

Climate Activism: The New Opportunities of Climate Change
The Gary Comer Lecture

Remarks by
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Thank you very much. To my old friend, John McCarter, thank you for getting me back to Chicago. And to Stephanie Comer and the family, it is an honor to deliver the first Gary Comer Lecture. I want to talk briefly today about our evolving priorities and responsibilities as a nation and as a world – particularly as they relate to climate change and the Earth’s environment.

The environmental movement, of which we are all a part, began in the United States through the quest to protect the land. We started as conservationists, defining ourselves by setting aside the most beautiful places of the country: Yellowstone, Yosemite, the Grand Canyon, and the list goes on.

For much of the 20th century, we followed the leadership of such visionaries as John Muir, Teddy Roosevelt and David Brower. In the 1970s, that era of the conservation movement came to an end as we began to recognize the impact of industrial activity at the local and regional level – on human health and local ecosystems. Public outcry over the effects of lead in gasoline and acid precipitation on forests was galvanized by events like the Cuyahoga River in Cleveland catching fire due to its horrendous levels of pollution. In reaction to this public outcry, the Congress began to clean up and constrain the existing industrial order.

The Clean Air Act was passed and limitations placed on acid rain. Catalytic converters were invented. Leaded gasoline was outlawed. And in order to contend with toxic releases and water pollution, the principle of “polluter pays” was enshrined in the Superfund Law. It was an era of legal confrontation, driven by the citizens of this country.

Now we environmentalists are entering another period of transformation. Out of necessity, we are redefining ourselves again, recognizing the global scale and planetary impacts of our actions – most especially the stark and far-reaching challenge of climate change, the most difficult challenge society has ever confronted. We need to transform ourselves again, this time into climate activists. Climate Activists. The stakes could not be higher. Ultimately, human life is at risk. Losing is not an option.

This era began in earnest in 1992, when the nations of the world came together in Rio for the Earth Summit. It was the biggest meeting of heads of state the world had ever seen and resulted in numerous agreements to protect the oceans, land resources, biological diversity and a range of other global environmental challenges. The most important product of the historic gathering was the Climate Treaty, more formally known as the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. The Climate Treaty was signed by the first President Bush in September of 1992 and it was ratified by the United States Senate a few weeks later. It is now the law of the land in the United States, as it is in 191 other countries around the world.

The Kyoto Protocol, which I had the privilege and challenge of helping to negotiate, is actually an amendment to that underlying Climate Treaty, and was designed to clarify aspects of the international agreement. The language of the Climate Treaty is extremely important; it commits all signatories to the goal of – and I quote – “stabilization of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic” – that’s us – “interference in the climate system.”

“Stabilization of greenhouse gases,”
“Dangerous interference in the climate system,”

These are the most important operative words of the treaty, and drive all policy debates.

The scientific community, led by the UN’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), and including a number of distinguished scientists from the Field Museum, has played an enormously important role in defining what will be required to prevent dangerous consequences from climate change. In fact, there is now broad agreement that by any reasonable definition, the current level of greenhouse forcing gases in the atmosphere is indeed dangerous. Temperatures have risen significantly.

Dr. James Hansen of NASA, perhaps the most widely respected and read climate scientist in the country, has written (and I quote): “In the past thirty years, we have had one degree Fahrenheit of global warming. But there’s another one degree Fahrenheit in the pipeline due to gases that are already in the atmosphere. And there’s another one degree Fahrenheit in the pipeline because of the energy infrastructure now in place – for example, power plants and vehicles that we’re not going to take off the road even if we decide that we’re going to address this problem.”

Dr. Hansen continues: “Any responsible assessment of environmental impact must conclude that further global warming exceeding two degrees Fahrenheit will be dangerous. The two-degree Fahrenheit limit will be exceeded unless a change of direction can begin during the current decade. Unless this fact is widely communicated, and decision-makers are responsive, it will soon be impossible to avoid climate change with far-reaching undesirable consequences. We have reached a critical tipping point,” end of quote.

Hansen’s concern about current and future climate change is reflected in data widely distributed in the mainstream media, from the *New York Times* to the “Daily Show.” The increased incidence of violent storms, doubling of major floods in the last 30 years, the rolling back of glaciers and erosion of Arctic ice, increased and permanent drought – all are indicators of the looming climate crisis.

Understanding the reality that human beings can alter the environment on a planetary scale forces us to think what we can do, how we can work together and how fast we can move. For we have to dramatically change the way we sustain ourselves. We have to reform our energy system, and with great urgency, move to a low-carbon economy.

