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Foundation](#)**EPW Commentary****December 6, 2003****Inaction on Climate Change****Follow the Leader?**

Not only does the US 'lead' by not acting on climate change, it has also emerged as the biggest stumbling block in the efforts by the world community to address the problem. As the Kyoto Protocol is about to become a reality and the world gears for the next round of negotiations, India must decide where it stands: Does it want to suck up to the US or stand up to its intransigence on climate action?

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Climate change (global warming for the scientifically challenged) is perhaps the most serious environmental challenge humanity has ever faced. While the extent of climate change and its environmental and economic impacts are subject to debate, it is, nevertheless, clear that humans are altering the earth's climate in profound ways through burning fossil fuels that produce carbon dioxide, a heat-trapping (or 'greenhouse') gas, and from activities such as cutting of forests and agriculture that produces methane, another greenhouse gas (GHG).¹ It is also evident that collective action by all nations is necessary to tackle this global problem. But there are nations and nations and then there is the US. Not only does the 'leader' of the free world (indeed now the leader of the entire world) 'lead' by not acting on climate change, it has also emerged as the biggest stumbling block in the efforts by the world community to address the problem.

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To begin with let us recapitulate some facts. The US with 4.5 per cent of world population accounts for 25 per cent of the world's energy consumption and about 20 per cent of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. Its emissions of carbon dioxide (CO₂) today are more than 15 per cent higher than in 1990 and growing. By the year 2025, CO₂ emission in the US will be 40 per cent higher than those in 2000 (*Annual Energy Outlook 2003 (AEO2003)*, US Energy Information Administration, Table 1, p 8). While it is true energy consumption and GHG emissions are also increasing in developing countries such as India and China, this increase is taking place against a backdrop of much needed economic growth. What is amazing, however, is that in the US, despite its current profligate use of energy (in absolute and per capita terms), consumption is projected to grow by over a third over the next 20 years!² Here is an egregious example of a country that has plenty and yet exhibits an unsatiated appetite for more. For instance, according to OECD estimates standby power alone (when appliances are not unplugged but left in standby mode such as VCRs, computers and microwave ovens) accounts for 1.3 per cent of annual electricity use and results in an additional 29 million tons of CO₂ emissions per year. To add insult to injury when president Bush announced in March 2001 that the US was pulling out of the Kyoto Protocol (a global effort to reduce emissions of GHGs in industrialised countries), he cited lack of 'meaningful participation' by developing countries such as India and China as one of the reasons!

The energy lobby dominated Bush administration has evolved a 3-D climate policy – one that is duplicitous, dilatory and divisive.³ First, there is deceitful denial that climate change is a problem. In May 2002, a report produced by its own Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and submitted to the UN held human activities specially burning of fossil fuels responsible for global warming. It was quickly disowned by Bush as a "report put out by the bureaucracy"! Earlier in February 2002, he came out with a disingenuous 'Clear Skies' proposal that virtually guaranteed much higher absolute emissions of GHG emissions in the

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US within a decade. The wording of his proposal, however, was that the US would reduce the GHG intensity of output (that is, the amount of emissions per unit of output) by 18 per cent over the next 10-years. This sleight of hand was so brazen that even the conservative weekly *The Economist* (February 14, 2002) was compelled to describe the proposal as “all hat and no cattle”. Undeterred, a paranoid, oil lobby run White House continues to censor reports by its own administration which suggest that climate change may be a problem. For instance, a draft version of the state of environment report by the EPA in June this year was ‘edited’ by White House staff to delete the innocuous phrase “climate change has global consequences for human health and the environment” (White House Edited Greenhouse Report, CBS News (www.cbsnews.com), June 19, 2003). This was the second time in six months the Bush administration censored discussion of global warming out of a report. In September 2002, for the first time in six years, the annual federal report on air pollution trends prepared by EPA had no section on global warming (Andrew C Revkin, ‘With White House Approval, EPA Pollution Report Omits Global Warming Section’, *New York Times*, September 15, 2002).

Second, delaying tactics are deployed by the Bush administration to avoid reducing GHG emissions now. Thus, it is claimed action cannot be taken until better scientific information on climate change is available. Or that action need not be taken since empty coal mines, oil and natural gas reservoirs can be used to bury (sequester) carbon dioxide captured during fossil fuel combustion. Or that hydrogen fuel cells will ‘solve’ the problem and Americans can live happily ever after – cruising in ever bigger sports utility vehicles (SUVs) producing only water vapour as emissions and no GHGs! At present ever-increasing sales of large SUVs over smaller cars in the US fuel its thirst for foreign oil and its global aggression. The trend towards larger motor vehicles means that, overall, the average efficiency of new vehicles sold in the US has been getting worse since the late 1980s. Mile for mile, an average vehicle in the US uses around 40 per cent more fuel than in the UK. If US vehicles were as fuel efficient as UK

vehicles, nearly two and half million barrels of oil would be saved every day – equivalent to 90 per cent of US oil imports from the west Asia (Greenpeace UK 2002: *The Tiger in the Tanks: Exxon Mobil, Oil Dependency and War in Iraq*, www.greenpeace.org.uk).

