

GLOBAL WARNING:

GET UP! STAND UP!

BY BILL MCKIBBEN



HOW TO BUILD A MASS MOVEMENT TO HALT CLIMATE CHANGE

HERE'S A SHORT LIST OF THE IMPORTANT

legislation our federal government has enacted to combat global warming in the years since 1988, when a NASA climatologist, James Hansen, first told Congress that climate change was real:

- 1.
- 2.
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And what do you know? That bipartisan effort at doing nothing has been highly successful: Our emissions of carbon dioxide have steadily increased over that two-decade span.

Meanwhile, how have the lone superpower's efforts at leading international action to deal with climate change gone? Not too well. We refused to ratify the Kyoto treaty, while the rest of the developed world finally did so. And while we've pressured China over world-shaking issues like DVD piracy, we've happily sold them the parts to help grow their coal-fired electric utility network to a size that matches ours.

In other words, Washington has utterly and completely failed to take on the single greatest challenge human civilization has ever faced.

What's more, Washington, at least so far, couldn't care less about the failure. A flurry of legislation has been introduced in the last couple of months, but scarcely a member of Congress felt compelled to answer in the last election for failing to deal with climate change. A simple "I'm concerned" was more than enough.

Not only that, but scientists revealed last December that a piece of ice the size of 11,000 football fields had broken off an Arctic ice shelf.

So, and here I use a technical term that comes from long study of the intricate science, we're screwed. Unless.

If we're going to change any of those nasty facts,

we need a movement. A real, broad-based public movement demanding transformation of the way we power our world. A movement as strong, passionate, and willing to sacrifice as the civil rights movement that ended segregation more than a generation ago. This essay is about the possible rise of such a movement—about the role that you might play in making it happen.

It's not the fault of our environmental organizations that such a movement doesn't yet exist. It's the fault of the molecular structure of carbon dioxide.

MODERN ENVIRONMENTALISM AROSE IN

the early 1960s in the wake of *Silent Spring*. That's the moment advocates of "conservation"—the idea that we should protect some areas as refuges amid a benign modernity—began to realize that modernity itself might be a problem, that the bright miracles of our economic life came with shadows. First DDT, but before long phosphates in detergent and sulfur in the smoke stream of coal plants and chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) in our air conditioners. And carbon monoxide, carbon with one oxygen atom, the stuff that was helping turn the air above our cities brown.

All were alike in one crucial way: You could take care of the problems they caused with fairly easy technical fixes. Different pesticides that didn't thin eggshells; scrubbers on smokestacks. DuPont ended up making more money on the stuff that replaced CFCs, which had been tearing a hole in the ozone layer. None of these battles was easy: The Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) and Greenpeace and Environmental Defense and the Sierra Club and the Union of Concerned Scientists and a thousand Friends of the You-Name-It had to fight like hell to make sure that the fixes got made. But that was the war we armed for: We had the lawyers and the scientists and the regulatory experts and the lobbyists and the fund-raisers. We didn't always win, but

the batting average was pretty high: You can swim in more rivers, breathe in more cities. It was a carbon monoxide movement, and the catalytic converter, which washed that chemical from your exhaust, was its emblem. You could drive your car; you just needed the right gear on your tailpipe.

But carbon dioxide—carbon with two oxygen atoms—screwed everything up. Carbon dioxide in itself isn't exactly a pollutant. It doesn't hurt you when you breathe it; in fact, for a very long time engineers described a motor as "clean-burning" if it gave off only CO₂ and water vapor. The problem that emerged into public view in the late 1980s was that its molecular structure trapped heat near the planet that would otherwise radiate back out to space. And, worse, there wasn't a technofix this time—CO₂ was an inevitable by-product of burning fossil fuels. That is to say, the only way to deal with global warming is to move quickly away from fossil fuels.

When you understand that, you understand why Congress has yet to act, and why even big and talented environmental organizations have been largely stymied. Fossil fuel is not like DDT or phosphates or CFCs. It's the absolute center of modern life. An alien scientist arriving on our planet might well conclude that Western human beings are devices for burning coal and gas and oil, since that is what we do from dawn to dusk, and then on into the brightly lit night. When societies get richer, they start reducing other pollutants—even in China some cities have begun to see reductions in sulfur and nitrogen as people demand better pollution controls. But as the Harvard economist Benjamin Friedman conceded in a landmark book in 2005, *The Moral Consequences of Economic Growth*, carbon dioxide is the only pollutant that economic growth doesn't reduce. It is economic growth. It's no accident that the last three centuries, a time of great prosperity, have also been the centuries of coal and oil and gas.

