

Wind Shift

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By Bryan Walsh

Global warming has no shortage of causes — coal-burning power plants, carbon-spewing automobiles — but many European and Asian environmentalists seem to blame one factor above all others: U.S. President George W. Bush. As the world's top carbon emitter and the only major developed country to refuse to ratify the Kyoto Protocol, America is seen as hastening global warming while foiling attempts to slow it down. At December's U.N. climate-change summit in Bali, the frustration toward American intransigence on global warming was palpable. When U.S. negotiators stood in the way of agreement during the summit's final day, the anger boiled over, with delegates, observers from environmental groups and even members of the international press booing the American team. The U.S. eventually dropped its opposition to the Bali road map, but that did little to allay suspicion that Washington would remain a roadblock in efforts to combat the world's most pressing environmental crisis.

The White House deserves the international condemnation. The Bush Administration has stymied action on global warming at home and abroad, questioning and occasionally suppressing compelling scientific evidence that the earth is heating up and man-made pollution is a major reason why. In a damning speech delivered near the end of the Bali summit, former U.S. Vice President and climate-change prophet Al Gore told the rest of the world to carry on the fight against global warming without the U.S. "Save a large blank space in your documents," he said. "Move ahead anyway, on the hope that blank will be filled in."

But as the world's movers, shakers and wonkier celebrities meet in Davos, where climate change is high on the agenda, America may be closer to filling in that blank space than many believe. The Bush Administration may still be in denial, but many Americans are not. Politicians are being forced to respond to mounting public pressure to do something about global warming. Even as White House climate negotiators in Bali were blocking efforts to set a target for international carbon emissions, the first bill that would cap such emissions in the U.S. passed out of the Senate's environment committee. Outside Washington, city and state governments, as well as private industry, are taking action. "Suddenly climate change is at the crossroads of what everyone is interested in," says Fred Krupp, president of Environmental Defense, a green NGO based in Washington. "There is a coming together on the issue that just hasn't been there before."

There's room at this climate-change crossroads for liberals and conservatives alike. Many of the top American leaders on global warming at the state and local level are Republicans. Most prominent among them is California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger. California has passed the most aggressive environmental laws in the U.S., setting a goal of reducing the state's greenhouse-gas emissions — which currently

amount to about 1.6% of the annual global total — to 1990 levels by 2020. California is part of a coalition of six western U.S. states and two Canadian provinces with plans to set up a regional cap-and-trade system for carbon emissions, similar to a market that has been operating for years in Europe. Despite his party affiliation, Schwarzenegger has been willing to challenge the White House, most recently by leading a lawsuit against the federal Environmental Protection Agency after it struck down California's stringent rules on carbon emissions from automobiles. "Give me a national policy that says we're going to take this seriously and we're going to fight global warming," Schwarzenegger told TIME recently. "Right now, there has been none."

Other leaders are moving to fill this void. In Florida, Republican Governor Charlie Crist launched a summit on climate change and committed his state to reducing greenhouse-gas emissions 80% by 2050. In Salt Lake City — capital of Utah and among the most conservative states in the U.S. — Mayor Rocky Anderson has emerged as an environmental activist by requiring that all municipal offices be built to green standards. He's one of more than 700 American mayors from across the political spectrum who voluntarily agreed to try to meet or beat Kyoto Protocol targets in their own cities. At her New York City office, Natural Resources Defense Council president Frances Beinecke shows a map of the U.S., with states that have adopted climate-change legislation colored green. Easily half the map is now that hue, a significant change from just a year ago. "Throughout the country, there's a willingness to take on this issue," she says.

More so than many of their European counterparts, America's new environmentalists believe climate change is about more than saving the environment. They care about polar bears, but like Schwarzenegger, they also view global warming as an economic challenge and opportunity — an outlook shared by a growing number of U.S. businesses. Last year some of the country's most influential corporations — including GE, DuPont and the power company NRG — formed the U.S. Climate Action Partnership to lobby Washington for a carbon cap-and-trade system. "This has to be a top domestic issue," says NRG CEO David Crane. "We have low-carbon solutions, but they need to have a little bit of government support."

Others see climate change as a pressing threat to national security. This danger is perceived to be physical, in the form of rising seas and superstorms, as well as geopolitical. Remaining addicted to fossil fuels mires the U.S. in the labyrinth of Middle East politics and keeps the country dependent upon oil-rich antagonists such as Iran and Russia. Conservatives who have jumped the fence on global warming have done so chiefly because of this issue. Many were convinced after a panel of retired generals and admirals delivered a report last year warning of the security implications of rising temperatures, including resource wars and refugees fleeing drought and famine. "I often find people remain skeptical of global warming," says James Woolsey, a former director of the Central Intelligence Agency under former U.S. President Bill Clinton. "But when you start talking about the effect it could have on security, suddenly green things like [solar power] sound a lot better."

Politicians in Washington are finally getting the message. In December Congress passed an energy bill that requires automakers, for the first time in decades, to boost the gas

mileage of the cars they sell and mandates increased use of biofuels. Just as importantly, the legislation calling for carbon-emission caps — co-sponsored by the independent Senator Joseph Lieberman and the Republican Senator John Warner — passed the first hurdle to becoming law. Bush has always opposed mandatory carbon caps and could veto the bill. But with climate change becoming a bigger issue in this year's presidential and congressional elections, even Bush might find it hard to do that. "You have Republicans and Democrats getting on board with this," says Eileen Claussen, president of the Pew Center on Global Climate Change, "and the reason why is because the public is increasingly there already."

Even if a climate-change bill bogs down in Congress this year, the consensus is that passage of some kind of carbon-capping legislation would likely pass in 2009. That might seem unforgivably late to Europeans, but the effect on stalled international efforts to combat global warming would be enormous. The U.S. could take a leadership position in negotiations, while China and India — which use American inaction as an excuse for their own foot-dragging — would come under greater pressure to control their rapidly increasing greenhouse-gas emissions. "The world conversation will be joined in a very different way," says Beinecke, the Natural Resources Defense Council president. Europeans shouldn't expect concordance overnight — even if it passes, the carbon cuts called for in the Senate bill fall short of what the E.U. has been pushing for itself. But at the very least, the next U.N. climate-change conference might feature fewer catcalls — and more progress.