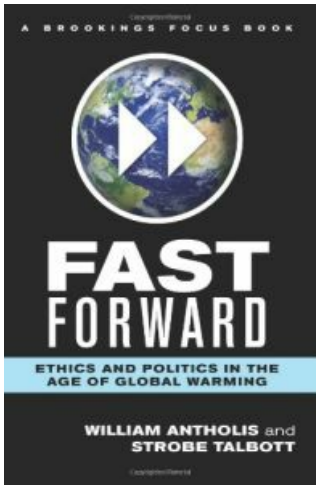

Book Fast Forward

Ethics and Politics in the Age of Global Warming

William Antholis and Strobe Talbott
Brookings Institution Press, 2010
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Recommendation

While the science on global warming is clear, its politics are murky. Foreign policy experts William Antholis and Strobe Talbott contend that national affairs of state must take into account ethical global concerns over the Earth's future. They reach back to the ancient Greeks, the Founding Fathers and the joint US-Russian efforts on nuclear arms control to portray modern climate change as a matter of overarching significance. While their principled arguments may not totally convince opposing sides, what remains, however, is valuable: a journalistic, blow-by-blow chronology of the global warming debate and its diplomatic failures to date. This detailed presentation makes the case – at times ploddingly – that a new way of thinking is necessary to reduce greenhouse gases before the planet suffers irreparable damage. The subject matter occasionally can get eye-glazingly technical, but its consequences are crucial. *BooksInShort* believes that policy wonks and environmental activists will lap up the book's points, and recommends it to students of global governance and every other citizen of planet Earth.

Take-Aways

- Man-made global warming is very close to wreaking irreparable harm on the environment.
- Just a couple of degrees more will lead to vast humanitarian and ecological disasters.
- The same moral and political will that world leaders brought to reining in nuclear proliferation should tackle global warming.
- With 5% of the world's population, the US produces "20% of the world's annual greenhouse gas emissions" and more carbon dioxide than any other nation.
- America should assume a global leadership role in combating climate change, yet it struggles to create meaningful domestic energy legislation.
- George H. W. Bush was the first president to acknowledge the problem of climate change.
- Vice President Dick Cheney reversed President George W. Bush's pro-environment stance and banned White House staff from using the words "global warming."
- President Barack Obama crashed a meeting of developing nations in Copenhagen to revive deadlocked negotiations.
- The EU has made the greatest progress in reducing emissions in the past 20 years.
- A 2010 poll found that 48% consider the dangers from global warming "generally exaggerated."

Summary

A Heated Argument

Over the past two centuries, civilization, unwittingly, has conducted a dangerous experiment: heating the Earth's atmosphere. Today's global population represents the first generation to bear the burden of this awareness – past generations did not understand the impact their actions had on the planet, and future generations will be

powerless to save it. It's up to contemporary society to take on the challenge of a global rescue.

> "Climate change is a test of our scientific and entrepreneurial ingenuity."

Global warming requires a "fast forward" response that essentially will reorient industries and economies. Climate change will challenge entrepreneurs and scientists to devise new solutions. Nations will have to work together, pushing the limits of sovereignty and national interests. The problem of global warming raises ethical questions, which can serve as the basis for political answers. Human beings must consider their responsibilities for planet Earth as important as their responsibilities for their communities and countries.

> "The necessary restructuring of our industries and economy will be possible only if our leaders demonstrate determination, skill and courage in their policies for their own nations and in cooperation with one another."

The sources of global warming are well-known: Beginning with the Industrial Revolution, factories released carbon dioxide (CO_2) and related gases in large enough quantities to change the way the Earth's atmosphere absorbs and reflects the sun's rays. By 1910, the Earth's temperatures were beginning to rise, albeit imperceptibly. The scientific community had recognized that changes were occurring in the environment by 1970, and, in 1988, a worldwide group of meteorologists, working with the United Nations, created the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. More than 1,000 scientists with expertise about the Earth, its oceans and its atmosphere agreed that the planet's surface temperature had increased 1.3°F [0.7°C] from its 19th century average. The resultant warming has begun melting glaciers in the Andes and Rockies, and thawing the polar ice caps. Less ice on the Earth's surface means less cooling of temperatures and a reduced capacity to reflect heat back into the atmosphere.

> "If we continue with business as usual, the globe could keep warming for millennia."

While these temperature raises may seem trivial, they have a profound impact on the planet. Twenty thousand years ago, the Earth was 9°F [5°C] colder than today; mile-thick ice blanketed Canada and the northern US. During the next 10 millennia, "natural global warming" melted the ice, made land arable and stabilized fish supplies, supporting human life in the Neolithic period. But modern global warming is "anthropogenic," or man-made. It is abrupt and swift. Just as the human body is sensitive to fevers, scientists have estimated that an additional future increase of only 2.3°F [1.3°C] would produce global climate disruptions, or "perturbations," that would flood New York City, freeze Europe and destroy agricultural capacity.

