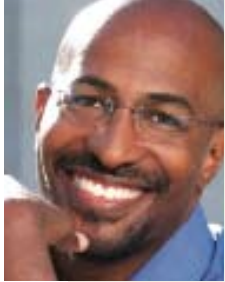


Q&A with Van Jones



“The shift to a green economy requires that we stop borrowing and start building again—that we stop relying on credit from overseas and rely instead on U.S. creativity to power the economy.”

Van Jones is founder and president of Green for All, an Oakland, California-based organization dedicated to providing millions of jobs for Americans through a new green economy. Knowledgeable and often outspoken, Jones explains his solutions to boost the economy, raise many Americans out of poverty, and protect the environment in his recent book The Green Collar Economy.

Looking beyond the collapse of U.S. economic titans like Lehman Brothers, AIG, and Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, what do you think really caused the current U.S. economic crisis?

For the large part of 30 years, we have been sold a bill of goods by both political parties that we could run the U.S. economy on consumption and not on genuine production; on credit, not on smart savings and thrift like our grandparents; on environmental destruction, not on environmental restoration. So, it was a package deal—and most Americans bought it.

By definition, that model is unsustainable. You cannot run the U.S. economy on credit cards, the remains of dead dinosaurs, and the consumption of often unneeded products that quickly end up in landfills. At some point, you are going to run into trouble—and we have. The house of cards started collapsing last fall, and it's hurting a lot of people.

Is the problem only America's spending practices? Aren't other nations following this model or, in some instances, acting as our enablers?

We have a fundamental flaw in the world economy. Today, Americans spend too much

and save too little, and the Chinese spend too little and save too much. That creates a huge imbalance in the world economy—where you have mountains of money in China looking for investment and you have millions of consumers in the United States scurrying around the country with credit cards buying things and tapping their homes like ATMs.

I'm not saying that we should stop buying Chinese goods. We want China's and all of Asia's economies to do well. They have millions of people in the most abject poverty, and they need to have better, healthier lives. But the current way of bringing them out of poverty is stupid. These people have to move out of their villages, leave their culture and their families behind, cram themselves into heavily polluted megacities, and work long hours at hard and often dangerous jobs to make stuff for us.

That's not a good deal for them, and it's horrible for Earth. Chinese air quality is going down, and that pollution floats far from China. Their water quality is going down, and that pollution eventually ends up in the oceans. Plus, they are generating rapidly rising amounts of greenhouse gas emissions.

The entire world economy has been driven by U.S. consumption, not U.S. production or U.S. innovation. The problem for the world economy is that people in the United States cannot afford their consumption binge—and definitely not now.

Unfortunately for the United States and the world, Americans have been pursuing the package deal of economic and environmental recklessness. We've avoided the issue for the past 30 years. We haven't had any moral leadership to point out the error of our ways.

Is there a silver lining in our current economic clouds?

This economic crisis has one advantage: only in dire situations can we talk about new ideas, like shifting our economy back to more innovation and production of the right things—to a *green* economy that turns this economic breakdown into an economic breakthrough.

A green economy recognizes that the only viable economy is environmental, and the only viable environment is economic. The power to make significant change requires both forces. If you try to rev up the economy in ways that don't respect the environment, you will run into speed bumps like toxic water and air pollution.

Nor can you regulate your way out. You must invent a new way out. You need the raw power of markets and innovations to supply the capital to make the technology and reach the necessary scale to create real, lasting, and profitable change, and you need the government to guide the process.

That's not easy, and it's not overnight. The shift to a green economy requires that we stop borrowing and start building again—that we stop relying on credit from overseas and rely instead on U.S. creativity to power the economy.

Where should we start this “new way out?”

The place to start is energy. We have a tremendous opportunity to power ourselves through the recession by fundamentally changing how we provide energy, not only switching to alternative energy, but also changing how we distribute that energy. We need green Keynesian policies—strong fiscal and monetary government policies that fight the recession and go green.

We need a real stimulus, not a silly stimulus. Last year, everybody got their government checks, went to Wal-Mart and bought flat-screen TVs, and powered the economy in China. We must stimulate *our* economy.

Suppose we focus on energy conservation as one key green economy policy. We weatherize and retrofit a few million buildings, so we are going to save money and we are going to cut carbon dioxide emissions. Energy savings are quick, and people get work at once.