The network of challenges before us is daunting, even overwhelming, but I like the way that writer Bill McKibben puts it. To the question, “Are we doomed?” he answers, “Not any more than your doctor telling you that your cholesterol is way too high means that the game is over.”

Much like the way your body will thin its blood if you give up Whoppers and cheese fries, so the earth rids itself naturally of some of its CO₂ each year. We just need to stop putting more in and over time, atmospheric concentrations will stabilize, perhaps fast enough to avert the worst damage.

How do we accomplish this? Very simply, we have to change the rules. In a healthy society, rules are periodically reviewed and updated to adapt to new realities and greater wisdom. Changing the rules doesn't make the problem go away. But changing the rules does allow us to try to bend the problem and to shape its future direction.

The rules that we have now were largely structured around the assumption of abundance, that the earth's bounty was infinite, that natural systems were simply too big to fail. This is now demonstrably untrue and therefore the rules have to be changed to accommodate our improved knowledge. We can lower our cholesterol.

To begin with, we must put a price on carbon. The old rule was that the atmosphere was a free good. The new rule must be that polluters have to pay for using the atmospheric commons as a carbon garbage dump. Putting a price on carbon will also help to equalize the costs of all energy sources, and will remove much of the advantage that we give to the dangerously polluting coal industry.

Coupled with a price on carbon, new laws and economic systems can spur broad-based energy efficiency at home and abroad.

For most utilities, the old rule was: provide more energy to your customers; build more power plants; sell more power. The more you sell, the more money you make for your shareholders. That has led to very significant waste. The new rule has to be: provide consumers with the services they need at the lowest cost possible.

We are learning to flip the old model, to allow utilities to earn the same or better rate of return for saving energy as they earned for generating it. In states as widely divergent as North Carolina, Maryland and California – and soon in Colorado – utilities will earn a comparable rate of return from installing insulation, storm windows, efficient furnaces, and the whole package of energy efficiency services.

Good economic analysis clearly indicates that efficiency pays for itself, and that a 2 to 3 percent annual increase in efficiency is feasible over the next 20 years. McKinsey and Company has recently published a series of widely respected studies that conclude that we could avoid half the projected growth in world energy demand with efficiency steps that will provide an annual rate of return on investment of more than 17 percent.

There is also room and opportunity to expand substantially the use of renewable energy sources. The Renewable Portfolio Standard developed in my home state of Colorado is a beautiful illustration. In the face of opposition from various business-as-usual interest groups, citizens went around a recalcitrant state legislature and governor, and through the initiative process, wrote into the state's Constitution the requirement that the state's biggest utility change the way that it generated and bought power. The result has been a resounding success – with more renewables coming online faster and cheaper than anyone ever thought possible. Changing the rules makes a big difference. Twenty-five states now have renewable portfolio standards – all have been successful.

And there are countless other examples of individuals and local governments leapfrogging ahead. Six hundred cities, led by Chicago, have signed the U.S. Mayors Climate Protection Agreement. States from Florida to Hawaii, California to New Jersey, have enacted their own long-term, binding and ambitious goals on emissions of greenhouse gases. Campuses are getting on board. Green building codes are being adopted broadly and I know that Christopher Kennedy and the Merchandise Mart have helped create the world's largest green building right here in Chicago. And the list of state and local initiatives goes on.

Equally encouraging is the emergence of a number of large, multi-national U.S.-based corporations, coming together in a new Climate Action Partnership. The roster reads like a list of the Fortune 100:

- Caterpillar
- Duke Energy
- General Electric
- Conoco-Phillips
- PG & E

This important group has called on our government to implement a cap on carbon emissions, coupled with an economically efficient trading system.

Now, will all of these initiatives, public and private, add up to something meaningful? I think they will, but only if we see the climate crisis not just as a woe-is-me problem, but as an extraordinary opportunity -- to transition the way we produce and use energy, to transform the multi-trillion-dollar energy industry. This is an opportunity for economic renewal, with a reach far beyond the recent telecommunications and digital revolutions.

It is an opportunity for business development and job creation; an opportunity to strengthen our national security; an opportunity for poverty alleviation; and especially an opportunity for innovation, which is why we need to sharply increase investments in research, development and demonstration of new energy technologies.

