



**What should be the role of the United States?
Frank E. Loy ¹**

Session 1: The Environment and Security Challenge

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State Secretary van Geel and ladies and gentlemen, we find ourselves in a distinguished and elegant hall in an important building, and with an exceptionally knowledgeable audience. I fear this imposes on me the burden of saying something profound and memorable. I doubt I can carry that burden, but I hope at least to say something that is relevant and helpful, as we tackle the complicated topic of this conference.

My subject today is the role of the United States. More specifically, to what extent do we in the US consider environmental problems -- or threats, if you will -- as possible threats to our national security? I focus on the United States not because of any hubris, of which we are often accused, but because that is the topic the organizers have asked me to cover.

Does the political establishment of the US, and the body politic as a whole, consider environmental issues to be valid considerations in shaping our national security agenda? American leaders repeatedly talk about environmental threats as possible threats to our national security. The question is whether they -- and whether we -- really mean it.

First, a brief look at some history. We in the US have concerned ourselves broadly about natural resource policies for at least a century, but only in the context of worrying that resource scarcities might slow our economic growth. We did not ask what consequences flow from the use of these resources in terms of our environment, as we recognize that term today.

As early as 1908, Theodore Roosevelt and Governor Pinchot organized a Governors Conference on the subject, which expressed great concern over how long the nation's supplies of fuels, timber, metals and other resources would last.

In the years following World War II there was a flurry of books on the "running out of resources" theme. Our national concern was heightened during the early 1950s by the Korean War, which imposed heavy and unforeseen demands on resources and sharpened old fears.

In 1951 President Truman established a Materials Policy Commission, known as the Paley Commission after its chairman, William Paley, the CEO of CBS. Its assignment was to study the broader and longer range aspects of the nation's materials problem (as distinct from the immediate defense needs). Truman noted that "We cannot allow shortages of materials to jeopardize our national security nor to become a bottleneck to our economic expansion."

The Paley Commission Report was issued in 1952 in five volumes. It found that consumption was expanding at compound rates and pressing hard on resources which were not expanding similarly -- a long-term problem.

While the fear of materials scarcity turned out to be mostly misplaced, the report was a major factor in putting natural resource policies on America's agenda, as a strategic issue that would shape our future. One reason for the influence of the report was that it happened to coincide with the transformation of the Ford Foundation from a modest Detroit-based foundation to America's wealthiest. Ford determined to take on natural resource policy as one of its important areas of work, and financed much early work in this area, including the formation of the first think tank devoted to natural resource policy and the environment, Resources for the Future.

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The three premises that shaped the report still guide much of America's thinking today. That

1. the US must operate on the principle of growth; there is no support here for a small-is-beautiful theme;
2. private enterprise is the most efficient way of performing industrial tasks in the US; and
3. the destinies of the US and the rest of the free world are intertwined. "If we fail to work for a rise in the standard of living of the free world, we thereby hamper and impede the further rise of our own, and equally lessen the chances of democracy to prosper and peace to rein the world over."

I can sense the doubts in the audience re the current status of the third of these, the internationalist premise. But I believe that Americans –perhaps not to the degree of Europeans – have increasingly come to believe that there is a significant relationship between our economic and general well-being and how other nations handle some of their environmental problems.

But up to this point – the immediate post World War II period – our concern was mostly with resource shortages; the environmental consequences, as we think of them today were not on our screen. That came along with events like the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in the 60's, the 1970 Earth Day celebration, and the 1972 Stockholm Conference.

These changed America's thinking (and its laws) enormously, but, while our understanding of our environmental challenges and our response to them, have grown, our sense that they might actually impact our national security is just beginning to enter our calculations.

This lag in our full understanding of the implications of what's happening is not entirely surprising. The pace of change in the 20th century was staggering. The world's population grew fourfold (and we know that it will grow another 50% in next four decades). In the same period 46% of our primary watersheds were altered by dams and other man-made changes to meet needs of expanding population. Our use of fossil fuels grew 20-fold, and with it the resultant alarming growth of atmospheric concentrations of carbon.

Let us fast-forward to today. And let's note one of the most recent events, the publication in March of 2004 of the Pentagon's Advanced Research Agency report on the national security risk of sudden and dramatic weather events. The report posited the real though remote possibility of mega-draughts, of the American breadbasket destroyed, of millions of acres along America's shoreline sinking under a rising sea level. All caused by global warming.

The Report concluded that "Global Warming must therefore be considered as a serious threat to global stability and should be elevated beyond a scientific debate to a US national security concern."

Let us not, however, fool ourselves. Neither this report nor some others of a similar vein will persuade Americans to take seriously the concept that environmentally caused disasters should be treated as threats to our national security until we have rethought how we define that term.

Historically we have thought of threats to our national security as stemming from the threat or use of military force to our territory or our territorial integrity -- generally by a state actor. And the intuitive assumption has been that they require a parallel response.

Quite aside from any consideration of environmental harm, the tragedy of 9/11 tells us that our historic definition no longer serves us. America's territorial border proved highly permeable – even trivial. Our overwhelming military might was neither a deterrent nor an effective response.

Let me suggest a quite different definition of national security, something along the lines of a version first proposed in the early 80s by Professor Richard Ulman:
Our national security is endangered by an action or sequence of events that

1. threatens drastically, and over a relatively brief span of time, to degrade the quality of life for the inhabitants of a state, or
2. threatens significantly to narrow the range of policy choices available to the government of a state.

Using that definition, I suggest, it becomes very difficult to deny that, for example, uncontrolled persistent organic pollutants that can reach our shores from anywhere in the world, declining fish populations in various oceans, or – most tellingly – global climate change are threats to our national security.

