

Earth Legacy 2004:

A Call for An American Recommitment to Global Environmental Leadership

In an increasingly interdependent and rapidly changing world, environmental degradation affects the health, well being, and security of every American. Yet over the past decade, the United States has relinquished its leadership on global environmental issues. The U.S. has declined to join a number of important environmental treaties and has been inconsistent at best in its support of global environmental institutions. It is now time for the United States Government to recommit to working with other nations to protect the Earth for our children and grandchildren.

It is our task in our time and in our generation, to hand down undiminished to those who come after us, as was handed down to us by those who went before, the natural wealth and beauty which is ours.

- President John F. Kennedy

The earth will continue to regenerate its life sources only as long as we and all the peoples of the world do our part to conserve its natural resources.

- President Gerald Ford

We must find ways to lessen the burden on Earth's resources, and we must encourage better stewardship of the planet so that all of us live in a clean and productive environment. The decisions we make in the decades to come will affect not only all of human civilization but also the fate of thousands of species representing millions of years of evolution.

- President Jimmy Carter

The idea of sustaining the planet so that it may sustain us is as old as life itself. We must leave this Earth in better condition than we found it.

- President George H.W. Bush

Distinguished leaders, in all our cultures we have been taught from time immemorial that, as scripture says, "One generation passes away and another

comes, but the Earth abides forever." We must strengthen our stewardship of the environment to make that true, and to insure that when this generation passes, the young man who just spoke before me, and all of those of his generation, will inherit a rich and abundant Earth.

- President Bill Clinton

Each of us understands that our prosperity as a nation will mean little if our legacy to future generations is a world of polluted air, toxic waste, and vanished forests.

- President George W. Bush

These words of our Presidents over the last four decades reflect what the American people have long known: we have an obligation to leave to our children a world as bountiful and beautiful as the one we inherited from our parents. We have made some progress, but deforestation, over-fishing, toxic contamination, destruction of habitat and loss of plant and animal species, and air and water pollution still present major challenges for the next century. An ever-increasing world population (currently just over six billion and projected to reach almost nine billion by 2050), spreading industrialization, land conversion, and rising consumption are putting enormous pressure on the Earth's natural system.

The environment does not recognize national boundaries and no country alone can be held accountable for these problems or their solutions. Yet the United States bears a special responsibility. The U.S. is the richest and most powerful nation on the planet and one of the world's biggest polluters and consumers of resources. American leadership is necessary to stimulate cooperation from all nations in assuring a livable and productive environment for future generations. Environmental protection and sustainable

development must become a real priority for American national security and foreign policies.

Global Environmental Decline is a Threat to the United States

Poverty, destruction of the environment and despair are destroyers of people, of societies, of nations, a cause of instability as an unholy trinity that can destabilize countries and destabilize entire regions.

- Secretary of State Colin Powell

The environment has a profound impact on our national interests in two ways: First, environmental forces transcend borders and oceans to threaten directly the health, prosperity and jobs of American citizens. Second, addressing natural resource issues is frequently critical to achieving political and economic stability, and to pursuing our strategic goals around the world.

– Secretary of State Warren Christopher

Threats to U.S. public health

- There are emerging concerns that climate change and other environmental factors are contributing to **the emergence and spread of dangerous new epidemics**, such as West Nile virus.
- **Accumulations of toxic chemicals** threaten food safety and cause long-term health effects. Persistent Organic Pollutants can now be found virtually everywhere in the world.
- While the United States has made substantial efforts to reduce domestic **lead** emissions, children adopted from foreign countries are suffering from lead poisoning, imported consumer products still contain lead, and the winds transport lead into our environment.
- About half the world's tropical forests have been lost in just the last forty years. Continued **deforestation threatens potential pharmaceutical sources**. New medicines may never be discovered, or may become rare and therefore prohibitively expensive.

Threats to U.S. National Security

- **Environmental degradation causes, and is caused by, civil and international conflict.**

- As the environment and natural resource base are degraded, income disparities widen and the absolute **number of people living in poverty in the developing world increases**, giving rise to social and political unrest and the prospects of even more terrorists and millions of environmental refugees.
- **Water shortages will become a major source of conflict** as one-third of the world's people already live in "water-stressed" countries that find it difficult or impossible to meet all of their water needs. UNESCO predicts that by mid-century as many as 7 billion people in close to 60 countries could face water shortages, threatening to cause political instability, create a public health crisis and negatively impact the global environment
- The **pillaging of commodities**—minerals, gems, timber, and others—has exacerbated several violent conflicts in developing countries
- There are links between the growing **world illegal trade in wildlife, and other resources and the supply of arms and drugs**.
- **Invasive species and exotic diseases** have been identified as potential weapons of terrorism.

