

Remarks by Bernard Goldstein, MD
Science and Policy Perspectives: Climate Change Roundtable
Panel 1
July 20, 2017

Withdrawal from the Paris agreement is a mistake of historic proportions and a public health disaster in the making. But the theme of my brief comments is that righteous indignation well justified, is compounding that mistake – and we have no time to waste.

I am a health scientist. I could bore you for my five minutes with a seemingly erudite description of the many adverse health consequences of global climate change. But while I started in medicine I am now in public health. In public health, we develop and translate science, not for the bedside, but for the policy maker and the public.

So I'd like to direct you to the public that President Trump appears to be speaking to. We are told of a White house debate between those for and against withdrawing from Paris. Reading President Trump's statement makes it clear that for reelection he believes that appealing to those who voted for him is better than appealing to Republicans and independents who do support the Paris agreement.

For example, his withdrawal statement makes much of the allegedly unfair burden to the US. This includes a comment about NATO countries "lax contributions to our critical military alliance." which has nothing directly to do with global climate change. Instead, President Trump seems to be speaking to US military and US veterans, who strongly supported him. But it is our military who particularly know the evils of war, and war is the worst threat to public health. It is abundantly clear that global climate change contributes greatly to the likelihood of war – something already recognized by US military leadership but not receiving as much attention as it should, nor the needed research effort to better understand and communicate how changes in the climate lead to war

Mr. Trump's statement also strongly links European and other countries unfair trade practices to his reason for withdrawing. Mr. Trump won over 60% of voters from rural agricultural areas of the US. As the EU Ambassador will be here, let me point out that the science claimed to justify current EU bans on American agricultural products, which include beef, chicken, and grains; - this science is about as strong as the arguments trotted out by the coal industry that GCC is not caused by humans. And that is not just my opinion. The alleged scientific rationale for these EU trade bans are not even supported by the EU's own Food Safety Authority.

We need to show that we understand that American farming practices in many ways are leading in sustainability; we need to support the research that can continue this leadership role; we need to fight against trade barriers that are little more than greed wrapped in a green flag; and we need to better understand the impact of GCC on American agricultural productivity so that the highly likely adverse consequences are clear to all Americans.

A third group aimed at by President Trump are conservative Republicans who, after much trepidation, came out to vote for candidate Trump in far greater numbers than expected. An applause line in Mr. Trump's announcement concerned alleged loss of US sovereignty due to the Paris agreement. My colleague, Julian Hudak, and I published a paper less than a year ago demonstrating that concern about environmentalism destroying US constitutional rights and particularly property rights, has been an increasingly strong part of the Republican Party platform and its rhetoric, although not until recently that of Mr. Trump. In contrast, one could not find mention of this issue in Democratic Party platforms.

Isn't it time to show that Democrats are not in favor of distorting US constitutional rights, and to devise a research agenda toward preventing and mitigating the adverse effects of global climate change in which it is clearly specified that US constitutional protection of property rights will be fully maintained?

There is also need to look for common ground with opponents of the Paris agreement to best achieve the goals of the Paris agreement. Preserving and enhancing the US nuclear power industry is one possible approach. Talking about population growth, which is also a forcing factor in global climate change, could be another.

Global climate change has much in common with something many of us in this room, including me, have struggled with for many years, being overweight and even obese. There is a forcing function that of body weight, which like greenhouse gases, will inevitably lead to discrete impacts, such as diabetes, heart attacks, blindness. As a young physician seeing patients in the Bellevue Hospital clinic with adult onset diabetes due to overweight, it was easy to be frustrated and righteously indignant about their failure to heed my directions to lose weight. But righteous indignation doesn't help people to lose weight as compared to understanding the cultural and personal factors responsible for the weight gain – and, as with greenhouse gases, any decrease in even the rate of weight gain is of preventive value. Similarly, to slow down the consequences of our addiction that is causing global climate change, at least until adults are again in charge, we must ignore the temptation to be righteously indignant and understand the factors leading to the President's decision

So to summarize, while I believe it is fair to characterize President Trump's rationale for withdrawal from the Paris agreement as delusional, even more delusional would be a belief that our righteous indignation will change his mind. Instead, we need to address the very real concerns of those segments of American society in search of whose votes the President has acted.

Thank you for your attention – I welcome your questions.