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Ethics and Climate

Obama Implicitly Acknowledges the Enormous Damage Caused By the Fossil Fuel Corporate Funded Climate Change Disinformation Campaign and Its Political Mercenaries

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During his speech on August 31 in Alaska, President Obama not only spoke about the enormity of the climate change threat and the urgency of strong action, he also acknowledged that the United States has responsibility for causing the problem. He said:

I've come here today, as the leader of the world's largest economy and its second largest emitter, to say that the United States recognizes our role in creating this problem, and we embrace our responsibility to help solve it. He spoke in clear terms about the enormity of the climate change threat.

Our understanding of climate change advances each day. Human activity is disrupting the climate, in many ways faster than we previously thought. The science is stark. It is sharpening. It proves that this once-distant threat is now very much in the present. But the point is that climate change is no longer some far-off problem. It is happening here. It is happening now. Climate change is already disrupting our agriculture and ecosystems, our water and food supplies, our energy, our infrastructure, human health, human safety — now. Today. And climate change is a trend that affects all trends — economic trends, security trends. Everything will be impacted. And it becomes more dramatic with each passing year.

But if those trend lines continue the way they are, there's not going to be a nation on this Earth that's not impacted negatively. People will suffer. Economies will suffer. Entire nations will find themselves under severe, severe problems. More drought; more floods; rising sea levels; greater migration; more refugees; more scarcity; more conflict. If we were to abandon our course of action, if we stop trying to build a clean-energy economy and reduce carbon pollution, if we do nothing to keep the glaciers from melting faster, and oceans from rising faster, and forests from burning faster, and storms from growing stronger, we will condemn our children to a planet beyond their capacity to repair: Submerged countries. Abandoned cities. Fields no longer growing. Indigenous peoples who can't carry out traditions that stretch back millennia. Entire industries of people who can't practice their livelihoods. Desperate refugees seeking the sanctuary of nations not their own. Political disruptions that could trigger multiple conflicts around the globe.

President Obama also acknowledged that because nations have delayed in taking meaningful climate action, the world is running out of time to prevent catastrophic warming. More specifically he said:

On this issue, of all issues, there is such a thing as being too late. That moment is almost upon us. And so President Obama admitted that: (a) climate change is a civilization challenging problem with dire potential consequences for nations and vulnerable people around the world, (b) the world is running out of time to prevent catastrophic warming, and, (c) the United States has responsibility for causing the problem.

The United States is not only responsible for the current crisis because, as President Obama noted, it is the second highest emitter of ghg in the world behind China, it has historically emitted much more ghgs into the atmosphere than any other country including China, it is currently near the top of all nations in per capita ghg emissions, and the US has been responsible more than any other developed nation for the failure of the international community to adopt meaningful ghg emissions reduction targets from the beginning of international climate negotiations in 1990 until the Obama administration. (For a detailed description of the blocking role that the United States has played in international climate negotiations since 1990 until the Obama administration, See Brown, 2002, American Heat; Ethical Problems the US Response to Global Warming, and Brown, 2013, Climate Chang Ethics: Navigating the Perfect Moral Storm)

In the Alaska speech, President Obama did not discuss the forces in the United States that have successfully undermined proposals for serious US climate change policies, matters which have been extensively discussed here under the category of “climate change disinformation campaign.” Since the mid-1980s a well-funded climate change disinformation campaign has successfully fought against US climate change policies. (For a discussion of the climate change disinformation campaign see, for example: The Climate Change Disinformation Campaign: What Kind Of Crime Against Humanity, Tort, Human Rights Violation, Malfeasance, Transgression, Villainy, Or Wrongdoing Is It? Part One: Is The Disinformation Campaign a Crime Against Humanity or A Civil Tort?) This campaign has largely been funded by fossil fuel companies and free-market fundamentalists foundations although recently it has been difficult to track the funding. (See, New Study Concludes That Tracking Funding Of The Ethically Abhorrent Climate Disinformation Campaign Is Now Impossible)

As we have documented in numerous articles on the disinformation campaign on this website, although responsible scientific skepticism is necessary for science to advance, the climate change disinformation campaign has been involved not in the pursuit of responsible scientific skepticism but in tactics that are morally reprehensible including: (a) telling lies about mainstream climate scientific evidence or engaging in reckless disregard for the truth, (b) focusing on unknowns about climate science while ignoring settled climate change science, that is cherry-picking the evidence, (c) creating front groups and Astroturf groups that hide the real parties in interest behind claims, (d) making specious claims about “good science”, (e) manufacturing science sounding claims about climate change by holding conferences in which claims are made and documents are released that have not been subjected to scientific peer-review, and (d) cyber bullying journalists and scientists. These tactics are not responsible scientific skepticism but disinformation.

In the late 1980s, the European Union proposed that all developed countries should accept binding ghg emissions reductions targets. These targets would have likely been agreed to in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change if the United States did not oppose them. The United States virtually standing alone prevented the inclusion of binding targets in the treaty which was finalized in 1992 and ratified by the US in that same year. During the next 20 years, the US

continued to block a meaningful global solution to climate change while being one of only a handful of nations that did not ratify the Kyoto Protocol, a treaty in which most developed countries accepted a ghg reduction target.

During this time, the climate change disinformation campaign also successfully prevented enactment of meaningful US domestic climate change laws and policies.

For the last several decades, US media has largely failed to cover the fact that the longer the world waits to make significant reductions in ghgs, the more difficult the problem becomes to solve. In this regard, the staggering enormity of the current challenge to the world to prevent dangerous climate change is rarely commented on in the US media despite the fact the 25 year delay in facing this problem has now made the problem a civilization challenging problem. For instance, James Hansen in a recent affidavit submitted in a legal proceeding against the State of Oregon asserted that the world must now reduce ghg emissions at a rate of 6% per year to avoid dangerous climate change. Yet as Hansen notes, if the world began to phase out of fossil fuel in 2005 the rate of reductions needed would only be 3.5% while waiting until 2020 will require a 15% reduction per year. Thus the delay in confronting climate change that is attributable to a large extent to the climate change disinformation campaign and its political mercenaries has made the problem much more difficult to solve with the result that harsh climate change impacts are much more likely. Because the harshest impacts from climate change will likely be experienced by some of the world's poorest people in Africa, Southeast Asia, and other parts of the world, the damage caused by the climate change disinformation campaign may become a global catastrophe.

And so the world is now facing a civilization challenging problem entailed by the need to rapidly reduce greenhouse gases to avoid catastrophic climate change. Although President Obama has announced administrative measures that would begin to reduce US ghg emissions, these measures are now being intensely fought by the climate change disinformation campaign and its political representatives and the Obama commitments still don't represent the US fair share of safe global ghg emissions. In fact, in his August 31 speech, President Obama said after describing his climate initiatives: "But we're not moving fast enough." And now it may be too late to prevent huge climate change induced harms because the world has lost 25 years in reducing the threat of climate change in no small measure due to the United States opposition to a meaningful global solution. President Obama's August 31 speech in Alaska implicitly acknowledged this conclusion. Yet the US media largely continues to fail to cover the enormous damage that has been caused by the delay in confronting human-induced warming .