To be more precise, we can imagine two different kinds of threats to our national security that have environmental origins. The first involves actions or events that threaten our nation directly, as global climate change would.

But, in fact, we can envision a much broader array of threats. We now are quite persuaded that unstable regions or failed states in almost any part of the world constitute a danger for us. As the NSS puts it: “America is now threatened less by conquering states than we are by failing ones.” And it does not take much imagination to imagine how competition over dwindling supplies of water food, and energy could produce widespread rioting and regional conflict, could push some areas of the planet into anarchy, and could produce warfare as resources are defended with a broad array of military strategies, including nuclear weapons.

If we read the language used by American leadership, we actually understand all of this. Three examples:

On Earth Day of 1998 Secretary of State Albright said “The threats we face from environmental harm are not as spectacular as those of a terrorist’s bomb or a missile. But we know that the health of our families will be affected by the health of the global environment. . . . And the security of our nation will be affected by whether we are able to prevent conflicts arising over scarce resources.

In the important 2002 document, National Security Strategy of the US (the “NSS”), President Bush notes that while poverty does not directly lead to terrorism “poverty, weak institutions and corruption can make weak states vulnerable to terrorist networks and drug cartels within their borders.”

In a July 2002 article Secretary of State Powell writes that “sustainable development is a security imperative. Poverty, destruction of the environment and despair are destroyers of people, of the society of nations – a cause of instability, an unholy trinity that can destabilize countries and entire regions.”

But we have to ask ourselves whether statements of this sort really govern American foreign policy thinking, whether they are more than politically correct rhetoric.

And I am afraid the answer is that mostly “it’s just talk”. Example: The current administration has quite correctly described the HIV/AIDS crisis in various parts of the world as a real threat to stability of countries and regions. And it has declared its intention to provide substantial funds. But in fact only a fraction of the promised funds have been sought or appropriated. The Defense Department does not suffer similar budget shortfalls

But the failure to connect the dots – to connect environmental risks and threats to our national security -- is best seen in the field of climate change. If there is any environmental threat that can harm the US, that meets all the tests of the definition of national security we described above, climate change is it.

Yet, we simply have no meaningful program –domestic or international – to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions in absolute terms in any near-term time frame. Neither the Pentagon’s report, nor earlier reports from the scientific community, such as the IPCC reports of those from the US National Academy of Science, triggered any reevaluation of our national strategy.

This brings us to the last question: Why is that? My European friends often suggest that the problem is fundamental: the US as a nation seems to lack the political will to address seriously a whole range of environmental issues – particularly those originating with our use of energy.

At this moment, there is some truth to this proposition. Right now, in the field of environment, at the national level we in the US are going backwards more often than forwards. This is particularly evident in the area of climate change, where we seem to have looked at the problem and decided that we would not do anything that is hard, anything that is even remotely proportional to the threat.

But I want to note that the broad proposition regarding the lack of political will in the US is not entirely right. At least not always. As a nation we have dealt seriously with a host of environmental issues, such as local air pollution, toxic substances in our society, acid rain. We took lead out of our gasoline earlier than our friends in Europe. Our control of pesticides is among the best. We have made progress under both Republican and Democratic administrations. And on the state or local front, we have many examples of successful innovation in dealing with issues such as local air pollution.

When all is said and done, however, we clearly have a problem in the US being as green as our own interest would seem to dictate. Why? Let me suggest five possible explanations. The first three are rather traditional efforts, and you will have heard them often:

The first one is historical. The new definition of national security has not taken hold. The political leadership has not managed to make the case that a redefinition of national security is needed, and the proposition has not been bought by most Americans.

One reason for that, I think, is that national security policy is still made largely by actors whose most formative foreign policy experience was the cold war, or earlier traumatic periods such as the World War II era.

A second explanation, often heard here in Europe, relates our attitude to our frontier mentality. Our nation grew up with plenty of space, and therefore we didn't need to be as respectful of the land as other nations.

A third explanation focuses on our individualism, our historic lack of confidence in the ability of government laws and regulations to fix things.

There is considerable merit in all three of these explanations. But let me suggest two others that strike me as possibly more fundamental and important – that can be seen most clearly perhaps when we look at differing attitudes on climate change.

The first has its origin in our political system. Our constitutional separation of powers between the executive and legislative branches means that however much the President may want a certain course of action; he cannot achieve his goal without bringing the legislature along. That is especially true in the treaty area, where the advice and consent of the Senate is required by our constitution.

Making environmental progress happen is made more difficult by the weakness of our political parties, and our system of financing Congressional campaigns. These factors combine to make our elected representatives even more locally oriented than those of other countries, and generally leave them heavily subject to influence by special groups. All countries have "special interests" to which the political process must pay attention. But our version of that is probably a heavier load.

And last, let me become much more speculative, and suggest one additional reason for the difference between the US and Europe. I'm not sure I really believe this, but I am intrigued by it. The difference is related to the fact that we in the US are a very religious country, and most of Europe is very secular. Our two populations – like people everywhere – seek sources that help them find the ethical roots of their beliefs. In the US we tend to turn to religion. In Europe, I

suggest, the source, the marker that determines responsible public conduct, is often responsible environmental behavior.

Let me end – and end on an optimistic note. One thing that I believe we have in our country is the power of self-correction. As I suggested, the current US position on climate change particularly seems to me highly irresponsible. But I am optimistic that – particularly as the relationship of this threat to our national security interest becomes clearer and stronger, we will find a way to become once again a responsible player in this arena.

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