

**Global Warming and the United States:** Was Truth  
ever Convenient?

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The 19<sup>th</sup> century had the Civil War and Western expansion. The 20<sup>th</sup> had transportation innovation and the internet. As we have recently crossed the threshold of the 21<sup>st</sup> century *Anno Domini*, America must confront its new centurial issue: global climate control. In many ways, humanity is entering its adolescence. As we spent much of the last century making sure that no man, or country, was an island, we now have to deal with the ramifications of such interconnectedness. The difference—and it is a glaring one—between the United States and our metaphorical youth is that the impact of poor global empathy will be vastly more dangerous than a teenage relationship gone awry.

As Americans (that amorphous term for those from the United States), we face the daily premonition that we can no longer sustain ourselves on our aging superpower status. Gone are the days of rolling through conflicts with United Nations approval. In the era of George W. Bush, America has likely seen the peak of foreign policy a la distasteful improv comedy; we may be shooting from the hip, but nobody else is laughing. As the signs of global warming become increasingly apparent, it becomes unethical to remain in the current state of inactivity. Politically, the world remains very clearly divided. Yet, when the industrial and personal habits of one nation contribute to a global rise in temperature, it becomes prudent to remember that heat and ozone do not draw boundaries. Not only will I attempt to demonstrate the inevitable reality of global warming, but I will provide an ethical analysis of why the ignorance characteristic of the American international machismo is so detestable.

By this point in time—that point being the Nobel committee recognition of Al Gore's work concerning climate change—there should be at least some truth worthy of

general acceptance to the world concerning global warming; indeed, Gore didn't win the prize for fiction writing. So what is global warming? To many Americans it represents an atmosphere filled with letters and numbers: CFCs, CO<sub>2</sub>, etc. Though many causes are evident, the scientific community has come to one consensus: the amount of CO<sub>2</sub> in the air is growing at a prodigious rate, and the effect of this concentration has caused, is causing, and will cause more elevation in the Earth's temperature (Johansen 26).

The burden science then must shoulder is proving the connection between CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations in the atmosphere and warming of the Earth. The polar ice caps hold much of the truth in this matter. These ice caps have been forming over many centuries, and as such air samples from years past are trapped within the ice's crystalline structure. By analyzing air from the past, scientists have found the normal fluctuation of CO<sub>2</sub> concentration in the atmosphere has been between 200 and 280 ppm (parts per million) (Johansen 33). Since the industrial revolution, however, the concentration has risen to 380 ppm (Johansen 34). The relationship now is clear. Temperature increase in our current state is not the natural fluctuation. All else constant, humans are causing the concentration of CO<sub>2</sub> to increase, and with it both the temperature of the planet and our probability of peril.

Carbon dioxide is not the only assay of choice for the presence of global warming. Hurricanes are formed off the coast of Africa (near the equator) and travel west toward the United States and Mexico. As the water gets warmer through the summer, the number of hurricanes and their intensity increase. To this end, the number of hurricanes of category four or five in the past thirty years has nearly doubled (Emmanuel 686-688). More hurricanes at a higher intensity indicates warmer waters, an event increasing in

likelihood when given the statistics for polar ice cap melting. The energy developed via global warming will not dissipate by itself, and therefore we see its devastation every hurricane season in higher and higher doses.

The evidence manifests itself as well in the form of animal migration. Just as humans prefer certain climates, so too do animals. Birds migrate naturally during the winter, and you will never find a polar bear roaming Fairmount Park, unless perhaps it broke free from the Philadelphia Zoo. Therefore, take this number into consideration: “at least 279 species of plants and animals are already responding to global warming by moving closer to the poles.” (Paramount Pictures 1) Animals do not have the same thoughts we do of creating our own environmental utopia. They stay where they are bred to survive, and therefore their movement is nothing short of involuntary reflex to climate change.

The evidence is available to those willing to open their eyes, so then why does America insist on acting blindly? In the age of interconnectedness, how can we stake any claim to global superiority when we refuse to address global issues? The proof is in the polling. In a Gallup poll given on the 11th of March, 2007, only 5% of those Americans polled believed that the overall quality of our environment is excellent (Gallup). Recognizing this problem, only 40% of that population polled believes the current administration has weakened the nation’s environmental policy. How is it that we can feel so badly about our environment, but not turn that desire for a better country into political change? What prevents the full 95% of that poll which thought the environment was not at its best from turning itself on those who perpetuate poor environmental practices? Therein lies the ethical rub.

