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VIEWPOINTS

GENERAL EARTH INSTITUTE, SUSTAINABILITY

Earth Day Urgency

BY STEVE COHEN | APRIL 25, 2022

Another Earth Day has passed as our politicos and media discover the planet Earth for a few days before they move on to whatever comes next. Along with media attention and political posturing, there are scientific predictions of the climate cliff and point of no return and environmental activists angry at everyone and everything that is leading to our planet's degradation and certain doom. After two years in COVID lockdown, many people have learned that there are forces greater than human preferences and economic imperatives. We live on a crowded, interconnected planet. Climate change, micro-plastic pollution, biodiversity loss, invasive species and a host of other environmental problems are with us and are not going away. We will never "solve" them, but we can make them less bad.

As someone who has worked in the world of environmental policy since the mid-1970s, I've seen enormous progress over this past half-century. Toxic waste has not been "cleaned up," but in the United States, most people are no longer in the pathways of exposure as they were in 1980. Our air is measurably cleaner than in 1970, even as pollution remains. Our water is also cleaner than it was when the Federal Water Pollution Control Act was enacted over Richard Nixon's veto in 1972. We have accurately modeled climate change and its impact: the models of the early 21st century predicted the heat, sea-level rise and extreme weather we are now struggling with. Through the development of climate attribution science, we are starting to understand the degree to which extreme weather events are caused by human-induced climate change. Nations, cities, states, and institutions have set decarbonization goals and have begun the transition to a renewable resource-based economy. About one million households in California have solar arrays on their roofs. Walmart is going solar as fast as they can. The technology of solar, wind, batteries, heat pumps, microgrids and electric vehicles continues to advance rapidly. We may not be reaching aspirational targets, but we are making progress.

Industry is getting the message, and while greenwashing continues, much of the change is real. The U.S. government's trillion-dollar infrastructure bill includes nearly 300 billion dollars in environmental investment. Significantly, America's electric utilities are getting the message and starting to invest massively in energy modernization. While utility investment will increase our power bills for a while, they are critical to decarbonization. According to Katherine Blunt in the *Wall Street Journal*:

"American utilities are planning their biggest spending increases in decades to upgrade aging grids, prepare for electric vehicles and make the transition to renewable energy—moves poised to further boost power costs as consumers face historic inflation. The plans propose tens of billions of dollars in spending in the coming years to reduce carbon emissions, partly in response to state and federal mandates, and to replace aging infrastructure that has become more prone to failure. Edison Electric Institute, an industry trade group, expects that utilities will invest roughly $140 billion each year in 2022 and 2023, substantially more than any year since 2000, when the group began tracking spending. Executives said the investments are critical to meeting renewable-energy targets and bolstering the reliability of the grid as outages become longer and more frequent. Climate change, they said, has heightened the need to simultaneously hasten the shift to carbon-free electricity sources and upgrade the grid to withstand severe weather patterns scientists link to rising temperatures."

The emission reduction goals set by some governments have been anticipated by corporations and utilities, and they are already moving toward compliance. Decarbonization is driving some of the change, but many of these investments are needed to make the grid more reliable and capable of operating during climate-induced extreme weather events. This is reality, and no amount of disinformation can change it or the need to respond to our climate-challenged planet.

The media's Earth Day narrative was that Joe Biden failed to enact Build Back Better, and so his climate policy has failed. **That is nonsense**. Pundits and experts lamented that we won't meet the climate targets on time, and damage to the planet will be irreversible as we fall off the climate cliff. The reality is that decarbonization is a generation-long change. We need to keep the economy going and our homes heated in winter while we transition to renewable energy. The growing understanding of environmental issues is obscured by the political rhetoric of advocates and opponents who are more interested in demeaning their opponents and monetizing their disagreements than understanding what is actually going on.

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The real action is in investments by private companies. GM, Ford, and Volkswagen are all making multi-billion-dollar investments in electric vehicles. Tesla is actually turning a profit. Nearly all large corporations are reporting on their environmental and community impacts and on the diversity of their staff and boards. Public awareness of climate impacts, sustainability management and environmental degradation is growing. The federal government now has chief sustainability officers in each agency, and new procedures are being put in place to

reduce the federal government's environmental impact and increase its green purchasing practices. Funding for replacing lead water pipes is in the fully enacted infrastructure bill. Compare Biden's record to an EPA under Donald Trump; that was a wholly-owned subsidiary of the fossil fuel industry.

The glass is either a quarter full or three-quarters empty. All I know is that the pace of progress is picking up. Some of this is due to public policy — states like California and New York and many American cities are moving on decarbonization. Industry is investing in decarbonization and climate adaptation due to the objective conditions of climate change and the reality of environmental degradation. Europe is seeing that decarbonization is their best path to energy independence and protection from the Russian aggression they now see in Ukraine. My own university is getting serious about environmental sustainability too. A recent email from Columbia's facilities chief, David Greenberg, highlights the seriousness of the effort. According to Greenberg:

"Looking ahead, we are planning to gradually transition Columbia's parking areas to 100% zero emission vehicle occupancy by phasing out access for internal combustion engine vehicles. The phase-out in University-managed space will begin between the years 2030 and 2037 in an effort to meet the University's greenhouse gas reduction targets while also aligning with New York State action on this issue."

Columbia is far from unique. These changes have begun all over the United States. and despite setbacks, it really is a matter of two steps forward and one step back, not the other way around. A consensus about environmental sustainability is growing in the United States. There are ideologues that oppose environmental policy, but they are vastly outnumbered by pragmatists that see the facts on the ground, in the air and on the water and know that we all need to act. Advocates that seek instant or even rapid change do not understand the nature of political, economic, and social change. Typically, only negative changes are rapid. Positive change is gradual as we build and seek to understand the full impact of our changes. The average Ukrainian has experienced rapid, horrifying, and negative change. The positive change of reconstruction will be far slower than the destruction of invasion.

Earth Day should convey a sense of urgency, but not a sense of "we" and "them" and of good and evil. I realize that the media likes heroes and villains. "If it bleeds, it leads" and all of that. But the stakes are too high for media as usual. The transition to environmental sustainability requires consensus politics, not a pitched ideological battle. From time to time, I answer media inquiries on environmental issues, and if I make five positive points and one negative point, I'm typically quoted on the negative one. If I'm quoted on a positive point, then two other "experts" are quoted to contradict me.

We are nowhere close to achieving the transition to environmental sustainability, but the process is well underway here in the United States. To achieve this, we need to think about our

shared values rather than our differences. Speaking of the Cold War and our disagreements with the Soviet Union, President John Kennedy appealed to our common values in his commencement address at American University in 1963 and said:

"So, let us not be blind to our differences — but let us also direct attention to our common interests and to the means by which those differences can be resolved. And if we cannot end now our differences, at least we can help make the world safe for diversity. For, in the final analysis, our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's future. And we are all mortal."

It is ironic that the sentiment used to advocate peace with a foreign enemy seems so relevant to America's internal politics today. But indeed, "we all inhabit this small planet." Let's make every day an Earth Day.

Views and opinions expressed here are those of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the Columbia Climate School, Earth Institute or Columbia University.

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vehicles. The phase-out in University-managed space will begin between the years 2030 and 2037 in an effort to meet the University's greenhouse gas reduction targets while also aligning with New York State action on this issue." Beginning ICE phase out for campus parking between 2030 – 2037! ***For a university mostly located in NYC, the mass transit and walkable city capital of the US, this is worse than foot dragging, it's knuckle-dragging***

Reply

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