And even better for Americans, a rosy hydrogen-fuel future can be achieved by spending a measly \$ 1.2 billion (the amount announced by Bush for the so-called Hydrogen Fuel Initiative in January this year). If the problem of climate change were not so serious this desperate search for a magic bullet would appear comical. And ironical too – a country that preaches the virtue of free markets to the world should realise one of the basic tenets of markets is ‘no free lunch’ – meaningful action on climate change will require some sacrifice from Americans who have been pampered for years by cheap energy. While real disposable personal income in the US is projected to increase by over 103 per cent between 2000-2025, the average American household expenditure for energy over the same period will increase by less than 13 per cent! (AEO2003, Tables 1, E1 and E6).

In all fairness though it must be stated that Bush (who was not elected by a majority of Americans in the first place) does not represent the view of all US citizens. For instance, in June this year Attorney Generals from the states of Maine, Massachusetts and Connecticut filed a federal lawsuit against the US government that argued the EPA had a mandatory duty to regulate carbon dioxide under the Clean Air Act. Also, on September 22 this year governors of the three west coast states of California, Oregon and Washington announced an ambitious, coordinated tri-state strategy to address global warming.⁴ But for now it is big American oil companies through their lackey Bush administration that determine US climate policy.

Deceit and delay are not all in the Bush approach to climate policy. It seeks to divide as well. Not content with inaction, it also insists on torpedoing the efforts of other nations in this regard. Having pulled out of the Kyoto Protocol it watches with chagrin as the treaty is on the brink of ratification and as the European Union

(EU) forges ahead with emissions trading (a 'cap and trade' scheme that allows firms in EU countries to buy and sell emissions subject to an overall ceiling). Thus, American officials are now fanning out across the globe seeking partners in its quixotic quest for a hydrogen-fuelled world. The US proposes to host a meeting of the International Partnership for a Hydrogen Economy (IPHE), its Star Trek alternative to meaningful action on climate change. In dividing the world on its resolve to address climate change, it has found an only too willing partner in the Hindutva-besotted Vajpayee government. With more important things such as Kashmir and 'mandir' on its mind, our government is willing to go to any length in supporting the US on climate change in return for American support on other 'strategic' issues. Thus, while the world was condemning the Bush 'Clear Skies' proposal, our external affairs ministry on February 18, 2002 came out with an asinine statement welcoming it! In the same vein, the draft of a ministerial statement at COP 8 (the 8th annual meeting of countries signatory to a UN climate change convention) hosted by India at Delhi last October set off howls of protest among the delegates by omitting any mention of the Kyoto Protocol. It was widely believed that this happened under US prodding. Even the final statement at COP 8 was a limp one that papered over deep divisions among the parties. It made a perfunctory reference to the Protocol – hardly the stuff to inspire and lead developing countries as India aspires to. Finally, in April 2002 India colluded with the US in turfing out Robert Watson the head of an international expert panel on climate change, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Watson was a marked man by the oil lobby (and therefore by the Bush administration) because he had been vocal in warning governments about the danger of fossil fuel emissions contributing to global warming. In February 2001, the White House Council on Environmental Quality received a memo from Exxon Mobil that asked, "Can Watson be replaced now, at the request of the US?" (US Scientist Booted Off Climate Panel," CBS News (www.cbsnews.com), April 19, 2002). The contentious nature of the election for IPCC chair where Watson lost his re-election bid (with 49 countries voting for him and 82 against), left many observers worried at the politicisation of this scientific

body.⁵ Whatever be the merits of the case, one thing is very clear. The Bush administration will not spare any effort nor any one in pursuing its 3-D climate policy.

Now as the Kyoto Protocol is about to become a reality and the world gears for the next round of negotiations on climate change, India must decide where it stands – does it want to suck up to the US as it holds the world hostage or stand up to its intransigence on climate action. The world is watching US.

Note

1 The Third Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), released in 2001, confirms that “an increasing body of observations gives a collective picture of a warming world” with “new and stronger evidence that most of the warming observed over the last 50 years is attributable to human activities”.

2 It is estimated that energy consumption in the US will increase from 99.4 quadrillion Btu in 2000 to 139 quadrillion Btu in the year 2020 (*Annual Energy Outlook 2003 (AEO2003)*, US Energy Information Administration, Table A1, p 119). The average annual growth rate works out to 1.5 per cent, whereas population is expected to grow at a rate of only 0.8 per cent over the same period (Table A20, p 145 op cit).

3 Energy and natural resource-extracting companies gave Bush \$ 2.9 million in the 2000 presidential election, nine times more than they gave to Al Gore (Derrick Z Jackson, ‘As the globe warms up, Bush won’t believe it’, *Boston Globe*, June 7, 2002).

4 In an explicit denunciation of the Bush administration, the statement by the three governors said, “(U)nfortunately, present federal policies will not lead to a reduction in the current emission levels of greenhouse gases associated with global warming. Therefore, the governors of the west coast states have concluded that our states must act individually and regionally to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.”

5 According to Jennifer Morgan, director of WWF’s climate programme, “WWF is concerned that oil and gas interests had too much say in the removal of Dr Watson as chairman of what should be an impartial, scientific body”.

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