> "Even if the human species is biologically resilient enough to survive for centuries, the human enterprise may well be hard to maintain in anything like the current form."

The same delicate balance exists with carbon emissions. Currently, the atmosphere contains about 385 parts per million (ppm) of CO_2, an amount that is increasing by 2 ppm annually. Scientists calculate that if this rate rises and remains above 400 ppm for an extended period of time, temperatures could climb another 2.3°F, tipping the Earth into "not just an environmental and humanitarian disaster, but a geopolitical one" as well.

> "In marked contrast to climate change, there was comparatively little debate about the science, facts or consequences of nuclear war."

To avert this global catastrophe, humankind must halve its CO_2 emissions by 2050. This will require changing from "a high-carbon to a low-carbon global economy," a shift that will demand America's participation. The US emits more CO_2 than any other nation on Earth; with about 5% of the world's population, the US produces "about 20% of the world's annual greenhouse gas emissions."

Nuclear Logic

The first use of nuclear weapons at the end of World War II motivated world leaders to embrace the "existential imperative" of preventing the Earth's destruction. This "priority that trumps all others" best describes the threat global warming now poses.

> "Technological advances have tended to precede and necessitate philosophical, ethical and political advances."

The technological advances that created atomic power leaped ahead of mankind's moral capacity to control it. While nations have warred for centuries, the advent of potential nuclear conflict and its mutually assured destruction changed the way countries resolved their differences. Thoughtful world leaders acknowledged the political and moral implications of untamed nuclear capabilities. Today, restricted nuclear proliferation, through arms control and negotiations, provides a model for how to proceed against global warming. The nations with the largest nuclear arsenals – Russia and the US – have taken responsibility for leading the way on nuclear arms control. Similarly, America now must set the pace for tackling global warming.

Failed Diplomacy

While treaties control nuclear weapons, UN attempts to forge binding international agreements on global warming have failed, due in large part to the political and economic conflicts arising among sovereign states. Despite America's pre-eminence in the science and technology of climate change, three US presidents – George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush – failed to conclude such a treaty during their collective 20 years in the White House.

> "Diplomacy had to stay in sync with domestic politics, which in turn were heavily influenced by domestic economics."

George H. W. Bush, the first post-Cold War president, also was the first to acknowledge global warming. He signed the US Global Change Research Act, which funded climate change research, and the Clean Air Act of 1990, which gave large polluters the ability to cap-and-trade their sulfur dioxide emissions, but not their CO_2 emissions. As president, Bill Clinton pushed for more environmental regulation, including gasoline tax hikes to compel Americans into more fuel-efficient vehicles.

> "Where the United Nations has come up short has been in its effort to convene and guide the negotiation of an energy and climate treaty."

Those tax increases gave the Republicans control of Congress in 1994. In 1995, the UN held a meeting to discuss greenhouse gas emission cuts, but Clinton was

unwilling to commit to specifics before his 1996 re-election campaign. It would not be until the 1997 climate summit in Kyoto that more advanced negotiations could occur. However, the 1995 meeting did introduce distinctions between "developed" and "developing" nations and their relative responsibilities for capping emissions.

> "The UN is too large, too inclusive and too limited in its authority to move quickly and decisively."

While internal political wrangling in the US sidetracked the development of unified environmental legislation, members of the European Union advanced an aggressive CO2 emissions agenda. Their parliamentary, proportional system of representation allowed "green" groups to exercise political influence well beyond their numbers. This was true especially in Germany, the Netherlands and the Scandinavian nations, which leveraged their political strength under the banner of "pooled sovereignty" to advance strong climate policies. In contrast, the US Congress needed a two-thirds "supermajority" to vote on any environmental legislation.

> "The situation in the United States is nearly the opposite of that in Europe: For two decades, America has disappointed the world and many of its own citizens in being slow to get its act together on climate."

When George W. Bush took office, he appointed an Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) head and a Treasury Secretary who both pushed for strong CO2 controls and a cap-and-trade system. But less than two months into his term, Bush empowered his vice president, Dick Cheney, to reverse this policy. Cheney banned the White House staff from using the words "global warming." Bush later said that he agreed with Cheney's assessment that the Kyoto Protocol was "fatally flawed." The US attitude angered the Europeans, who pledged to reduce CO2 reductions of 8% below 1990 levels, while Germany, France and the UK promised 20% cuts.

> "Just as wars are too important to leave entirely to generals, creating the necessary national and international ethos is too important, and too difficult, to be left entirely to governments."

