Hot Air Over Kyoto
The United States and the Politics of Global Warming

The year 2001 has been the most turbulent year in international global-warming policy since the tumultuous final round of negotiations on the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in 1992. US President George W. Bush's decision in March to withdraw from further talks on the 1997 Kyoto Protocol may seem to be a potentially fatal blow to current international efforts to control greenhouse gas emissions. However, as the year draws to a close, the outlook for real progress is actually more mixed. The outlook is in many ways even more positive than it was in the final years of President Clinton's administration, which never mounted a serious campaign internationally or domestically after retreating from its public commitment to aggressive action on global warming within 24 hours of the successful conclusion of the Kyoto talks in December 1997.

The morning after the Kyoto agreement, Republican congressional leaders held a news conference declaring the Protocol "dead on arrival" in the US Senate, arguing that the document's failure to set binding emissions-reduction targets for China, India, and other major developing countries would economically disadvantage the United States. In response, the Clinton administration chose not to defend the Protocol's basic premise: industrialized nations, whose fossil fuel-based economic growth in the 20th century is largely responsible for today's increased level of greenhouse gas concentrations, should act first to curb their emissions growth. Instead, the White House announced that it would not send the agreement to the Senate for ratification without obtaining emissions-reduction commitments from key developing countries—a posture that directly contradicted the international negotiating position it had maintained for more than two years.

As it emerged from Kyoto, the Protocol was only a barebones framework of reduction targets and a hazy statement of the principles for meeting them. It would require several years of additional negotiations to build an international agreement on actual reduction mechanisms. But having trapped itself in a conflict between its international and domestic positions, the Clinton administration put the Kyoto process on a political back burner.

Progress at home also was slow in the wake of the Kyoto negotiations. While it was readily apparent that the debate over carbon dioxide emissions-reduction measures must begin quickly if the United States was to have any chance of meeting the targets it accepted at Kyoto, the Clinton administration never advanced a serious legislative proposal to begin the process. In August 1998, Vice President Al Gore summarily rejected a request from environmental organizations that the Clinton administration mount a fight in the US Congress to reduce emissions from electric utilities, which account for nearly 40 percent of US greenhouse gas emissions. Similarly, Clinton repeatedly signed into law Republican-sponsored riders to appropriations bills that barred the promulgation of new automobile fuel-efficiency standards.

To be fair, the Clinton White House faced a difficult domestic political situation. Control of both the House and Senate by Republicans closely allied with the oil, coal, utility, and automobile industries made domestic action to reduce carbon diox-
ide emissions difficult. This difficulty was compounded by alliances between a significant number of congressional Democrats and mining and autoworkers' unions. Achieving rapid ratification of an international global-warming agreement requiring a two-thirds Senate majority was clearly impossible under the circumstances. Breaking this complex knot of opposition over several years would have required a sustained commitment from the highest levels of the administration to spend a substantial amount of political capital on the issue.

That level of commitment, of course, was not forthcoming. Throughout 1998, scandal and impeachment absorbed much of the White House's energy. By the time the US Senate acquitted Clinton in January 1999, the 2000 presidential campaign was in its initial stages, intensifying a number of imperatives for the Clinton administration. As a domestic political issue, global warming had been strongly associated with Gore since the publication of his 1992 book, *Earth in the Balance*. Any new administration initiative on climate change, domestic or international, could be expected to be exploited by Gore's electoral opponents; his advisers were already concerned that the initial Kyoto Protocol itself would be a political liability. For three years, the oil, coal, utility, and automobile industries had been generating studies predicting economic disaster for the United States if the Protocol were implemented. Taking on the United Mine Workers and the United Auto Workers in a battle to reduce carbon emissions was similarly unattractive at a time when Gore was courting labor's support in both primary and general election contests. Global warming was an issue best kept off the political stage in the view of many, if not most, in the White House.

