

■ Al Gore's Address to the Kyoto Climate Change Conference

Date: December 1997

Author: Al Gore

Genre: speech

Summary Overview

Of all the environmental crises faced by the human race, perhaps none has been more hotly contested than climate change, also known as global warming. Since scientists first began to publish their findings in the mid-twentieth century, proving that global temperatures were on the rise, the direct impact of greenhouse gas fed by human industrial activity, political forces have risen in opposition. While groups on the Left have argued for immediate action to stem rising temperatures, groups on the Right, concerned by the impact of environmental regulation on the economy, have called into question the validity of the scientific data, despite a nearly unified scientific consensus on the causes of the problem. One of the most ardent champions of climate change and a vocal advocate for immediate action is former Vice President Al Gore, who first addressed the burgeoning crisis at the Kyoto Climate Change Conference in 1997.

Defining Moment

Since the dawn of the Industrial Age, human activity has resulted in the release of high levels of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. These pollutants, such as methane and carbon monoxide, the natural by-product of combustion of fossil fuels, deforestation, and animal agriculture, rise into the atmosphere where they trap heat along the Earth's surface. The resulting temperature increases have harmful effects on the ecosystem, including rising sea levels, lowered precipitation, expansion of deserts, and the increased likelihood of extreme weather events. Since scientists first began to observe the phenomenon in the mid-twentieth century, global temperatures have increased every year, making each subsequent year hotter than the last. However, despite an overwhelming consensus that human activity is directly linked to increasing temperatures and dire warnings about the impending consequences of climate change, American political leaders have taken virtually no action to stem the crisis. Much of the inaction is the result of a political stalemate, with leaders on the Left urging for increased environmental regulation and leaders on the Right questioning the very validity of scientific findings. One of the most vocal proponents of climate change is Al Gore, Vice President under Bill Clinton,

who in the 1990s became increasingly convinced of the immediacy of the crisis. Quickly emerging as a leader on the issue, Gore urged political leaders in the



Al Gore in 1994. Photo via Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain.]

United States and abroad to take action by curbing the production of greenhouse gases. Meeting on the issue, representatives from nearly every nation on Earth met in climate change conferences, first in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 and again in Berlin in 1995. Drawing on tentative agreements, representatives agreed to meet again in Kyoto in 1997 where they hoped to finalize a binding set of protocols that would finally put solid plans into action to curb greenhouse gasses and perhaps final stop the rise in global temperatures.

Author Biography

Albert Arnold Gore Jr. was born on March 31, 1948, the son of the Democratic Congressman and later Senator from Tennessee, Albert Gore Sr. After attending undergraduate studies at Harvard, where he first became interested in politics and environmentalism, Gore enlisted in the army and served with distinction

in the Vietnam War. Following brief stint as a journalist, Gore was first elected as a Democrat to the House of Representatives for Tennessee's 4th district, then the 6th, and eventually to the United States Senate. After an unsuccessful run for President in 1988, he became Vice President to Bill Clinton in 1993. In his capacity as VP, Gore distinguished himself in addressing issues of waste and spending, championing technological investment (most famously in the internet), and becoming a vocal proponent of environmental causes, including climate change. After a defeat by George W. Bush in the highly contested 2000 presidential election, Gore became an outspoken critic of the Iraq War, a power broker in the Democratic Party, and arguably the most famous environmentalist in the world. In fact, his work on climate change earned him numerous accolades, notably a Nobel Peace Prize in 2007.



Historical Document

Address to the Kyoto Climate Change Conference

Prime Minister Hashimoto and President Figueres, President Kinza Clodumar, other distinguished heads of state, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen.

It is an honor to be here at this historic gathering, in this ancient capital of such beauty and grace. On behalf of President Clinton and the American people, and our U.S. negotiator, Ambassador Stu Eizenstat, I salute our Japanese hosts for their gracious hospitality, and offer a special thank you to Prime Minister Hashimoto, and to our chairs, Minister Ohki, and Ambassador Estrada, for their hard work and leadership.

Since we gathered at the Rio Conference in 1992, both scientific consensus and political will have come a long way. If we pause for a moment and look around us, we can see how extraordinary this gathering really is.

We have reached a fundamentally new stage in the development of human civilization, in which it is necessary to take responsibility for a recent but profound alteration in the relationship between our species and our planet. Because of our new technological power and our growing numbers, we now must pay careful attention to the consequences of what we are doing to the Earth—especially to the atmosphere.

