

Opinion

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U.S. Withdrawal from the Paris Agreement



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Opinion

On June 1, 2017, President Trump announced from the White House Rose Garden that the United States was withdrawing from the Paris Climate Agreement. In an act of reasserting “America’s sovereignty,” the justification given by President Trump for this unprecedented move was that it was his “duty to protect America and its citizens.” The mentioning of the duty to protect - while at the same time backing out of the Climate Agreement - presents somewhat of a contradiction as the effects of global warming tends to ignore sovereign boundaries. Despite the inherent irony, one must ask - do we care?

The Paris Agreement was signed in 2015 with several achievable directives in mind. First, the Agreement promotes the prevention of a global temperature rise of 2°C beyond preindustrial averages. This steadfast number stems from a global consensus amongst scientist who hypothesize that if Earth warms a total of 2°C more than its average temperature before humans started burning fossil fuels. the results could be catastrophic. We know that stable climates provide a vital foundation for most life on this planet, but ours is changing rapidly and having a devastating effect on people and places around the world. Ice melt at the polar caps adding to sea level rise has put millions at risk. Additionally, sunny-day-flooding has become commonplace up and down our East Coast and heatwaves, droughts, and fires have grown more intense in the continental interior. These events are said to be just a precursor to the costlier effects to our wellbeing – the gradual extinction of some of the more vulnerable species making up our ecosystem which could have a cascade effect on other forms of wildlife. Second, the agreement sets – in nonbinding terms – a goal for countries to reach peak carbon emissions as soon as possible. Third, the agreement looks for monetary pledges from the richer countries to aid the poorer countries in their quest to acquire green technologies and prepare for the changing environment – the Green Climate Fund. The above is not a full accounting of all the directives; however, it does include the most pertinent.

It sounds like an ominous undertaking, but again – do we care? I ask because President Trump stated, in his Rose Garden

announcement, that the Paris Climate Agreement is “less about the climate and more about other countries gaining a financial advantage over the United States,” and that it “fails to live up to our environmental ideals.” The President stated that he could not “in good conscience” support an agreement that punishes the United States, as the “world’s leader in environmental protection” while at the same time “imposing no meaningful obligations on the world’s leading polluters.” After hearing these words, one (as many countries have already) would think the people of the United States do not care about the shape – or the fate – of the planet on which we live.

The Paris Agreement did – and still does – constitute a remarkable milestone in global history as for the first time, the world reached consensus on a best path for our future. Over 195 countries agreed to one of the most ambitious plans to limit carbon emissions. The Paris Agreement also constitutes a turning point in global thinking. By signing the Agreement countries acknowledged the need for low-carbon economies as they recognized the power of nature in this quest to combat climate change. Thus, the Agreement sent the message that the world is ready to act in a sustainable manner for the benefit of our future generations and their continued existence on this planet – or at least until the person occupying the post that has historically been considered a pillar of global leadership reneged on America’s commitment. President Trump’s Rose Garden speech was followed by a “pep-talk” by Scott Pruitt, the newly appointed administrator of the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Administrator Pruitt, as far as we know, has no formal education in science – environmental or otherwise – yet, President Trump saw fit to put him in charge of protecting our nation’s public health, air, and water.

Pruitt is a lawyer, politician, and a businessman; the historical credits to his name includes the elimination of the environmental enforcement unit as Oklahoma’s Attorney General and suing the EPA over a dozen times displaying his extreme right-wing ideology that lacks interest in any kind of environmental law or science that counters the goals of his

industrial friends. President Trump saw fit to claim that, “United States, under the Trump administration, will continue to be the cleanest and most environmentally friendly country on Earth” in his speech, but he neglected to mention the people of Flint. Over nine thousand children and un-told tens of thousands of adults were exposed to water poisoning causing irreversible damage due to the same kind of ideological thinking we are bound to see surface in policies championed by Pruitt – the President’s top choice to protect the health of 321 million Americans. Fortunately, General Motors (the largest employer in Flint) was able to avert the damage, caused by tainted water, to their engine blocks by switching their water supply from the contaminated Flint River back to the Detroit municipal system (a cleaner system) in an exercise of economic muscle. This was not an option made available to the residents of Flint even after the first wave of complaints, but who cares?

When it comes to the Paris Agreement and environmental quality, Americans do care. An Associated Press poll shows that only 29 percent of Americans supported the withdraw from the Agreement. This does not come even close to being the majority. On average, 69 percent of Americans support strict CO2 emission limits and the overwhelming majority of Americans believe climate change is harming people in the United States. So, the notion that we do not care is simply a fallacy because 69 percent - the majority - believe we should have stayed in the Agreement. The proof of this is found in the numbers – the number of cities,

states, universities, and businesses who have pledged to fill the void left by President Trump’s withdrawal from the Paris Agreement. According to the New York Times, some 30 mayors, 3 governors, 80 university presidents, and over 100 businesses are in the process of submitting a proposal to the United Nations pledging to meet the U.S. emissions target set by the Agreement despite our current administration’s stance. In his pep talk, Administrator Pruitt claimed that “America finally has a leader who answers only to the people - not to the special interests” but, as we truly know, his statement was entirely wrong as most Americans believe the President’s actions and reasoning was foolhardy.

While the deed is done, the duly appointed anti-environmental EPA Administrator is seeking to do some damage control by trying to convince America that climate change is not the overwhelming issue we make it out to be by launching a debate about climate change. In this debate, “specially” selected scientists will answer the challenge of proving that global warming is a serious threat. We must keep in mind that the facilitator is a lawyer and a politician who has spent most of his career denouncing climate change. Would this display of insecurity be necessary if the will of the people were followed from the start as the Rose Garden speech claimed? The teaser for this “debate” alludes that it could aired on television, but since we already know what the majority of Americans truly want and believe... do we really care if it is or if it isn’t?



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