The political dynamics changed only after the 2000 election, when the sixth Conference of the Parties to the UNFCCC convened in The Hague at the height of the Florida recount controversy in the United States. With the possibility of a Bush presidency becoming more likely, the Clinton administration launched a last-minute push to resolve in two weeks a host of issues that had been left unsettled for three years. Unfortunately, European nations (with the exception of the United Kingdom) failed to recognize the implications of an incoming US administration headed by a president and vice president with oil-industry backgrounds who had opposed the Protocol during their electoral campaigns. In the end, the European Union allowed the talks to collapse over proposals that would have shrunk the US emission reduction commitment by 150 million tons out of 500 million tons total, a difference of 25 percent. Clinton worked aggressively to convince foreign leaders during the negotiations, but to no avail.

Thus, 2001 had opened with a very dark outlook for real progress on global warming. Three years had passed since the agreement on targets in Kyoto, with very little serious negotiating progress; the most recent round of talks had failed completely. No public challenge had been mounted to US congressional oppo-

Smoke gets in your eyes:
A demonstrator kisses her colleague outside the US embassy in Athens during a rally against US President George W. Bush's announcement not to ratify the Kyoto Protocol.

Photo Courtesy AFP/L. Goulamaki
ponents of the Kyoto Protocol, and most congressional supporters of the agreement remained silent. Finally, a new administration opposed to the Protocol was preparing to take office.

**The Early Bush Months**

Bush came to office with contradictory international and domestic positions on climate change. While he had vocally opposed the Kyoto Protocol as a threat to the US economy during his campaign, as president he embraced aggressive domestic emissions-reduction measures that the initiative may have been largely intended to protect him in the televised presidential debates from criticism of his poor record on cleaning up air pollution by Texas utilities, the inclusion of carbon emissions set the stage for a high-profile controversy over global warming that persisted through the first nine months of his administration.

Bush had been in office only a matter of weeks when Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Administrator Christine Todd Whitman’s restatement of Bush’s commitment to reduce carbon dioxide emissions touched off a storm of criticism from conservative Republicans. By mid-March, the White House could only calm the storm by releasing a letter from the president to a prominent congressional foe of carbon emissions reductions renouncing his campaign pledge. Soon afterwards, word leaked to the *Washington Post* of a private lunch held by European ambassadors in Washington at which the guest of honor, US National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, remarked that the Kyoto Protocol was “dead, as far as the President is concerned.” The *Post* also reported that the Bush White House had sought US State Department advice on procedures for reversing Clinton’s 1996 decision to sign the Protocol. At a subsequent press appearance, Bush reaffirmed the position taken by his national security adviser, ill-advisedly using the word “dead” himself to describe the Kyoto Protocol.

In a breathtakingly short time, these clumsily executed moves reversed years of assiduous and successful Clinton administration work to keep climate change out of the political spotlight. Instead, global warming was forced to the front of the president’s international and domestic agenda by the heavy criticism generated by the administration’s actions. For the European Union, US rejection of the Kyoto agreement was the first symptom of a new and highly objectionable “unilateralist” approach to foreign policy. This feeling was followed by similar Bush administration decisions to reject international agreements on biological weapons and trade in small arms, and by threats to exercise the six-month notice provi-

Clinton administration had never seriously considered. In trying to resolve this contradiction, the Bush administration inadvertently rearranged the entire US political landscape on global warming. Between March and July 2001, the Bush White House laid the foundation of a bipartisan coalition in the US Congress for mandatory carbon dioxide emissions reductions, effectively putting an end to the industry-promoted debate over the adequacy of climate-change science, and generated the political will among other industrialized nations to complete the Kyoto Protocol.

On September 29, 2000, in an energy policy speech in Lansing, Michigan, then-Governor Bush proposed a major departure from the voluntary emissions-reductions policies first embraced by his father’s administration almost a decade earlier. He proposed amending the Clean Air Act to require mandatory carbon dioxide emissions reductions from the nation’s utilities as part of a comprehensive program that would reduce emissions of other principal air pollutants as well. While
Protocol or to advocate aggressive domestic action to reduce emissions, largely due to opposition from labor. But the highly critical media coverage of the administration's rejection of the agreement and the reversal of the president's campaign pledge emboldened many to take far more outspoken positions. For example, House Democratic Leader Richard Gephardt, whose home state, Missouri, is second only to Michigan in automobile union membership, publicly called for ratification of the Protocol. Other Democrats lined up behind legislation to reduce power plant carbon dioxide emissions.

