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Nixon to China, Bush to Kyoto?

By Ira Straus

[*Drawing on the metaphor of Richard Nixon's 1972 China visit, an October 21 article in The Globalist has drawn attention to the forthcoming Bush visit to Kyoto as a potentially agenda-setting event. Scholar-activist Ira Straus proposes that George Bush use his forthcoming visit to Kyoto to become a world leader in environmentalism. Bush is due to meet with Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi in Kyoto on November 15-16, in a stop-over on his way to the APEC meeting in Busan and then later to China. There has been no indication that the environment will form a significant part of the two leaders' agenda, even though they will meet in the city where the world's first global warming treaty was hammered out. It would indeed surprise many if Bush, whose administration torpedoed the Kyoto protocol, were to use his visit to launch a major environmental protection initiative.*

Among the Bush administration's first acts on coming to power in 2001 was to reject the Kyoto accord. Indeed, it was the first big foray in the unilateralist foreign policy that has characterized the regime. Now hubris and treacherous tides have run Bushism onto the rocks in Iraq and elsewhere. Even nature has been conspicuously cruel, as hurricanes sunk an American city, damaged a big piece of America's energy-supply infrastructure, and blew off the remnants of Bush's political credibility. As a result, when Bush goes to Kyoto, he goes not in triumph but as the hapless captain of a leaky if not sinking ship, and yet has proclaimed every intention to 'stay the course'. The passengers appear less confident: A November 2 CBS poll showed that Bush's support had plummeted to a low of 35 percent, only 8 points above the soon-to-resign Nixon in the first and only November of Nixon's second term. And Bush meets Latin American Presidents in Argentina as the most unpopular American president ever, apparently incapable of dictating the agenda.

Mr Straus insists that Bush could rebound strongly by announcing a major series of environmental policy initiatives from Kyoto. Indeed, he writes as if the wish itself could produce the deed. Straus points out that Reagan and other previous US presidents caught up in scandals made similar use of bold moves to reset the political agenda. He adds that it would be entirely in character for Bush to take a large gamble here, even suggesting that the president from oil could put a large gas tax increase on the agenda.

The idea of Bush proposing a tax increase is perhaps not as preposterous as it seems. America's gasoline taxes are about a fifth of those in Japan and the EU, thus supporting America's gas-guzzling culture. And over the past year, even some neocons have shown a propensity to go green. Their sometime mouthpiece Thomas Friedman, in his January 30, 2005 column in the New York Times, introduced "The Geo-Green Alternative." He insisted that a serious gas tax would reduce consumption and thus cut dependence on Middle-Eastern oil, the resultant drop in revenues bringing those regimes to heel and cutting the funds some of their principals send to terrorist organizations. Moreover, the increased American tax on gasoline would shift more money to the US government to fund research on alternative energies.

Stripped of its naive enthusiasm for yet another oiled-up domino theory applied to the world's most unstable region, the gas tax idea makes a lot of sense. A New York Times editorial on October 24 argued as much, proposing that gas taxes be raised so that prices stay at over $3 per gallon, curbing consumption and furnishing revenues for research into alternative energy.

Of course, for some readers the mere prospect of George Bush rebuilding his political fortunes through a policy shift that targeted global warming must seem absurd. Yet the Nixon-Mao China initiative metaphor of a decisive global policy shift is misplaced. This is not 1972 and Bush is not about to morph into the green president in Kyoto. Even when Bush is clearly wrong, and paying a heavy political price for a policy like the Iraq war, he rarely backs down. Becoming an environmentalist would mean repudiating several years of denying the steadily mounting evidence that global warming is a fact. And raising gas taxes would mark Bush as an apostate among the Republican right and its base.

Straus has leaped for the moon based on a false analogy. For several years prior to the Nixon visit, as recently released documents make clear, the balletic moves by both Mao and Nixon to engineer a geopolitical shift at the expense of the Soviet Union, based on a common enemy and the necessity for the US to end its disastrous Vietnam War adventure, provided the basis for change. Bush has shown no such propensity with respect to environmental issues, even when pressed by skyrocketing oil prices and the approaching gradual depletion in oil supplies.

As a gesture to the Koizumi regime, Bush might indeed mouth some encouraging words about the environment. But such would only serve as a rhetorical prelude to the serious business of the meeting: strengthening the new face of the US-Japan military alliance.

The real merit of the Straus article is to draw the attention of activists, that Bush's visit to Kyoto offers a good, indeed historic, opportunity to put environmental issues squarely on the global agenda. Being what he is, Bush's role will simply be in being there. It is up to the rest of us to make the visit a milestone for the environment. Japan Focus]

In 1972, then U.S. President Richard Nixon took a historic step by visiting China to improve Sino-U.S. relations. Today, the Bush Administration, which often is criticized for its poor environmental record, is facing a similar situation. U.S. conservative Ira Straus argues that George W. Bush should follow Nixon's example by embracing the controversial Kyoto Protocol.

It is George W. Bush's nature to take such dramatic steps. In this he has less in common with his father, a fan of finesse, than with Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan. He can take a page from their book.

