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## Keystone XL Pipeline Delay: Were Fears Of A 'North American Union' Behind Opposition?



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The Obama administration's decision to delay the Keystone pipeline has been largely painted in the media as a victory for the environmental movement.

Environmentalists certainly have reason to celebrate, as the delay has the potential to kill the project altogether, and has already prompted Canada to turn to other markets for its oil. It may not be the hands-down, decisive victory opponents of the Keystone were aiming for, but it moves the ball a long way down the field towards green movement's goals.

Yet the notion that environmentalists scuttled this deal doesn't entirely square with the facts. Progressive-minded celebrities were arrested outside

the White House in anti-Keystone protests, sure, but in the actual halls of power the story played out very differently.

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In terms of the practical steps required to make Keystone XL a reality, the most significant opposition came from Nebraska, where a Republican governor came out firmly against the project. In a [letter to the Obama administration this summer](#), Gov. Dave Heineman argued the Keystone XL pipeline, in its current proposed form, would threaten the Ogallala aquifer, a watershed that supplies drinking water to 2 million people in Nebraska and six other states.

There is no reason to doubt that Heineman's concerns about the potential pollution of drinking water are genuine, but it's hard to reconcile his position with his political brand. Employing environmentalists' talking points to oppose an oil industry project seems strikingly out of character for a Republican governor.

Yet this is precisely what happened. So are Midwestern conservatives eschewing their support for big business and taking up environmental causes? Unlikely. Underneath the heated discussions over environmental impact lie several issues close to the hearts of populist American conservatives.

One of these issues is property rights. As *The New York Times* reported last month, TransCanada Corp., the Keystone's builder, "has been threatening to confiscate private land from South Dakota to the Gulf of Mexico, and is already suing many who have refused to allow the Keystone XL pipeline on their property even though the controversial project has yet to receive federal approval."

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Nothing could strike a more unwelcome chord with today's libertarian-minded rural American conservative. The idea that a company – and a *foreign* company, at that – could come to people's homes and demand that they sell their property to them under threat of lawsuit flies in the face of what they see as the foundations of America's constitutional order. The spectre of a large, unaccountable Canadian company taking homeowners' land against their will in order to build a pipeline for Canadian oil is enough to spark a revolution in today's bloody-minded, Tea Party-dominated conservative movement.

With Tea Party websites up in arms about the seizure of Americans' property by a foreign company, the conservative opposition to the Keystone coalesced. In Nebraska, state lawmakers [took to debating changing the laws surrounding eminent domain](#).

But beyond the controversy over property rights lies another concern, one which may not be articulated by elected politicians in the deep-red rural Midwest, but one that appears in private conversations, in the comments sections of online articles, and on the discussion boards where grassroots conservative debate takes place. And that fear is the [North American Union](#).

It has been a concern (some would say a conspiracy theory) of U.S. conservatives that the North American Free Trade Agreement is the thin end of the wedge to the creation of a North American Union, our very own version of the European Union, complete with mountains of technocratic regulations, soul-sucking bureaucracy and an accompanying loss of sovereignty that would make the United States a subservient element of a new, super-national entity.

(It's an interesting irony to note that while in Canada the fear of losing sovereignty through economic integration has been the domain of progressives, in the U.S. that exact same fear is primarily held by conservative-leaning individuals.)

In the mid-2000s, a [conspiracy theory](#) began to circulate on the Internet about a "NAFTA Super-Highway," a massive freeway and rail right-of-way running from the Mexican border to the Canadian border across the continental United States.

Regardless of the fact that such a project would be largely unnecessary and unrealistically expensive, rumours of its imminent groundbreaking spread across the Internet like wildfire. To those worried about a North American Union, the super-highway represented a dangerous new phase of this supposed project to create a super-state from Canada, Mexico and the U.S.

Enter the Keystone pipeline. As [some observers have pointed out](#), the Keystone's route is fairly similar to the route "proposed" for the NAFTA Super-Highway.

#### MAP OF THE PROPOSED KEYSTONE XL PIPELINE EXPANSION

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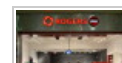
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MAP OF THE SO-CALLED 'NAFTA SUPER-HIGHWAY'



"This pipeline was part of the Trans-Texas Corridor (which is now 'dead,') , which was part of the NAFTA Superhighway (which 'doesn't exist,') which will apparently get built in one incarnation or another," argued the Texas-based Truth Be Told blog in a typical posting on the subject.

It is against this backdrop of property rights concerns and North American Union conspiracy theories that opposition to the Keystone XL pipeline in the deep-red states of the Midwest joined forces with the environmental movement.

Simply put, the environmentalists worried about the ecological impact of the oil sands found common cause with those worried about the abuse of eminent domain, and those worried about Canada and Mexico surreptitiously taking over the United States through growing economic integration.

This is the political circumstance in which President Barack Obama's administration decided to delay the final word on the pipeline to past the 2012 election. It was not, after all, a group of progressive activists who convinced the White House that Keystone was a bad idea; rather it was a confluence of political objectives on both sides of the aisle that convinced the administration it had little to gain from approving the project, at least in the short term.

Yet the outcome here raises some important questions. Many ambitious infrastructure projects have been built in the United States. The most ambitious, the Eisenhower Interstate System, required the repeated use of eminent domain. The controversy over the use of that governmental power has not in the past stopped such projects from going forward; neither have conspiracy theories about a takeover of the United States. That this is now happening raises real and fundamental questions about how the United States makes important policy decisions – or whether it is capable of making them at all, anymore.

The Keystone XL may yet become a reality; or it may be tossed into the dustbin of history as Canada looks to new markets for its oil and the U.S. looks to other sources for its vast energy consumption.

But one thing is certain: The demise of the Keystone XL pipeline, now a very real possibility, is a far more complicated issue than one of environmentalists versus oil barons. What happened to Keystone is as complicated, bizarre and difficult to unravel as America itself is today.

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

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