

A Chronicle of the Age of Consequences

Chapter 22 Kicking the Can

At 12:25pm Eastern Standard Time, on Thursday, July 22nd, 2010, America kicked the can of climate change legislation down the road, perhaps for good, when Senator Harry Reid, a Democrat from Nevada and the Majority Leader of the U.S. Senate, stepped up to a podium to announce to an assemblage of reporters that he was abandoning the effort to bring a climate bill to the floor of the Senate this year.

And just like that the Age of Consequences took a big turn for the worse.

Reid's disappointing announcement ended a hopeful process that began with the ascension of Barack Obama to the presidency of the United States on January 20th, 2009. During his campaign for office, Obama had promised action on climate change during the first two years of his administration, calling it one of his Top Three legislative priorities, along with health care reform and stimulus funding to revive the economy. This promise received a big boost when the U.S. House of Representatives passed a landmark climate bill on June 26th, 2009, squeaking it through in a raucous vote by a razor-thin 219-212 margin. Then it was the Senate's turn, which quickly felt the heat to act before the United Nations' climate conference in Copenhagen convened in December.

For a moment, things looked bright. All the elements seemed to be in place for substantive action on the overarching crisis of the Age of Consequences: a supportive U.S. President, a large Democratic majority in the U.S. Senate, an unprecedented summit of world leaders in Copenhagen coming up, a huge amount of media attention, and clarion calls by a wide array of scientists, policymakers, opinion-makers, and ordinary citizens for action. A wave of momentum for action on climate change, building ever since former vice-president Al Gore unveiled his call-to-arms documentary titled "An Inconvenient Truth" in 2006, seemed ready to peak.

Except it didn't.

The Senate failed to act. Then at Copenhagen, President Obama and a handful of other key world leaders punted. They cobbled together a non-binding, wishful-thinking Accord on future political action and then kicked the ball back to the U.S. Senate for the next move. At the time, many viewed this development as a sign of progress. For example, the leaders of two large environmental groups high-fived each in a Copenhagen hallway after the Accord's announcement. That's because they thought the climate fight would finally leave the cumbersome consensus (i.e. democratic) process of the United Nations behind and focus instead on a handful of big global polluters. "Now," they told their members in press releases, "the real work can begin."

Except it didn't.

Not that the Senate didn't try. Rather, it's not that three influential members of the Senate didn't try. Dubbed "The Three Amigos" by the media, the Senators – liberal Democrat John Kerry of

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Massachusetts, centrist Independent Joe Lieberman of Connecticut and conservative Republican Lindsey Graham of South Carolina – began work in the fall of 2009 on a comprehensive climate bill, in what they called a “tripartisan” approach. They cobbled together an unlikely coalition of environmentalists and industry representatives to support legislation that would shift the economy away from fossil fuels and toward “alternate” sources of energy, including huge incentives for new nuclear plants. The bill they came up with would slash greenhouse gas pollution by 80% by 2050, they said. But to gain the support of coal-state Democrats and Republicans, their bill included huge giveaways to the coal industry, writing the fossil fuel into national energy policy for decades, rather than shutting it out as many climate scientists insist must happen in order to accomplish meaningful reductions in emissions. But that was the political reality on Capitol Hill.

By early spring, The Three Amigos were ready – all they needed now was support from the White House to round up more Senators. They assumed it was coming. After all, in a campaign speech during the Democratic primaries, candidate Obama had said “We will be able to look back and tell our children that this was the moment when... the rise of the oceans began to slow and our planet began to heal.” And in an address to Congress in February, 2009, President Obama said “To truly transform our economy, protect our security, and save our planet from the ravages of climate change...I ask Congress to send me legislation that places a market-based cap on carbon pollution.” Which is exactly what The Three Amigos were trying to do. At a meeting in the White House, they asked the President to step up to the plate. They received assurances that he would.

Except he didn’t.

The President didn’t lift a finger. In fact, he made things worse. On March 31st, Obama made a surprise announcement: offshore drilling in the Gulf of Mexico for oil and natural gas would be expanded under his administration. To environmentalists, it looked like he was trying to appease critics of his administration’s “green” energy policies by saying “Hey, we’re all for oil-and gas too!” Whatever Obama’s rationale, by making the announcement he gave away an important bargaining chip that Kerry-Lieberman-Graham were hording in order to secure more votes for their bill. ‘Support a cap on carbon,’ they were telling colleagues, ‘and in return we’ll give you more off-shore drilling.’ Except now they couldn’t. The Three Amigos felt betrayed and they were furious at Obama. Worse, not only did he neglect to consult with them, the President received nothing in return from Republicans for this freebie.

And in defending his decision to expand oil drilling, Obama went on to say something that would haunt him less than a month later: “It turns out, by the way, that oil rigs today don’t generally cause oil spills.”