It is the only response to the New Orleans disaster that would be convincing. The damages already come to hundreds of billions of dollars. The costs of Kyoto to the U.S. economy, though real, pale before the cost of repeated Katrinas.

And that is the prospect presented by warming oceans, which strengthen tropical storms. Nearly all Americans have by now learned about this causal connection. Few believe any longer that the increase in extreme weather events is just coincidence.

Even in Washington, one can sense a change in mood in environmental-skeptic circles. Already, after the invasion of Iraq, high gas prices and concerns about subsidizing Islamic regimes led to green trends among conservative enviro-skeptics.

Dramatic gestures

Katrina brought this trend to critical mass. People are ready for a change. Enviro-skeptics may not be pushing for Kyoto, but if their leader leads, they will follow. And their leader is George W. Bush.

The Bush Administration needs a dramatic gesture to show it is coping with the new scale of disaster but not by rebuilding New Orleans — something already widely seen as a mistake — but by addressing the sources of weather extremism.

The cost of prevention

The costs of prevention are great, and for a long time we can at best only slow the growth of the problem, but the costs are visibly greater if we go on not even trying to slow that growth and instead limit ourselves to consequence management.

The slogans are irrelevant now. There was no New Orleans to be destroyed 10,000 years ago.

Mr. Bush needs to go to Kyoto. He needs to say that, in face of the costs already incurred from a warming Gulf of Mexico, the United States is changing its policy on Kyoto. And announce a carefully calibrated gas tax to show he's serious.

He might still want to say that Kyoto has to be modified, but should turn "modified" into a code word for strengthening not ignoring it. It is clear, for example, that the world needs increasing controls on developing country emissions.

It would be like President Ronald Reagan who, having denounced Strategic Arms Limitations Talks — a treaty between the United States and the former Soviet Union that froze a number of offensive weapons — came back to arms control by upping the ante on it with Strategic Arms Reductions Talks — a treaty between the United States and the Soviet Union that limited each other's warhead supplies.

The right kind of leader

Mr. Bush would be able to deliver the Republican vote and with it the United States. He would lead an America that, despite previous bitter Republican opposition to Kyoto, would be basically united in supporting it.

George W. Bush could, of course, just go on repeating slogans about how some scientists are unsure about whether global warming is real or whether the planet was just as warm or warmer 10,000 years ago.

He would thus act as the kind of leader Mr. Nixon proved to be when he led a unified United States on renewing relations with China despite previous sharp opposition to any such thing.

It is Mr. Bush's nature to take such dramatic steps. In this he has less in common with his father, a fan of finesse, than with Mr. Nixon and Mr. Reagan. He can take a page from their book.

Mr. Nixon was the greatest tactical mind among Republican politicians of the last generation, Reagan the strongest strategist. They believed in doing the dramatic thing, reshuffling the whole deck when the cards have started coming up unplayable — as they have been for Bush after Katrina.

It was advice Mr. Nixon gave to former president George H.W. Bush when the latter was sinking politically. But George H.W. Bush preferred to stay inside his comfort zone — and drown.

Hitting back

George W. Bush is brasher. He enjoys hitting back. His father spoke of waiting and seeing, fearing to "make the wrong mistake." But George W. Bush prefers to feel decisive. He likes to answer a big blow with a punch on the same scale.

He overran Afghanistan in response to 9/11. He likes policy reversals that match the scope of geopolitical change. He approached Russia to become an ally after 9/11 despite having run on an anti-Russia platform.

Go to Kyoto

Going to Kyoto would be in character for him. He could present it that way — and avoid looking like a fraud.

Richard Nixon was the strongest strategist, the greatest tactical mind among Republican politicians of the last generation. He believed in doing the dramatic thing.

He could, of course, just go on repeating slogans about how some scientists are unsure about whether global warming is real, or — the current line of retreat — whether humans are the cause of it, or at least whether humans are the main cause of it. Or that it's all a long natural cycle, the planet was just as warm or warmer 10,000 years ago.

These slogans are beginning to look painfully irrelevant. But there was no New Orleans to be destroyed 10,000 years ago. Modern coastal cities and infrastructures and interdependencies were not around then. The hunter-gatherers could relocate relatively easily. Those who drowned were replaceable units, quickly forgotten.

If it were really true that the warming had entirely natural causes, we would respond to it as a threat from nature, just like avian flu or the asteroid threat. It is

only in a non-logical polemical mode, a sort of inverted environmentalist fundamentalism, which people say, "The causes are natural so we shouldn't do anything about it."

Global warming and its effects

The normal human response would be to go on a crash course to find technologies to cool back down the earth, stop nature from cooking us out, and keep the environment steady for the long term — steady enough to accommodate modern civilizations and populations.

In reality, of course, the human contributory causes are significant, whether or not they add up to 50% of the problem. There are things that can be done immediately to reduce them. In a normal frame of mind, we would be pursuing them now, alongside longer-term projects like technologies for cooling and stabilizing the planet.

Alternative options

The alternative is to dump more and more hundreds of billions into more and more repairs, in a pointless act of mimicking Sisyphean labor.

And to go to Iran and Venezuela, begging for more oil? Take a hard look at that option. Going to Kyoto is the easier way out.

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