There are other parts of the Earth's ecological system that are also threatened by the increasingly harsh impact of thoughtless behavior:

The poisoning of too many places where people—especially poor people—live, and the deaths of too many children—especially poor children—from polluted water and dirty air; The dangerous and unsustainable depletion of ocean fisheries; And The rapid destruction of critical habitats—rain forests, temperate forests, boreal forests, wetlands, coral reefs, and other precious wellsprings of genetic variety upon which the future of humankind depends.

But the most vulnerable part of the Earth's environment is the very thin layer of air clinging near to the surface of the planet, that we are now so carelessly filling with gaseous wastes that we are actually altering the relationship between the Earth and the Sun—by trapping more solar radiation under this growing blanket of pollution that envelops the entire world.

The extra heat which cannot escape is beginning to change the global patterns of climate to which we are accustomed, and to which we have adapted over the last 10,000 years.

Last week we learned from scientists that this year, 1997, with only three weeks remaining, will be the hottest year since records have been kept. Indeed, nine of the 10 hottest years since the measurements began have come in the last 10 years. The trend is clear. The human consequences—and the economic costs—of failing to act are unthinkable. More record floods and droughts. Diseases and pests spreading to new areas. Crop failures and famines. Melting glaciers, stronger storms, and rising seas.

Our fundamental challenge now is to find out whether and how we can change the behaviors that are causing the problem.

To do so requires humility, because the spiritual roots of our crisis are pridefulness and a failure to understand and respect our connections to God's Earth and to each other.

Each of the 160 nations here has brought unique perspectives to the table, but we all understand that our work in Kyoto is only a beginning. None of the proposals being debated here will solve the problem completely by itself. But if we get off to the right start here, we can quickly build momentum as we learn together how to meet this challenge. Our first step should be to set realistic and achievable, binding emissions limits, which will create new markets for new technologies and new ideas that will, in turn, expand the boundaries of the possible and create new hope. Other steps will then follow. And then, ultimately, we will achieve a safe overall concentration level for greenhouse gases in the Earth's atmosphere.

This is the step-by-step approach we took in Montreal 10 years ago to address the problem of ozone depletion. And it is working.

This time, success will require first and foremost that we heal the divisions among us.

The first and most important task for developed countries is to hear the immediate needs of the developing world. And let me say, the United States has listened and we have learned.

We understand that your first priority is to lift your citizens from the poverty so many endure and build strong economies that will assure a better future. This is your right: it will not be denied.

And let me be clear in our answer to you: We do not want to founder on a false divide. Reducing poverty and protecting the Earth's environment are both

critical components of truly sustainable development. We want to forge a lasting partnership to achieve a better future. One key is mobilizing new investment in your countries to ensure that you have higher standards of living, with modern, clean and efficient technologies.

That is what our proposals for emissions trading and joint implementation strive to do.

To our partners in the developed world, let me say we have listened and learned from you as well. We understand that while we share a common goal, each of us faces unique challenges.

You have shown leadership here, and for that we are grateful. We came to Kyoto to find new ways to bridge our differences. In doing so, however, we must not waiver in our resolve. For our part, the United States remains firmly committed to a strong, binding target that will reduce our own emissions by nearly 30 percent from what they would otherwise be—a commitment as strong, or stronger, than any we have heard here from any country. The imperative here is to do what we promise, rather than to promise what we cannot do.

All of us, of course, must reject the advice of those who ask us to believe there really is no problem at all. We know their arguments; we have heard others like them throughout history. For example, in my country, we remember the tobacco company spokesmen who insisted for so long that smoking did no harm. To those who seek to obfuscate and obstruct, we say: we will not allow you to put narrow special interests above the interests of all humankind.

So what does the United States propose that we do?

The first measure of any proposal must be its environmental merit, and ours is environmentally solid and sound.

It is strong and comprehensive, covering all six significant greenhouse gases. It recognizes the link between the air and the land, including both sources and sinks. It provides the tools to ensure that targets can be met—offering emissions trading, joint implementation and research as powerful engines of technology development and transfer. It further reduces emissions—below 1990 levels—in the years 2012 and beyond. It provides the means to ensure that all nations can join us on their own terms in meeting this common challenge.

It is also economically sound. And, with strict monitoring and accountability, it ensures that we will keep our bond with one another.

Whether or not agreement is reached here, we will take concrete steps to help meet this challenge. President Clinton and I understand that our first obligation is to address this issue at home. I commit to you today that the United States is prepared to act—and will act.

For my part, I have come here to Kyoto because I am both determined and optimistic that we can succeed. I believe that by our coming together in Kyoto we have already achieved a major victory, one of both of substance and of spirit. I have no doubt that the process we have started here inevitably will lead to a solution in the days or years ahead.