The administration's posture also galvanized support for international and domestic action on climate change among Republicans. Moderates from northeastern states, where the environment is a top-tier political issue, distanced themselves from the president. Then-Senate Environment and Public Works Committee Chairman Bob Smith (R-NH) made it clear that he supported a carbon dioxide emissions-reduction program for power plants and designated the legislation as a top priority for his panel. US Senator John McCain (R-AZ), Bush's 2000 primary opponent, joined with Senator Joe Lieberman (D-CT), the 2000 Democratic vice-presidential nominee, in calling for an economy-wide greenhouse gas emissions-reduction program.

On June 7, 2001, one of the Bush White House's principal efforts to justify reversal of the president's campaign pledge on power plants and rejection of the Kyoto Protocol backfired spectacularly. For the past decade, public-relations campaigns sponsored by the oil, coal, utility, and automobile industries have attempted to portray the scientific evidence of climate change as uncertain, touting the opinions of a handful of industry-funded scientists who dissent from a very broad international scientific consensus.

This year, the newly released assessment reports by the UN-sponsored Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), involving over 2,000 scientists in the United States and abroad, demonstrated with further scientific certainty that human contributions to atmospheric greenhouse gas concentrations are accelerating global warming. Having little personal background in the field, senior White House staff members accepted arguments by industry and conservative groups that the IPCC reports did not reflect the views of mainstream US scientists. In May 2001, John M. Bridgeland, deputy assistant to the president for domestic policy, and Gary Edson, deputy assistant for international economic affairs, requested a "fast-track" review of climate change science from the National Academy of Sciences, questioning the IPCC studies. Only days before Bush's first meeting with European heads of government in Gothenburg, Sweden, where the Kyoto Protocol would rise as a principal issue, an 11-member Academy panel released its report. It was an authoritative rebuff to earlier administration statements questioning the IPCC's assessments: the panel reaffirmed the mainstream scientific conclusion that "greenhouse gases are accumulating in earth's atmosphere as a result of human activities, causing surface air temperatures and subsurface ocean temperatures to rise." The scientists also warned that "national policy decisions made now and in the longer-term future will influence the extent of any damage suffered by vulnerable human populations and ecosystems later in the century." Ironically, Acad-
emy panels had taken this position in earlier reports, of which both the Bush White House and many reporters were unaware. The White House-initiated review, so clearly an embarrassment to the administration, generated headlines and editorials all over the

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nounced on July 23 that substantially completed the Protocol.

**Dynamics of 2002**

While there are no public indications today that the Bush administration is considering softening its

position on the Kyoto Protocol or domestic emissions reductions, political pressures for it to do so are likely to intensify over the coming year. For one, 2002 is a critical congressional election year for both parties: Republicans control the House by a razor-thin margin and Democrats control the Senate only by courtesy of Vermont’s James Jeffords, now an Independent. While many of the Democrats’ most popular domestic issues were temporarily swept off the table by the September 11 terrorist attacks, it is unlikely that the 90-percent presidential approval ratings from which Republicans are benefiting will survive through next November. (Bush senior enjoyed similar ratings following the Gulf War in 1991, but went on to be defeated in his re-election bid the following year.) As the ship of state rights itself and elections loom, national security may remain by far the most prominent national issue, but it is unlikely to remain the only one of concern to voters.

The Bush administration certainly recognizes that a significant amount of repair work must be done to its environmental image. Bush’s flurry of press conferences in national parks during the spring and summer did not move his poll numbers on environmental issues at all; those in the White House arguing that the problem is not policy but presentation have now seen their message-only approach fail. One important early sign of preparation for the 2002 congressional elections was Whitman’s about-face on standards for arsenic in drinking water: in a Washington Post interview on September 10, she said she would not

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country. Even the most prominent congressional skeptics were forced to admit that science had reached a stage where action was required. US Senator Chuck Hagel (R-NB), the leading Senate opponent of the Protocol, told the New York Times, “This report does provide us with enough evidence to move forward in a responsible, reasonable way to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.”