Threats to U.S. Economic Interests

- Scientists predict that in the future the **weather is likely to become more erratic** and extreme as a result of climate change. More severe droughts and hurricanes could severely damage food production and be very costly to our economy. The number of people affected by weather-related disasters rose from 147 million people/year in the 80s to 211 million people/year in the 90s, costing an estimated US \$100 billion per year.
- **Rising sea levels** could flood coastal cities costing billions to mitigate and rebuild.
- Biodiversity is important for the continued availability of many key commodities. **Declines of wild plants** related to industrial crops such as cotton or plantation-grown timber could one day limit our ability to cultivate those commodities by shrinking the gene pools needed for breeding new varieties.
- **Species invasions** cost the United States an estimated \$136 billion each year.

International action and US leadership are essential.

As befits America's world leadership role, we are also moving vigorously with other nations to preserve the global environment.

- President Richard Nixon

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- Climate change, ozone layer depletion, invasive species, loss of species, and depletion of marine fisheries can only be addressed through **joint and coordinated action by national governments**.
- History makes clear that **American leadership** is absolutely critical in creating new international arrangements and finding solutions to global environmental challenges.

- The U.S. represents a quarter of the global economy and is one of the world's largest polluters and resource consumers.
- The U.S. is one of the few countries with the scientific and financial resources to make the investments in new energy, transportation and other technologies that can reduce the pressure on the planet's ecosystems and resources.

Need for Leadership and Action to Protect the Earth

Over the last decade, the United States has relinquished its leadership on global environmental issues. The U.S. has declined to join a number of important international environmental treaties, including the Kyoto Protocol and the Convention on Biological Diversity, and has been inconsistent at best in its support of global environmental institutions. The United States Government was one of the driving forces behind the creation of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in 1972 and the Global Environmental Facility (GEF) in 1991. Yet our annual contribution to UNEP is half of what it was 25 years ago and a quarter of what it was a decade ago. Today, the US is in arrears to the GEF in the amount of more than \$100 million.

At the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa, the United States was seen by many as out of step with many of its closest allies. In the end, the Summit adopted ambitious new targets for achieving a more sustainable future, including providing safe drinking water to hundreds of millions of people and curbing the loss of species. However, none of these goals can be achieved until the United States demonstrates a commitment to provide the necessary leadership.

The year 2004 will be an important opportunity for our nation to examine the future direction of our society in the 21st century. We can no longer afford to ignore global environmental challenges. We must do more than just talk about these problems; we need to stimulate real actions to address them.

The United States Government should make a concrete and substantial commitment to strengthening international environmental governance and to cooperating with developing countries to address their own severe environmental challenges. Stronger international norms and institutions are necessary to protect global ecosystems and resources, to the benefit of all nations, but especially to the benefit of those nations such as the United States, that have the most to lose. The U.S. should take the initiative in establishing and carrying out multilateral work plans to implement environmental treaties and internationally-agreed environmental targets. We also need to increase substantially our contributions to the international environmental agencies, such as the United Nations Environment Programme and the Global Environmental Facility. Giving a higher priority to environmental protection in our foreign assistance programs and in our work with the intergovernmental organizations, including the World Bank and regional development banks, will protect the investments we are making to promote stability and prosperity.

The United States Government should take action at home to make our society a model for sustainable development. By strengthening laws, regulations, and programs to stimulate the development of a less-resource-intensive and less-polluting society based on cutting-edge green technologies and industries, we will position the U.S to benefit from the economic and employment opportunities presented by the transition to an environmentally sustainable global economy.

By making environmental protection a fundamental element of our foreign policy, we can prevent degradation of the global environment that endangers our nation's public health, security and economic well-being. The pursuit of this fundamental focus will require the engagement with other governments in diplomatic dialogues and active cooperation on key environmental issues. New partnerships and initiatives, involving not only governments, but also international agencies, citizen groups, and businesses will increase the effectiveness of our public investments. And enhancing the ability of individuals and communities worldwide to protect their own health and environment will strengthen the commitment to democracy in many nations.