Some of you here have, perhaps, heard from your home capitals that President Clinton and I have been burning up the phone lines, consulting and sharing new ideas. Today let me add this. After talking with our negotiators this morning and after speaking on the telephone from here a short time ago with President Clinton, I am instructing our delegation right now to show increased negotiating flexibility if a comprehensive plan can be put in place, one with realistic targets and timetables, market mechanisms, and the meaningful participation of key developing countries.

Earlier this century, the Scottish mountain climber, W.H. Murray, wrote:

“Until one is committed there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness. Concerning all acts of initiative...there is one elementary truth, the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans: that the moment one definitely commits oneself, providence moves, too.”

So let us press forward. Let us resolve to conduct ourselves in such a way that our children’s children will read about the “Spirit of Kyoto,” and remember well the place and the time where humankind first chose to embark together on a long-term sustainable relationship between our civilization and the Earth’s environment.

In that spirit, let us transcend our differences and commit to secure our common destiny: a planet whole and healthy, whose nations are at peace, prosperous and free; and whose people everywhere are able to reach for their God-given potential.

Thank you.



Document Analysis

In his address to the Kyoto Climate Change Conference, Al Gore focuses on a simple premise: Climate change is a real and immediate danger and steps must be taken immediately to reduce if not completely eliminate the emission of greenhouse gases. Gore starts by laying out the issue. “We have reached a fundamentally new stage in the development of human civilization,” he says, a period in history where technology and industry is outpacing the environment’s capacity to keep up. He mentions the many environmental challenges the people of the Earth face, but makes it clear that the most important is climate change. The year of the conference, 1997, was at the time the hottest year on record, part of a regular trend of increasing temperatures. Action must be taken, Gore insists, by setting realistic, but binding emissions limits and facing head on the problems of poverty and global warming. To achieve these goals it is up to the developed world to lead. With this in mind, Gore lays out the American proposal, which includes emissions trading and new renewable energy research, which would cut greenhouse gases to below 1990 levels. “President Clinton and I understand that our first obligation is to address this issue at home,” states Gore unequivocally, “I commit to you today that the United States is prepared to act—and will act.” For Gore Kyoto is not only the first step in an aggressive agenda to save the planet from destruction, but the first step in fundamentally transforming the global community. By working in cooperation the nations of the world will reshape their destiny, finally defeat poverty, and create sustainable societies. In closing he says: “let us transcend our differences and commit to secure our common destiny: a planet whole and healthy, whose nations are at peace, prosperous and free; and whose people everywhere are able to reach for their God-given potential.”

Essential Themes

Following the Kyoto Climate Change Conference, the delegate nations agreed to what became known as the Kyoto Protocol, a binding commitment to cut greenhouse emissions by 2012. Unfortunately, despite Al Gore’s solemn vow to lead by example, the

Republican-led United States Congress, critical of climate change as at worst a hoax and at best an unproven theory, failed to ratify the agreement, making the U.S. the only major industrialized nation not to authorize it. Further attempts to cut emissions in the United States were blocked, and in 2000, after Al Gore was defeated by George W. Bush in a hotly contested presidential election, the new Republican president, a climate change denier, scrubbed any future plans for higher emission standards. Without American participation in the Kyoto Protocol, gains were forfeit, and the volume of greenhouse gasses entering the atmosphere actually increased.

Since 1997, every subsequent year has set a new temperature record. As climate changes and water levels rise, there is increasing concern over the displacement of entire populations in what the United Nations has called an impending environmental refugee crisis. Even more concerning is the fact that some scientists have gone on the record to declare that even the most drastic changes by the nations of the world would already be too late. As for Al Gore, he has become arguably the world’s most renowned environmentalist, warning the world of impending danger—a warning that, unfortunately, has largely fallen on deaf ears in the United States.

During the second Trump administration, for example, observers expected a continuation and likely intensification of his previous administration’s stance on climate change, which was characterized by science skepticism and a focus on fossil fuel industries. Early on, there were plans to roll back climate regulations, withdraw from international agreements like the Paris Agreement, and eliminate all federal funding for climate research and programs.

—KP Dawes, MA

Bibliography and Additional Reading

Friedman, Thomas L. *Hot, Flat, and Crowded: Why We Need a Green Revolution and How It Can Renew America*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008.

Gibson, Kalina. “The Trump Administration’s Retreat from Global Climate Leadership,” Center for American Progress, Jan. 21, 2025.

www.americanprogress.org/article/the-trump-administrations-retreat-from-global-climate-leadership.

Gore, Al. *An Inconvenient Truth: The Planetary Emergency of Global Warming and What We Can Do About It*. Emmaus, PA: Rodale Books, 2006.

Mann, Michael E. *The New Climate War: The Fight to Take Back Our Planet*. New York: PublicAffairs, 2021.