It should be a national embarrassment that today, in constant dollars, our government spends only 25 percent of the level of R&D that we committed 30 years ago. Let me say that again. Today, our government spends only 25 percent – same dollars – on research and development for energy that we did 30 years ago. In view of the climate crisis and the economic opportunity before us, in the transition to the new administration, we should pursue a four-fold increase, at least getting us back to those earlier levels.

Part and parcel of the technological revolution will be changes in the way that we approach our transportation system. I happen to believe that the plug-in hybrid will rapidly become the vehicle of choice, since it largely depends on existing distribution networks. While it has a long way to go, Congress has begun to move by writing new rules for auto efficiency. These efforts will accelerate, as will the development of new fuels, new storage capability and cleaner fuels.

Obviously, our transportation system continues to rely on liquid fuels and there has been much talk in recent weeks and months about the international food crisis and its relationship to development of biofuels and bioenergy. The current crisis should not deter the world's search for long-term global solutions to poverty, alternative fuels, and environmental protection. We should continue efforts to move to second-generation fuels made from waste materials and non-food crops. Even the limited amount of biofuels on the market today have been credited with helping to dampen the spiral of oil price increases, and next generation fuels certainly can be economically advantageous for poor countries with little if any effect on food production. Today, all across the United States, blended fuels – a mix of biofuels and gasoline – have made a significant contribution to lowering urban ozone, one of our greatest public health problems. As bad as the impact of high food prices has been, the impact of high oil prices has been worse – devastating poor countries that have no indigenous source of supply, erasing all the benefits of international debt relief and more.

All of these resource issues – from food to oil to the atmosphere – remind us how important it is to once again attend to the pressing matter of human population. This subject, which began with a focus on the numbers of people on an already overcrowded earth, is now understood to include a number of other variables:

- The carrying capacity of the planet – how many people can the planet sustain and at what levels of consumption;
- Climate-induced migration;
- Urbanization and coastal vulnerability;
- Pressures by people escaping failed states;
- And the new demographics of aging.

These factors complicate the inexorable growth of global population, now projected to increase from 6.5 to 9 billion within two or three generations, and these factors are stubbornly resistant to ideology.

Once the global leader in population policy, the United States government should return to this status:

- Increasing our support to meet the unmet need for family planning;
- Reshaping our AIDS programs;
- And focusing on education and health system reform, especially to include the needs of adolescent girls.

This is a comprehensive agenda – for changing the rules and transforming the energy system, developing and sharing new technologies, encouraging new transportation options and stabilizing population. So what will make it all come together? Can we assure needed, coordinated action in the urgent time frame that's necessary? A lot will depend on the results of the next election, the state of the economy, and how aggressively U.S. multi-nationals are willing to join the fray and demand change. And maybe most important will be how we conduct ourselves in the international arena. Unless we figure out how to get along with the rest of the world, our domestic actions will not be enough.

Just as we need to change the rules at home, so, too, in a globalized world, we need new rules to address issues and conditions that transcend boundaries – what Kofi Annan called “problems without passports.” Our special challenge is to help figure out a fair and equitable way of preventing destruction of the global commons – the air, oceans and other resources that link human beings at the most fundamental level.

On the one hand, most developing countries argue that we (in the developed world) caused most of the problem, and we should pay to fix it. And, they also remind us that our per capita emissions are five to ten times greater than theirs.

On the other hand, we argue that many nations in the developing world have become major emitters of carbon, and must also be part of the solution. China, for example, is now the world’s #1 carbon emitter, and how might we expect our Congress to legislate a program for carbon reduction that doesn’t include China, India and other rapidly developing countries?

Of course, both positions are correct.

How this conflict is resolved, especially between countries like the United States and China, will in large part determine the success or failure of the climate negotiations. Finding a fair and equitable solution will be the nub of the global climate talks.

So it was encouraging last fall when German Chancellor Angela Merkel, offered a page out of the developing-country playbook: Chancellor Merkel suggested that the international community strive to allocate emission rights on a per-capita basis. This was a revolutionary suggestion. She suggested that international negotiations would set a global goal for annual greenhouse gas emissions and then divide them so that over time, every person would receive an equal allotment. Recognizing disparities in current per-capita emissions, her proposal would establish different trajectories and challenges for North and South, in the context of a common compact to prevent catastrophic climate change.

To put this in the perspective of a few numbers, the United States today emits 20 tons of carbon per person; Germany, about 11 tons per person; China, about three; and India, a little more than one. Chancellor Merkel suggested that the global standards eventually converge at two tons per capita, so her proposal would require huge cuts from those of us in the industrialized world and much smaller ones from China.

