

Gore Opening Statement

We're all grateful today to welcome back to this Committee not only a visionary leader, but an old friend and Senate classmate of mine—former Vice President and Nobel Peace Prize-winner Al Gore.

It's well known that Al and I have a certain political experience in common. What is less well-known is that we also teamed up on the first-ever Senate hearing on climate change for the Commerce Committee back in 1988. On a sweltering June day, some Senate staff opened up the windows and drove home the point for everyone sweating in their seats during Dr. James Hansen's historic and tragically prescient testimony.

We won't be repeating that gesture today. But I speak for everyone on this Committee when I tell you how much we appreciate your appearing before us in what passes down here for tough winter weather. And to the naysayers and deniers still out there, let me add: a little snow in Washington does nothing to diminish the reality of this crisis.

This is the first substantive hearing of this Committee in this Congress. And we're here because we're ten months from negotiating the follow-up to the Kyoto Protocol, and the world has appropriately high expectations for America. Delegates will be meeting in March and again in June of this year, to prepare negotiating language to be finalized at the Conference of the Parties in Copenhagen in December, and we need to join them in crafting a new global treaty. That means there is no time to waste. We must learn from the mistakes of Kyoto and make Copenhagen a success. Regrettably—and despite committed efforts from Al and many others—today we're on the brink of an acute crisis that is gathering momentum daily. We need to take action—now.

It is no accident that we have asked Vice President Gore to testify at this first hearing of this Committee, this session. Climate change will be increasingly central to our foreign policy and national security, and it will be a focal point of this Committee's efforts as well.

We are here today for the same reason our top military leaders and intelligence officials have been sounding the alarms. They describe climate change as a threat multiplier, and they are warning that the cost of ignoring this issue will be more famine, more drought, more widespread pandemics, more natural disasters, more resource scarcity, and human displacement on a massive scale. In other words, our military leaders predict more of the very drivers that exacerbate conflict worldwide and create failed states – which, as we all know too well, present glaring targets of opportunity for the worst actors in our international system. That endangers all of us.

Marine Corps General Anthony Zinni, former commander of our forces in the Middle East, says that without action—and I quote—“we will pay the price later in military terms. And that will involve human lives. There will be a human toll.” More immediately, as a new Administration

sets a new tone with the global community, this issue will be an early test of our capacity to exert thoughtful, forceful diplomatic and moral leadership on any future challenge the world faces.

We have willing partners in this endeavor. Mexico, South Africa, Brazil, Australia, the EU and others have made meaningful domestic climate change policy commitments in recent months. But all of us are still falling far short of what the science tells us must be done. A partnership led by the University of Pennsylvania, MIT, and The Heinz Center recently aggregated the impact of all of these domestic policy proposals – including President Obama’s aggressive goal of 80% reductions by 2050. What they found was sobering: If every nation were to make good on its existing promises, we would still see atmospheric carbon dioxide levels well above 600 parts per million—50% above where we are now. This translates into global temperatures at least 4 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. No one disputes that this would be catastrophic.

That is why we need more than just a policy shift. We need a transformation in public policy thinking to embrace the reality of what science is telling us, accept its implications, and then act in accordance with the full scope and urgency of the problem.

Frankly, the science is screaming at us. Right now, the most critical trends and facts point in the wrong direction. CO₂ emissions grew at a rate four times faster during the Bush Administration than they did in the 1990s. Two years ago the UN’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change issued a series of projections for global emissions, based on likely energy and land use patterns. Well, today our emissions have actually moved beyond the worst case scenarios predicted by all of the models of the IPCC! Meanwhile, our oceans and forests, which act as natural repositories of CO₂, are losing their ability to absorb carbon dioxide. This is a stronger climate forcing signal than expected, arriving sooner than expected.

The result will be a major foreign policy and national security challenge: In the Middle East, more than six percent of the world’s population today fights over less than two percent of the world’s renewable fresh water. As the region experiences a demographic explosion, the last thing we need is for climate change to shrink an already tight water supply. The Himalayan glaciers, which supply water to almost a billion people, could disappear completely by 2035. The British government issued a report estimating that 200 million people may become permanently displaced “climate migrants”—ten times the total number of refugees and internally displaced people in the world today. And a recent study in *Science* predicts that as much as half the world’s population could face serious food shortages by the end of this century. Perversely, Africa, the continent that has done the least to contribute to climate change, will be the worst affected. Quite simply, these conditions would result in a world we don’t recognize – a ravaged planet in which all of us would be less secure.

More than fifteen years ago, Secretary of State Jim Baker spoke eloquently about what he called “the greening of our foreign policy”—and that’s exactly what we need today.

Vice President Gore and I recently returned from the climate change negotiations in Poznan, Poland. I met with the leaders of over a dozen delegations, ranging from the EU to China to the Small Island States. One clear message emanated from every corner of the globe: this challenge cannot be solved without the active commitment and leadership of the United States.

We need to begin by putting in place a domestic cap-and-trade program here at home. This will give us leverage to influence other countries' behavior. And as we move toward Copenhagen, we must not repeat the mistakes of Kyoto. Going forward, the most important initiative that will determine the success of our climate diplomacy is how we give life to the words agreed to in 1992 in Rio and reiterated in Bali and Poznan: "shared but differentiated responsibility" among nations in solving this problem. In Kyoto people stiff-armed that discussion. But the landscape has shifted over the past decade, and now China is the world's largest emitter. Developing countries will account for three-quarters of the increase in global energy use over the next two decades. A global problem demands a global effort, and today we are working toward a solution with a role for developed and developing countries alike, which will be vital as we work to build consensus here at home in tough economic times.

Finally, some may argue that we cannot afford to address this issue in the midst of an economic crisis. They have it fundamentally wrong. This is a moment of enormous opportunity for new technology, new jobs, and the greening of our economy. We can't afford not to act. The question is not whether or not we pay for climate change. Listen to General Zinni: If there was a cost-free way forward, of course we'd take it.

The real question is whether we pay it now in a way that also helps us break our addiction to oil, strengthens our global system and global standing, and catapults us into the 21st-century economy with millions of new jobs and a jolt of economic stimulus—or we can pay for it later on a massive, unpredictable scale in the currency of environmental devastation, military commitments, human misery, and reduced economic growth for decades to come. And while I am very aware of the unique perils of this economic moment, I believe the choice we cannot afford is the second one.

This political season has celebrated the legacy of a great President who not only called this country "the last best hope of earth" but helped to make it so. After years of being the last place on earth to get serious about our climate, this is a moment and an issue that offers us as real a chance as we get to live up to the full meaning of that phrase.

I want to thank Vice President Gore for joining us, and I look forward to hearing his insights and ideas about how this nation can finally lead the world in crafting a solution to one of humanity's most dire challenges.