At a 2007 UN climate conference in Bali, Indonesia, developing nations committed to cutting their own emissions in ways that were "measurable, reportable and verifiable," while leaving specifics intentionally blurry. In 2008, 10 Democratic senators declared that any American climate change legislation would have to protect US jobs.

Serious About Energy

When Barack Obama campaigned for the presidency, he advocated a cap-and-trade program and proposals to cut greenhouse gas emissions by 83% by 2050. After he assumed office in 2009, his administration pushed for clean energy programs, for improved energy efficiency and for new ways to generate electricity. Internationally, Obama concentrated his energy efforts on the G-20 nations, particularly engaging with India and China. At the end of November 2009, India and China each revealed plans to reduce their respective "carbon intensity" – "the amount of carbon emitted per unit of economic output" – by 40% by 2020. But the two countries declared they would resist any imposed "binding targets" in carbon reduction at the December 2009 UN climate meeting in Copenhagen.

> "Personal as well as communal self-sacrifice has an ancient and noble place in the annals of politics economics, ethics and civics."

As the Copenhagen sessions began, the Obama administration was mired in the health care debate, which blocked congressional action on any climate bill. Without legislation, US negotiators could not sign a legally binding international agreement in Copenhagen. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton – who later confided to Obama that this was "the worst meeting I've been to since eighth-grade student council" – pledged to source about $100 billion annually to the developing nations if they would reduce emissions. But the conference was deadlocked and headed for failure until Obama crashed a gathering of the delegations from China, India, Brazil and South Africa. There, he pushed for – and achieved – consensus on issues related to the "nature and verification" of emission-reduction pledges, and a formal agreement between all nations that global warming could not exceed another 2.3°F.

> "Barack Obama...has often said that his presidency coincides with what may be a now-or-never moment because the peril is growing and the opportunity to avert it is shrinking."

Before Obama left Copenhagen, he gained concurrence from the UK, Germany and France on the agreement. However, nations that had been absent from the talks did not sanction the compromise, dubbed the "Copenhagen Accord." Global warming still could not generate worldwide harmony. Many of the Copenhagen delegates were looking for a legally binding treaty, which could be presented and ratified by every national legislature. Back in the US, Obama now had to sell the Accord to Congress if he wanted to negotiate from strength at the upcoming Cancun climate summit, one year hence. But US Republicans already were calling the proposal a "national energy tax," while some Democrats suggested that Obama delay any push for climate legislation due to other priorities. But the president's impromptu meeting with other key international leaders showed that "minilateralism" – "reaching agreement among the smallest possible number of countries needed to have the largest possible impact on solving a problem" – could produce significant unilateral pledges from nations to reduce their own greenhouse gas emissions.

"The Inner Circle"

As a group, the US, the EU, China and India represent almost half the world's population and 63% of its GDP. They also emit 60% of the world's carbon dioxide, so the "Big Four," working together, could wield tremendous power in lessening global warming. If the US and the EU could reduce emissions by 80%, that would keep global temperatures from entering the danger zone. The EU has made the greatest progress in reducing emissions during the past 20 years. In 2005, the EU appropriated George H. W. Bush's idea for a cap-and-trade system to cut sulfur dioxide pollution and applied it to reducing carbon emissions. The EU also created a long-term method to effectively price carbon. In contrast, the US has not made progress on enacting effective climate control legislation. While two promising bills have been introduced in Congress, getting 60 Senate votes to enact the legislation has proved difficult for Obama.

The president must work with Congress to forge climate and energy emission laws. It's a tough challenge: A 2010 Gallup poll found that 48% of respondents considered the dangers from global warming "generally exaggerated." The scientific community and the president must educate Americans on this issue. To gain their trust, Obama needs to use logic, "personal integrity" and "empathy" to convince them that global warming is real, and that addressing climate change will create new jobs and preserve existing ones.

The president's economic advisers estimate that $90 billion in stimulus funds for "clean energy" would result in 720,000 new jobs by 2012. Yet while green energy can

accrue savings, meeting the climate challenge certainly incurs costs: Current proposed legislation could end up costing American households between $40 and $800 each annually. No one can propose a definitive budget because expenses will be contingent on an uncertain future "temperature curve."

Enacting a global environmental agreement also will require extraordinary cooperation. Just as the nuclear bomb forced world leaders to act in new ways, the cataclysm of global warming should force today's leaders to acknowledge their communal connections and mutual national responsibilities. While this issue is laden with uncertainties, the cost of doing nothing is immense – including the possibility of leaving future generations a less-hospitable Earth.

About the Authors

Strobe Talbott heads the Brookings Institution, where **William Antholis** is managing director and a senior fellow in Governance Studies. Talbott served as US deputy secretary of state in the Clinton administration; Antholis worked on Clinton's National Security and National Economic Councils.