The administration’s declaration that the Kyoto Protocol was “dead” also produced unexpected results at the negotiating table. European governments that had rejected even minor modifications to the Kyoto emissions-reduction targets during The Hague talks were suddenly forced to confront the reality that the entire agreement might collapse if the Protocol were not completed in July at the next negotiating session in Bonn, Germany. And while Bush pledged not to obstruct the Bonn meeting, US administration officials identified Japan as the weakest link among industrialized nations and worked to convince the new government of Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi to await a US proposal before agreeing to anything in Bonn. In the end, this effort failed: in order to save the treaty, European governments made substantial concessions to the Japanese—concessions that would have been unthinkable six months earlier in the Hague—and an agreement was an-
At the same time, the international dynamic around the Kyoto Protocol has intensified. British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who has assumed the role of the administration’s strongest international supporter in anti-terrorism efforts, has made clear both publicly and in private meetings with US administration officials since September 11 that a cooperative US policy on global warming is a high priority to him. His views will be very difficult for the president to ignore. Germany and France, both of whom have strong supporters in the aftermath of the attacks, offering participation by their troops, are also among the strongest backers of Kyoto.

Equally important, following legal text negotiations in Marrakech in October and November, the European Union and many other nations will proceed to formal ratification. Japan recently informed US State Department officials that Japanese ratification will swiftly follow the Marrakech talks. This creates a difficult international situation with potential domestic political consequences: in September 2002, less than two months before the US congressional elections, world leaders will meet at the second “Earth Summit” in Johannesburg, South Africa, to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the Rio summit. Global warming will be a high-profile issue at the meeting, and Bush faces the prospect of appearing at home to be isolated and out-of-step on the environment once again. Ironically, this is exactly the situation his father faced at Rio before the 1992 elections, when he rejected provisions of the draft UNFCCC that required binding emissions-reduction targets.

Getting Bush on Board

If international pressure is to be successful in softening the Bush administration’s position on agreeing to a binding international agreement on carbon dioxide emissions reductions, the United States must be given a face-saving means of rejoining the international community on this issue. There is a way to accomplish the above goal that, at the same time, acknowledges a fundamental reality. The United States cannot now meet the reductions targets agreed to in Kyoto four years ago. A reduction from business-as-usual emissions of more than 30 percent by approximately 2010 was ambitious, even if the Clinton administration had begun to press Congress immediately for action on domestic emissions reductions. Now, following the September 11 attacks, there is simply no indication that the United States can reach that goal. If Congress completed legislation mandating such reductions by the end of 2002—not in itself likely—completing regulations implementing the law would take at least two years. Industries facing reductions would then be only three years away from the Protocol’s first budget period (2008-2012) and meeting the targets would be physically impossible.

It is critical at this point that the European Union, Japan, and other nations recognize this reality—something that will be politically difficult for them at home. But such a recognition would allow the Bush administration to come back to the table: Bush has consistently argued that the Kyoto targets would have a serious economic impact on the United States, but his administration has equally consistently supported the flexible international trading mechanism that have been negotiated to implement the Protocol. In addition, utilities facing the prospect of mandated emissions reductions have begun to make the case that access to the international mechanisms is critical to their ability to make cost-effective carbon dioxide emissions reductions. Making it clear to the Bush White House that US proposals to join the Protocol in the second budget period would be looked upon favorably would provide a politically palatable resolution to the situation. This would allow the Bush administration to join the agreement while renegotiating the targets agreed to by its predecessor.

The turbulence of 2001 has almost completely altered the political landscape around global-warming issues, and 2002 offers critical opportunities to capitalize on these changes. They must be lost. The next year may produce a unique political dynamic and the best foreseeable opportunity to shift US policy onto a constructive path. The European Union, in particular, must participate in creating an atmosphere that both presses for change and shapes a constructive US response.

The United States must partner with others around the world on a program to develop alternative energy systems. The technological revolution needed for the urgent move to a hydrogen economy, for example, coupled with increased national investment in research for environmentally safe transportation, would yield huge results for the global environment. Such a far-reaching program would have a major stimulative effect for the world economy and would place the United States again in a position of genuine global vision and leadership.