Which means that this is a war that environmentalism as currently constituted simply can't win. Our lobbyists can sit down with congressional staffers and convince them of the need for, say, lower arsenic levels in water supplies; they have enough support to win those kinds of votes. We've managed, brilliantly, to save the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge from drilling. But we lack (by a long shot) the firepower to force, say, a carbon tax that might actually cut fossil fuel use. We've been outgunned by the car companies and the auto unions when it comes to gasoline mileage. We can save the Arctic refuge from oil drilling, but we can't save it from thawing into a northern swamp no caribou would ever wander through. In essence, we have a problem opposite to that of the American military: Well armed for small battles with insurgent polluters, we suddenly find ourselves needing to fight World War II.

What we have now is the superstructure of a movement. We have brilliant scientists, we have superb economists, we have some of the most battle-hardened lawyers and lobbyists you could hope for. The only thing the climate movement lacks is the movement part.

Consider this: Last Labor Day weekend, a few of us led a five-day, 50-mile march across our home state of Vermont to demand that

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BIG CHANGE, STARTING NOW!

WHEN WE LAUNCHED THE STEPITUP07.ORG campaign in early January, we didn't know what to expect. We put up a Web site and started circulating e-mails asking people to organize rallies for April 14. The first day 30 groups signed up, and the day after that 40, and before the week was out we'd already exceeded our wildest expectations. By early February we'd soared past the 500-rally mark, making it very clear that this would be the biggest demonstration about global warming yet in this country, and perhaps the biggest day of environmental protest in this country since the first Earth Day, in 1970.

We told people that we weren't really organizing in the traditional sense. Instead, it was more like an invitation to a party—a potluck. Bring your best ideas, your creativity, your hopes. People began responding immediately—especially with ideas for actions in iconic places to dramatize the impact of climate change. Teams of scuba divers will hold underwater rallies (with waterproof banners!) off the endangered coral reefs of Maui and Key West. Others will hang signs from the Shawangunk Mountains of New York State, or ski off the dwindling glaciers above Jackson Hole. In New York and other cities, activists will paint blue stripes where the new high-water mark will be once the seas start to rise. On and on.

The protesters come from every kind of background. Extreme athletes and seasoned environmentalists, sure. NRDC is helping organize a rally on the shrinking ice fields of Glacier National Park; the Sierra Club, the National Wildlife Federation, and many smaller groups are planning events. But there are also church groups, chapters of the League of Women Voters, nature centers, and campus groups. Hollywood is on the front lines, led by Al Gore's producer, Laurie David. MUSE, a group of musicians, is posting dozens of new songs to our site every week; graphic artists are producing posters; and podcasters are producing, well, podcasts. It's mostly volunteer and it's a little homemade, and that's one reason it seems to be working. We knew we were on the right track when a digital picture arrived showing 180 smiling sorority sisters from Alpha Phi House at the University of Texas. "We wanted to show it wasn't just hippies who care," they said. Long live the hippie-sorority alliance!

The hope is that a distributed demonstration like this will let congressional representatives know that in every voting district in the country global warming is emerging as a potent issue, one to be ignored at their electoral peril. By the close of the day on April 14, we should have a cascade of pictures of these gatherings that will, we hope, prove irresistible to the media, and that we'll be able to make good use of on YouTube and the rest of the Web. When the day is over we'll move on—we're not an organization, just an idea. But an idea whose time—we hope—has finally come. —B.McK.

our candidates for federal office take stronger stands on climate legislation. We started at Robert Frost's summer writing cabin high in the Green Mountains, happy with the symbolism of choosing a road less taken. As we wandered byways and main roads, we were happy too with the reception we got—crowds waiting to greet us at churches and senior centers and farms, motorists waving and honking even from the largest SUVs. By the time we reached Burlington, the state capital, we had a thousand marchers. (It was more than enough to convince all our candidates, even the conservative Republicans, to endorse strong carbon reductions; they all signed a pledge backing 80 percent cuts in carbon emissions by 2050.) But here's the not-so-happy thing: The newspapers said that a rally of 1,000 people was the largest that had yet taken place in this nation against global warming. That's pathetic.