But the ultimate goal and the ultimate equity was that everybody would get their fair share. Ambitious as that sounds, both its logic and ethical appeal are unassailable. Fairness demands a climate agreement that treats all people equally and that shares both opportunities and responsibilities in a carbon-constrained world, if we are to work together in a common effort to prevent catastrophic climate change.

Now, it is hard for me to imagine any politician in the developing world signing an agreement that doesn’t seem fair to all his or her constituents. Likewise, it is hard to imagine an agreement, particularly between the United States and China, that overnight would require huge cuts in emissions for us, along with a hefty transfer of wealth to the developing world.

So if we are to build a pathway to agreement, the tricky diplomacy required will have to include significant breakthroughs and transfers of technology; a glide path for developed country emissions, down from today's highs; growing responsibilities by the newly developed countries – China, India, Mexico, Chile, Brazil, South Africa – who will have to make special leadership commitments to efficiency and lower emissions and some sort of large financial commitment, over time as much as \$100 billion a year to help the least developed countries, the 50 or 60 poorest countries in the world – to help those who have contributed the least and are going to be impacted the most by climate change that they had little or no hand in creating.

But none of this is going to happen without the full cooperation, support and leadership of the United States. This brings me to one final point – the imperative of Climate Activism – dramatic, persistent, citizen action, focused on the need to get our national government off the sidelines and into the action – domestically and internationally.

Because we cannot solve this problem without the complete engagement of the United States government. So the problem is simply ours – if we want to save the world, we had better get busy.

The problem of getting our government to move is not new – this issue is just much bigger and more urgent than ones we've dealt with in the past.

Let's remind ourselves that we have done it before – we have markedly changed our government through aggressive, grassroots citizen activism.

Just in the 40 years that John and I have known each other:

- The Civil Rights movement changed America; but the Civil Rights Bill and the Voting Rights Act did not come because, high above the silent city, members of the Senate Judiciary Committee decided change was needed. In fact, they resisted, while citizen action forced these changes.
- Similarly the movement to empower women and change employment, health care, college admission and a whole range of other rules effecting women didn't happen because of the work of many women in the House and Senate – there were very few. These changes also came from citizen activism.
- So, too, the consumer movement, rules for safety and consumer protection, product disclosure, auto safety, seat belts and food labeling – all from grassroots activism.
- And we know the reasons for the modern environmental movement: the National Environmental Protection Act, Safe Drinking Water Legislation, the Toxic Substances, the Endangered Species Act.

So what of the new climate activism today?

Yes, there are promising indicators of progress and change

- At State and local government
- In the private sector

Yes, the debate over the climate science seems finally to be over, and we can now move to what we do about it.

Yes, there are economic signals, pointing to broad new opportunities.

And yes, all the Presidential candidates have endorsed the need to cap and put a price on carbon.

But Congress still refuses to pass the easy ones: efficiency requirements; renewable standards; and research and development funding.

Major concentrations of economic power: the largest utility, the biggest and most profitable oil company, and the largest coal company, continue to profit from the old rules while they spend lots of money to sow doubt about the new.

The agricultural industry still pays much more attention to maintaining its outmoded subsidies, rather than focusing on the promises of the new economy.

The utility industry is largely stuck in a status quo, while our grid remains antiquated and new fuels are barely explored.

- And around the world, the perception of the United States and what we stand for has soured, turning from promise to disappointment.

We have a long way to go. Can we get there fast enough?

- Only if we demand change, and are willing to work for it.

Maybe the most promising sign of all is the very large number of young people who have flocked into this election. Will this last?

- Will they turn out to vote?
- Will they run for office themselves?
- Will they go into public service, as teachers, air traffic controllers, foreign service officers?

We don't know. In so many ways, we are – as Jim Hansen has said – we are at the tipping point.

On one side is a world of great new opportunities. We know what to do – will we do what has to be done?

On the other side is certain disaster – if we do nothing, the world as we know it is doomed.

This is the final opportunity within the fascinating climate challenge – the seeds of a new political renewal in America. For too long we have also debased, neglected and abused our political system, just as we have our environment.

They are all part and parcel of the same climate challenge – the opportunity for economic change, social equity, global leadership and political change.

You are here tonight because you recognize that the world is changing – together we can guide that change, and help bring the globe into a safe landing.

Again thank you.