Except they do.

Not long after Obama’s announcement, things turned ugly. Fox News got wind of the pending climate bill, and ran a (false) story about how Graham wanted to raise gas taxes on average Americans during a Recession, causing the Senator to go ballistic. As the Fox story went viral

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over the Internet, and angry voters called his offices in South Carolina, Graham threatened to pull his support for the climate bill. The prospects for a ‘tripartisan’ climate bill in the Senate suddenly looked shaky. Everyone worked overtime to reel the Senator back in. At a major meeting at the White House on April 20th – Earth Day – Senator Graham was finally mollified. He agreed to support climate legislation again, though he complained about tepid White House support.

A few hours later, a bubble of methane gas burst out of a well below the Deepwater Horizon oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico, setting the rig on fire and killing eleven men. Two days later, the oil rig sank, igniting one of the worst environmental disasters in American history. Within a week, Graham pulled out of the climate bill for good. He was being hammered from all sides, and had had enough. Graham’s chief staffer for energy wrote an email to his colleague in Lieberman’s office, with whom he had worked diligently for eight months, causing her to burst into tears. “Sorry buddy,” was all it said.

A journalist put it this way later: “Perhaps the last best chance to deal with global warming in the Obama era was dead.”

The now Two Amigos shouldered on. The scope of the bill narrowed. More deals were cut with industry representatives and their senatorial allies, to the growing consternation of climate activists and scientists. The Two Amigos said the deals were examples of ‘political reality.’ In late June, perhaps in desperation, Senator Kerry issued a rallying cry that unintentionally defined the nature of the entire process: “We believe we have compromised significantly,” he proclaimed, “and we’re prepared to compromise further.”

Meanwhile, environmentalists desperately prayed that the disastrous oil spill in the Gulf would spur action and outrage. But support for a climate bill from the White House remained lukewarm, and no Republican in the Senate stepped up to replace Graham. Meanwhile, Democrats began to hear Republican knives being sharpened for the mid-term elections in the fall. Poll numbers looked bad for incumbents. Pressure built on Obama to make a last-minute push for climate legislation, but when he made a televised address to the nation – his first – about the Gulf oil spill in mid-June, people noted that he didn’t utter the words “climate,” “emissions,” or even “pollution.” The moment was lost, causing environmentalists to turn their ire on the President.

A month later, Harry Reid stepped to the podium to announce the obvious. Climate legislation was dead.

And so is the prospect, in my estimation, of avoiding a serious climate calamity.

That’s because polls show that Republicans will likely take control of the House of Representatives in November, and their avowed skepticism of climate science means no action on climate legislation will happen until 2013, at the earliest. If President Obama loses his bid for reelection, which is entirely possible given the stubborn state of the sour economy and the souring mood of the electorate, then nothing will happen on the climate front until 2017 – or

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2021 if his Republican successor wins reelection. And if Republicans control either the Senate or the House during this period, then the likelihood of substantive climate legislation becoming law is probably low (as recent events demonstrate even having a Democrat in the White House and large Democratic majorities in Congress is not enough apparently). So, the chances of significant political action on climate change in the next decade are remote at best, and nil realistically.

Which means greenhouse gas emissions, already substantial, will not reach the top of a ‘bell curve’ anytime soon, condemning the planet (and us) to significant warming.

Perhaps this why reaction from around the country to Reid’s announcement was swift and strong. Typical was an op-ed by conservative columnist Thomas Friedman, published in the *New York Times* two days later, whose title said it all: “*We’re Gonna Be Sorry.*”

“All climate change deniers are now going to live long enough to see how wrong they were,” Friedman wrote. “Alas, so are the rest of us.” Mother Nature is just chemistry, biology, and physics, he continued. “You cannot sweet-talk her. You cannot spin her. You cannot tell her that the oil companies say climate change is a hoax. No, Mother Nature is going to do what whatever chemistry, biology and physics dictate.”

Climate blogger Joe Romm said this: “By the end of the third decade of this century, all of American life – politics, international relations, our homes, our jobs, our industries, the kind of cars we drive – will be forever transformed by the climate and energy challenge.”

Climate activist Bill McKibben, in an online op-ed, observed that despite all the signals of a changing climate in the daily news and all the science available, including knowledge that 2010 is on track to be the warmest year on record, “the U.S. Senate decided to do exactly nothing about climate change. They didn’t do less than they could have – they did *nothing*, preserving a perfect two-decade bipartisan record of no action.”

Well-known capitalist and successful hedge-fund manager Jeremy Grantham cut right to the point: “HAVE THEY NO GRANDCHILDREN?”

Apparently they don’t.

Why did this happen?