If the federal government created a revolving loan fund, it would help cities retrofit their buildings. Those cities would pay back the loan fund from their energy savings over time, so the fund would be revenue neutral.

Right now, our energy strategy is to send billions and trillions of dollars to the Pentagon to protect our oil supplies around the world so that we can send billions and trillions of dollars to other countries to buy that oil. I'd take 10 percent of the Pentagon budget, retrofit millions of buildings, reduce our energy use and loss of billions of dollars to oil suppliers, build thousands of wind and solar farms, produce a bunch of electric vehicles, and be done with it.

We could call the program Retrofit America. It has incredible co-benefits: cheaper energy, cleaner air, jobs for people, less entanglement overseas in various resource wars. It's a great set of opportunities, and it's all part of a package. You build the alternative energy equipment here. Each wind tower is 20 tons of steel. Each wind turbine has 8,000 parts. You could put Detroit back to work—not making SUVs that will destroy the world, but manufacturing wind turbines that will help save the world and strengthen America.

The logo for Retrofit America should not be a hybrid car or a polar bear on an ice floe, but a modern version of World War II's Rosie the Riveter making solar panels and wind turbines.

What good is all this new energy if it's generated hundreds of miles from the nation's economic centers?

We must construct a highly efficient smart energy grid to major population centers. Yes, that's expensive. It takes a lot of work, which will create jobs. It will also require a breakthrough in transmission lines and storage. If we can direct our best minds and R&D money to that challenge, we can create an oil-independent superpower for decades into the future.

Does America have the political will to pull this off?

We've done it before. In the 1950s, we had a bunch of old rural dirt roads in much of the nation. So, we created an interstate highway system for national security—to move troops and materials around the nation, if need be

—and to connect American business and Americans with each other.

Yes, it was expensive, but we recognized that we couldn't afford *not* to do it. Once people could get around the country easily, our economy went through the roof. More recently, think of the Internet superhighway, which moves data and information, not people and cars.

A smart energy grid will give us a comprehensive, highly efficient national energy grid to move alternative energy around, not the current antiquated and inefficient patchwork grid. With this American invention, we beat the global warming beast, we supercharge the world economy, and we make the United States the global leader in one of the key technologies and products of our age—which we can sell or share with the rest of the world. That's the next ten-year agenda.

You're talking about a complete transformation of how we think about, generate, distribute, and use energy. Isn't that too radical a leap for most Americans?

You don't have to be a flaming radical to pull this off. You follow Adam Smith. You cut energy demand, and you expand renewable energy supply. That's how you cut energy prices. It's better fuel standards for cars. It's investing in mass transit, so you cut the demand for gasoline and diesel fuel by half. Once you have the smart energy grid, you plug the car in at night.

Won't cutting energy demand mean a reduction in jobs?

Cutting energy demand—amazingly—increases jobs. The Washington, D.C.-based think tank Center for American Progress estimates that investment in clean energy generates *four times* as many jobs as similar investment in the oil industry. By cutting energy demand in a recession, you can put four people to work instead of just one person. When you cut demand, you bring down prices. When you increase jobs, you expand supply with solar and wind power, and geothermal.

How would the green economy affect real estate development and investment?

Denser, more walkable communities will be more desirable because transportation costs are going to be higher in the future. The current slump in oil prices is only temporary. We may see a cultural return to more modest, better-designed homes and the idea of thrifty not being seen as cheap or uptight, but as a reflection of wisdom and sanity, which will affect all development. Smart growth will win out, not at the pace its proponents hope for, but in a way that will affect all development.

Do you foresee companies scaling back on their sustainability programs to save money?

Companies are going to go back and forth on sustainability based on short-term market signals. We need a government response based on a long-term economic strategy for the nation. Energy prices go up or go down, but if the government says, "We are going to become energy efficient, and companies must make genuine plans and then carry them out," we'll see real change. The federal government must put a price on carbon. That's unpopular now, but it's necessary.

My hope is that the case for a job-generating clean-energy revolution and green economy will be so compelling to the new president and new Congress that they will embark on it. Once they have started, I think we can create so many winners that politicians will be lining up to support these programs, because these programs will create a growing constituency for "clean and green."

We stand at the end of the carbon age and at the dawn of the solar age—the dawn of the second industrial age. The earlier Industrial Revolution hurt people, and it hurt the planet. The new one must help people and help heal the planet. That's the mission statement for the new century, and it's infinitely doable. **UL**

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