

Could America lead the world on global warming?

□ Leaders from three steadfastly right-wing arenas - church, military and industry - are now calling for limits on US emissions. Jim Giles surveys America's green stampede.

Jim Giles

When politicians start to run out of analogies, you know a subject must be hot. And in Washington right now, they are scraping the bottom of the barrel.

Al Gore has for months been using the 'sick child' story to explain the scientific consensus on global warming: if nine out of ten doctors say your kid needs antibiotics, you don't choose to go with the single dissenter. Which means: listen to the consensus report on the causes and effects of climate change, ignore the skeptics.

Barbara Boxer, the head of the US Senate's Environment and Public Works Committee, this week stretched the family analogy further. No mother or father would leave their child trapped in a hot car with the Sun beating down, she said. Neither should they let their offspring inherit a rapidly heating world.

Boxer and her colleagues are reaching for new ways to describe the problem because everyone is now talking about global warming. Since the Democrats gained control of Congress last November, climate change has gone mainstream. It's no longer an issue just for liberals and environmentalists — some steadfastly right-wing groups have pitched in, including, this week, the military.

Green berets

The so-called 'green hawks', a group of 11 retired US army generals and admirals, released [CNA Report: National Security and the Threat of Climate Change](#) this week concluding that climate change poses a serious security threat to the United States. They recommend a defence strategy that involves America working harder to stabilize the climate, helping other nations to deal with the effects of a warming world, and tightening up on energy efficiency.

They're not alone. Some traditionally conservative firms, such as power companies and retail giants, are taking real, if preliminary, steps to tackle the global warming fight. Boxer sees such steps as a potential national asset, saying she wants US industry to create "green-collar jobs".

And last year, prominent US evangelical Christians pledged to "destroy those who destroy the Earth". The official National Association of Evangelicals, boasting 30 million members, hasn't yet signed on to the initiative — but many still saw the move as significant.

"I want to rename 'green'," wrote the influential foreign-affairs writer Thomas Friedman in the New York Times last weekend. The word doesn't just belong to tree-huggers anymore, he argues, but to all of America. "I want to rename it geostrategic, geoeconomic, capitalistic and patriotic." If that's the new definition of being green, then America can see a clear way to make money and to earn global respect while taking a lead on green issues.

The messenger matters

The original 'green' groups know that this influx of interest is hugely important. The military, church and industry have significant power - far more than that wielded by environmental protestors. The messages they send may sound very familiar, but it matters that the messenger is different.

Climate researchers, for example, have warned for years that drought in areas such as sub-Saharan Africa will cause states to fail, leading to civil war, refugee pressures and potentially creating breeding grounds for Islamic fundamentalism. But when the same message comes from the former guardians of America's safety, politicians take notice.

Other security officials are likely to weigh in soon. A bill put before the Senate late last month calls for government intelligence staff to produce an official assessment of the security threats posed by climate change. The legislation has cross-party support, so expect it to succeed. Such an assessment — by the current US military rather than external consultants — would really have clout.

Three's company

With the trinity of industry, military and church now calling for emission limits, we can afford a little optimism.

Boxer wants federal and state legislation to work towards a target that, in political terms, would be sensational: an 80% cut in emissions below 1990 levels by 2050. The UK government, the world leader so far in terms of such targets, is set to commit to a 60% cut over the same period. Suddenly a US politician, and one with some power, is calling for her nation to take a global lead on reining in emissions.

Such a commitment will have to wait at least until next November's departure of President George W. Bush. Even then, it will almost certainly be too much for industries such as power utilities and car manufacturers to swallow, even in their new green guise. But just the

fact that such figures are being bandied around in Congress is significant. And with the possibility of progress on global warming getting ever more real, politicians can use whatever cheesy analogies they like to hammer the point home.

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