occupy" protesters and Hollywood hipsters, stung by a series of environmental disappointments the last two years, decided the KXL pipeline was their cause célèbre.

Back in 2008, they had high hopes, with a brand new president and a Democratic Congress, that their environmental wish list would at last be granted.

But that's not what happened. Instead, environmental groups have been dealt several setbacks. A climate change bill passed the House by the smallest of margins in 2009, only to die in the Senate and with it the promise of legislatively mandated cap and trade. More recently we are seeing scandals involving the administration favouring multi-million-dollar loans to renewable energy companies like Solyndra, only to see them file for bankruptcy. With a sputtering economy, Americans put environmental concerns on the back burner and Congress, likewise, has had no appetite to pass legislation that could be deemed "anti-jobs."

As a result, the more strident environmentalists were demanding a victory and what was a "no-brainer" pipeline project approval, became a "no way!" for a portion of President Obama's base who demanded tangible proof of his fidelity to their cause. Then with Nebraska expressing concern over the project and seeking an alternative route to avoid areas in the Sand Hills the state fears would be vulnerable to a spill, the administration had a hook on which to hang the delay.

So now the U.S. State Department is reviewing that alternative route and conveniently, a decision has been postponed until 2013. The permitting process that usually takes 18 months will now take 54 months. That's a long time to wait on jobs - especially those "shovel ready" jobs the president says he wants to create. Talk about infrastructure! The KXL project is a 2,700-kilometres-long, \$7-billion investment. That represents a whole lot of shovels.

Activists claimed victory when President Obama announced his decision to push the State Department's permitting decision past next November's election. Will environmental groups still cheer when and if Nebraska and the Obama administration agree on a new route to avoid the Sand Hills? I doubt it.

Canada will not - nor should it - stop production of its oilsands. While the U.S. dithers, other countries will certainly seek out and benefit from partnering with a trustworthy, stable source of energy. The protesters did not really accomplish anything related to the environment, but they have certainly ensured America's continued reliance on oil from hostile nations who don't share the common historic underpinning and commitment to liberty that define the world-class U.S.-Canada bilateral relationship.

Several U.S. presidents have pledged to bring their country closer to energy security and independence. Yet, the one project which offers a direct pipeline to that goal is now in jeopardy, and with it the strength and vibrancy of our most important global friendship.

That is a devastatingly high price to pay for a political pass.

David H. Wilkins served as U.S. ambassador to Canada from 2005-'09. He is a Special Advisor to Global Public Affairs.