But not hopeless. Because that movement is starting to gather, less inside the main environmental organizations than on their fringes.

The student movement, for instance, has come out of nowhere in the last three years. All of a sudden there are hundreds of high schools and college campuses where kids are working for real change in how their dorms and classrooms are heated and lit. And emboldened by their success on campus, they're increasingly involved in state and national and international efforts. Whenever I'm feeling disheartened about how slowly change is coming, I stop by a meeting of the Sunday Night Group at Middlebury College, the campus where I work. A hundred or more students show up for the weekly meetings, and they get right down to business—some on making sure that every lightbulb in town is a compact fluorescent, some on making sure that every legislator in the state is a climate convert. On the national level, the group Energy Action has joined 16 student organizations into an effective force. The group's Campus Climate Challenge will soon involve a thousand schools, and its leaders are planning a summer of marches and a platoon of youth to bird-dog presidential candidates.

Or look at the churches and synagogues. Ten years ago there was no religious environmental movement to speak of. Now, "creation care" is an emerging watchword across the spectrum, from Unitarians to evangelicals among the Christian traditions and in Jewish, Buddhist, and Muslim communities as well. And the rhetoric is increasingly matched by action: Groups such as Interfaith Power and Light are organizing congregations to cut energy use, and groups such as Religious Witness for the Earth are organizing people of faith for marches of their own.

There's even one very sweet by-product of the roadblock in Washington: In cities and states across the union, big environmental groups and local citizen activists have focused their energy on mayors and governors and learned a good deal in the process. Including this: It's possible to win. If California's Republican governor can decide it's in his interest to embrace strong climate legislation, you know people have done good groundwork. They've worked in public as well as be-

hind the scenes. Activists from the Maryland-based Chesapeake Climate Action Network were arrested last fall for blocking the doors to federal offices to demand more accurate federal science.

The moment is ripe. Hurricane Katrina blew open the door of public opinion, and Al Gore walked valiantly through it with his movie. There are, finally, lots and lots of people who want to know how they can make a difference. Not 51 percent of the people, but we don't need 51 percent. We can do just fine with 15 percent. As long as they're active. As long as they're a movement.

Which brings me, finally, to the point. It's time to unleash as much passion and energy as we can. It's movement time.

What we need is nothing less than a societal transformation. Not a new gizmo, not a few new laws, but a commitment to wean America from fossil fuels in our lifetime and to lead the rest of the world, especially India and China, in the same direction. The shorthand we're using in our April stepitup07.org campaign is the same as it was in our Vermont march: 80 percent cuts by 2050. What we need is big change, starting right now.

And that's a message Congress needs to hear. Though the November elections opened new possibilities, they also raised new perils. Instead of James Inhofe, who thought global warming was a hoax, the relevant Senate committee now answers to Barbara Boxer, who understands that it's very real. But the very chance of a deal raises the specter of a bad deal—some small-potatoes around-the-edges kind of action that substitutes the faux realism of Washington politics for the actual physics-and-chemistry realism of our predicament. For instance, when John McCain introduced legislation

five years ago that asked for small and more or less voluntary cuts, it was a step forward, and I saluted him on the cover of this magazine. But the current draft of his bill is fairly weak. Even the strongest bills, introduced by Henry Waxman and Bernie Sanders, barely meet the test for what the science demands. And chances are, unless we really do our job on the ground, the measures they're proposing will barely be discussed.

NASA's James Hansen—our premier climatologist—has made it clear we have 10 years to reverse the flow of carbon into the atmosphere. Actually, he made it clear in the fall of 2005, so we have eight and a half years before we cross certain thresholds (Arctic melt, for instance) that commit us to an endless cycle of self-reinforcing feedback loops and, in Hansen's words, a "totally different planet."

That requires transformation, not tinkering. It's not like carbon monoxide or DDT—it's like the women's movement or the civil rights movement, which changed the basic taken-for-granted architecture of our nation. Except it's harder, because this time we don't need the system to accommodate more people; we need the system to change in profound ways.

The only chance is for those of us who see the risk and the opportunity to act—as quickly and as powerfully as ever we can. ♻️

OUR PROBLEM IS OPPOSITE TO THAT

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OURSELVES FIGHTING WORLD WAR II