Americans are born into a world of guaranteed autonomy. We have certain rights detailed to us that former Americans fought to win. In both World Wars, we traveled to Europe and defended the innocent, breaking the stalemate of power. Our schools are well respected, our international businesses are flourishing and we are the example of all that is Western. The point of my listing America's international exploits is this: we are born into self-supremacy. Arguments against autonomy stand only due to the fact that the fair and balanced mind knows that the self is not infallible.

Now as America flounders on the international political scene, we are left with that same desire to stick to the autonomy of our forefathers. It is very difficult to take righteousness away from those who are born into deserving it. Yet, the tide is turning (in addition to rising). The success of thought which battles the status quo is an indicator of how sects of the population are coming to terms with a loss of full international autonomy. Conservatives call these people "liberal." I choose to call them "rational." It takes a gross amount of oversight to run away from the scientific fact which has accumulated in favor of the argument that something must be done about global warming.

Ethical systems of belief were derived to reach the "good life" which Plato and Socrates first brought about in Ancient Greece. They answer the question "How can we obtain happiness?" The threat to global health is such an inherently awful concept, that there does not seem to be a system in opposition of remedying our environmental practices. First, let us analyze the deontological viewpoint. Deontology attempts to focus on the rightness of the action itself. Whether a rule deontologist or an act deontologist, the inherent value in preserving the planet on which we live is self-evident. Self-

sustenance must be a goal of humanity in every act. Nobody is free to seek the happy life if they have no life in which to do the seeking. Whether you align selfish or charitable, global warming would not be good, deontologically.

As opposed to analyzing the issue by rule adherence, one could also adhere to consequentialism. In this case, the consequences of actions are the focal point utilized in determining good behavior. Our proposed consequence then becomes the consequences of global climate change: the shifting of populations, the eradication of species of both flora and fauna, and the loss of land area due to rising seas coupled with our already increasing global population. This dramatic crisis of socio-economic and environmental norm would lead to discomfort at the least, and casualty at the worst. Therefore, unless you see global warming as some form of righteous retribution from a removed power (be it God or fate), consequentialist teaching would align again with the “liberal” population.

We could even delve as deeply as to go through Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. The theory behind this triangular ranking of human needs and satisfactions is that higher levels of the triangle are only possible if they have a base to rely on. The most basic needs in residence at the bottom of the triangle—those needs which must be satisfied to allow any further human development—include food, water, shelter and breathing. Mayer Hillman writes in his collaborative work *The Suicide Planet*:

The U.S. National Assessment suggests that U.S. temperatures could increase by 3°F to 9°F. Yet just 1°F of additional global warming could see drought across the western states that are at present the fastest growing. Deserts will reemerge across the High Plains—in particular Nebraska, which has areas of stabilized sand dunes thousands of years old from paleo-droughts, but also Wyoming, eastern Montana, northern Texas, and much of Oklahoma.

(Hillman 29)

With evidence that there has been such heat in the nation's Midwest region before, it is hard to argue that it couldn't happen again—to a possibly greater degree. And with an increasing amount of our agriculture coming from imports, America could soon become a nation dependant on others for food.

The list of facts and theories against the status quo reactionary methods is astounding. While no one piece of the evidence is outstanding enough to make the case by itself, together there can be only one conclusion: global warming is a present reality, not a fantasy or even a possibility on the horizon. Pushing aside disbelief, we must strategize internationally to help save ourselves from economic and ecological peril. In order to prevent further environmental damage, the United States must start to act internationally as if the world was not a personal possession. Common possession and common stake in this issue mandate cooperation from all capable. The solutions are in the works: it is growing knowledge what a “carbon footprint” is, automobile manufacturers are designing flexible fueling vehicles in the waiting that the government can subsidize them past the oil barrier.

In my mind, it becomes a matter of popular will against governmental neglect. Tossing a few lines toward the environment during a State of the Union address hardly addresses the issue at all. I fear some taste of the future impact of global warming will be necessary for our government to begin acting on behalf of the constituency. Indeed, the truth was never convenient, one of the reasons why we have never mobilized outside of isolated groups of concerned citizens. Hopefully, our current trend in politics to move away from the ignorance carried by the current administration will continue into the coming presidential election. While the people must make ethical decisions as well, the

United States is in sore need of an administration that can realize the needs of the many in this instance *are* the needs of the few. It's quite lonely at the top, and it's about time we joined the rest of humanity in its shared struggle.

## **Bibliography**

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