

U.S. Climate Policy: Toward a Sensible Center

June 24, 2004

Excerpt: Strobe Talbott, President, The Brookings Institution

MR. TALBOTT: Good morning, everybody. Could you all take your seats, please? Let me give the folks in the back of the room just another moment. I'll use the pause while we're waiting for people to take their seats to make the standard announcement, and that is, until Brookings is able to install the ejection seats that they're now advertising in the movie theaters, I would ask you all please to turn off your cell phones, or put them on vibrate I guess is Option B.

I'm Strobe Talbott, the President of Brookings, and I want to welcome you all here this morning for what I'm sure you all agree is not just a very important event on an important subject but a very timely event as well. I cannot think of a better example than climate change of a global issue and, indeed, a global challenge that is also a challenge to American national policy. And that, of course, is our topic today.

Brookings is very proud to be cosponsoring this event with our friends from the Pew Center on Global Climate Change, and in a moment Eileen Claussen will come to the podium and preview the program for the day. She is the President of the Pew Center. She's a former colleague of mine and a very good friend, and I'm glad that she's now a collaborator with the Brookings Institution on this project.

Eileen is also a true expert on the subject that we are going to be discussing today. She has devoted much of her career to these issues. That is not a claim that I can make. Much of my career has been focused on other threats to international security and, indeed, threats to the survival of the planet and the species. I've been working on such issues as nuclear weaponry, the arms race, the Cold War. But as a citizen, I have come to appreciate, as I suspect all of you in this room have, that global warming is in the same league in terms of both something to worry about and also something to do something about and also in terms of its importance, its complexity, and the danger that it poses to all of us.

There is, of course, a difference between manmade weaponry that can unleash forces of nature that would trigger catastrophic destruction, perhaps global destruction, in a matter of hours and man-induced disruption of the forces of nature that can wreak horrendous destruction over a period of decades and centuries by degrading the Earth's ability to sustain life in general and human life in particular.

The United States, of course, is a major contributor to the problem of climate change, and it behooves us, both for that reason and also because of our leadership position in the world, to be a major contributor to the solution. Achieving that goal is going to require a much more sophisticated, constructive, forward-looking, and civil discussion than has been the case so far. To date, the debate on this issue has been characterized by far more heat than light. This issue has been both polarized and polarizing.

One example that often comes to my mind is what's happened to the word Kyoto. Not too long ago, that word conjured up images of imperial grandeur and raked pebble gardens. Now it is, of course, a battle slogan. It is either a buzz word for what's wrong with attempts at international governance, or it's seen as representing a threat to our national sovereignty, or it's a catch phrase for much of what is wrong with U.S. policy and predominant views about America's role in the world.

What's needed in order to get this right, or at least to begin moving in the right direction, is objectivity, a respect for empirical evidence--which is to say, the facts as best we can determine them--and also a respect for diversity of views.

We have those values very much in mind here at Brookings as we're going about the task of trying to significantly increase this institution's capacity to make a contribution on the issue of the environment and to put the environment on our long-term agenda here at Brookings as befits an issue that is so important to the national agenda.

Several colleagues of mine whom you will be seeing during the course of the day have been in the lead in this respect: Niger Purvis, who worked on these issues both in the Clinton and Bush administrations; David Sandalow, who worked on them in the State Department, in the White House, and in the NGO world; Warwick McKibben, who is a leading expert on the economics of climate change; and Jim Steinberg, Vice President of Brookings and also the director of our Foreign Policy Studies Program, who has played in the past a central role in climate change diplomacy as Deputy National Security Adviser to the President.

I want to join all of them in thanking the Alcoa Foundation and the Virginia Wellington Cabot Foundation for supporting Brookings' work in this area during the past year, and I want to single out two of our trustees in particular: Steve Wolf, and particularly Louis Cabot, who is here today to participate in these proceedings.

In organizing this conference, Nigel and Eileen have reached out to a broad-based and very distinguished group of participants. They include Members of Congress, Senators, CEOs, senior administration officials, representatives of the scientific and NGO communities, and the President of the World Bank. They will all offer different perspectives on the challenge that is posed by our topic, which is how to define a sensible center for U.S. climate policy, and thereby perhaps help to depolarize the issue and lay the ground for bold yet practical and widely supported remedies to this problem.

So, Eileen, if I could now invite you to the podium to describe the structure of the conference in greater depth and offer your thoughts on where U.S. climate policy is heading. Thank you.