Decades from now, as the effects of climate change bear down, I am certain many people will be asking an anguished question: why didn’t we do something when we had a chance? My answer to this question is woven through the chapters of this *Chronicle* – which is my way of saying “it’s complicated.” But here are two quick answers from other sources that I think summarize the situation pretty well:

The first is from Al Gore (from his book *Our Choice*): “We argued among ourselves. We didn’t want to believe it was really happening. We waited too long. We couldn’t imagine that it was

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even possible for human beings to cause such profound changes on a planetary scale. We didn't understand that so much could go wrong so quickly...we lost confidence in our own abilities to reason together...we found it impossible to break free of the political paralysis induced by those who felt we should do nothing...we had so many other problems crying out for attention...I'm sorry."

The second is from Dr. James Hansen, who blames the lack of legislative action on: (1) the power of special interests in Washington; (2) the role of money in politics; (3) 'greenwashing' (the intentional illusion of meaningful action) by leaders of all stripes; (4) the effective disinformation campaign being waged by climate change deniers; and (5) the inertia of a confused and distracted citizenry.

Meanwhile, a heat wave in Russia is sparking wildfires that are driving residents from Moscow and devastating the country's wheat crop. A fifth of Pakistan is underwater as a result of massive flooding and millions are deluged by heavy rains in Asia. Another heat wave is torturing the East Coast of the United States; and a large chunk of ice has broken off a glacier in Greenland, the most significant climate event there in fifty years. The climate news, in other words, should be working in the favor of activists.

Except it's not.

"We're setting climate records at a record-setting pace," said David Orr, a professor of environmental studies and politics at Oberlin College, to a reporter for the online *Huffington Post*. "More hottest hots, driest dries, wettest wets, windiest wind conditions. So it's all part of a pattern. If you ask is this evidence of climate destabilization, the only scientific answer you can give is: It is consistent with what we can expect."

On the campaign to obscure the crisis, Orr had this to say: "It is criminality beyond any language, concepts or laws that we presently have. It's criminality that places the entire human enterprise at risk. And we simply have not been able to confront inaction that allows the entire human enterprise to slip into catastrophic failure. It really does beggar the imagination..."

Except, apparently, it doesn't.

While browsing in a bookstore last spring, I came across a special publication of *Newsweek* magazine titled "100 Places to Remember Before They Disappear." Apparently inspired by a best-selling book titled "100 Places to Visit Before You Die," it featured stunning photographs of a wide variety of landscapes, cultural and natural, around the globe. I pulled out my wallet and plunked down \$14 for it.

I went over to the coffee zone in the store, bought a latte, and sat down. I opened the publication. Here's what I saw:

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Pictures of an atoll in the South Pacific, a glacier in Peru, a musk ox in Greenland, tundra in Alaska, reindeer in Norway, coral reefs in Australia, gondolas in Venice, slums in Jordan, a river delta in Thailand, herdsmen in Mongolia, a rainforest in Hawaii, the River Thames in London, the original site of the Olympic Games in Greece, snow in the Alps, dunes in the Namib desert, a monastery in Bhutan, the Empty Quarter in Saudi Arabia, a coffee plantation in Mexico, a wild orangutan in Borneo, thousands of penguins on an ice shelf in Antarctica, a popular beach in Brazil, a graveyard in Canadian permafrost, a congested highway in China, a surfer in New Zealand, lake bathers in Hungary, dikes in the Netherlands, the snows of Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania, a cotton harvest in India, an imperial castle in Ethiopia, an abbey in Italy, a turtle in the Caribbean Sea, a mudslide in Venezuela, farmers along the Nile River in Egypt, a national park in Nepal, an island nation in the Indian Ocean, a fisherman on Lake Chad in Africa, a forest in Sweden, a street in Cuba, a grassland in Russia, the Eiffel Tower in Paris, a cattle herd in Sudan, a cedar tree in Lebanon, a walrus in the Arctic Circle, a farmer in Bangladesh, a vineyard in France, pedestrians in Tokyo, an olive orchard in Spain, a savanna in Kenya, the Indus River in Pakistan, a wetland in Australia, a rice plantation in Vietnam, a farm in Ireland, the waterfront in Chicago, a whale in Argentina, a rare bird in Madagascar, a flower in South Africa, a bridge in America, and a planet in space.

Here's what the editor said: "This book isn't about atmospheric chemistry or carbon emissions; it's about people, the places they inhabit and the places they have made, and a heart-tugging evocation of what we may lose if global warming continues apace. Whatever one's views on the public policy surrounding these issues, this book is a reminder of what's at stake if we are complacent in the face of a rapidly changing climate. Read it, marvel at what we have, and then get to work to make sure it does not slip away."

Except, apparently, it will.