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The Theater of Climate Change

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If this were play'd upon a stage now, I could condemn it as an improbable fiction.

—William Shakespeare, Twelfth Night, Act 3, Scene 4

In a season of failure the United Nations’ climate change initiatives have suffered yet another serious blow. On Feb. 18 the U.N.’s top climate change official, Yvo de Boer, announced that he would resign his post before treaty negotiations resumed later this year. The announcement climaxed a series of developments that demonstrated that the climate change movement is still in “free fall” since the debacle in Copenhagen last December. Unless the movement can somehow find a diplomatic parachute on the way down, a hard and perhaps fatal landing seems inevitable.

Even in resignation, de Boer remains incredibly unrealistic. He insists that an agreement was “basically in our grasp,” that the delegates were “about an inch away from a formal agreement” and that the derailed negotiations remain “on track.” As an eyewitness to Copenhagen’s failure, I wonder whether de Boer and I attended the same convocation. From the beginning of the Denmark negotiations, it was plain that nothing would happen unless China and its “G-77” retinue of “developing” nations would agree to strict verification and accountability regarding the trillions of dollars they demanded from the United States and other “developed” economies. De Boer conceded as much before the conference opened but inexplicably adopted an optimistic tone throughout its progress. Instead of frank negotiations, de Boer chose to pursue the politics of perception, hoping that the illusion of collegiality would pressure developed countries to fund massive subsidies without reasonable oversight. When this naïve plan failed, neither de Boer nor anyone else could salvage a binding agreement.
The fiasco in Copenhagen revealed a great truth behind the international and, for that matter, national, climate change movements. At their core, the movements are more concerned about transferring wealth than they are about creating or preserving it. Internationally, this is exemplified by the pleas of opaque, despotic and even genocidal nations, such as Sudan, for unsupervised financial transusions.

Although these subsidies are supposedly targeted at climate change mitigation and adaptation, a regime that cannot be trusted by its own people surely cannot be relied upon by foreign donors. It is telling that Lumumba Di-Aping, the Sudanese negotiator for the G-77 group of developing nations, reportedly wept at a meeting with some of his constituents when unpoliced subsidies proved unavailable. The incongruity between those lamentations and Sudan’s historical reluctance to admit U.N. peacekeepers to protect innocent Darfuri lives was especially troubling.

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Of course, not every nation lies at Sudan’s extremes, but given the amounts of aid under consideration, those who desire assistance must not only specify clearly defined projects, but also provide verifiable guarantees that the funding actually will be used either to serve the universal climate or to provide truly necessary adaptations to climate-induced problems. Despite this obvious requirement, the “developing” economies (apparently supported by the U.N. climate hierarchy) feigned shock and outrage when the United States and others insisted on accountability. Although China’s initial demands for assistance were outrageous enough (in view of its $2 trillion reserve of U.S. currency), its determination to serve as “leader” of the “developing” G-77 group was even more implausible.

Late in the game, China finally dropped its financial demands but maintained its opacity to verifiable emissions targets. The lack of transparency by a country labeled by many as a “leader” in the negotiations set a precedent for wide resistance by the nations that China professed to represent. By tolerating this roadblock without substantial criticism, the international climate change movement revealed a clear preoccupation with wealth redistribution and a corresponding indifference to guaranteeing the reversal of global warming.

In the United States, the climate change lobby shares similar views. Irrespective of whether any international agreement is possible, these advocates are determined to pursue unilateral climate change laws and regulations even though U.S. unilateralism cannot meaningfully slow or reverse climate changes. Indeed, unilateral measures will burden U.S. industries with phonebook-sized legal codes, increase compliance costs, generate substantial government enforcement and encourage the flight of American jobs to less demanding overseas locations. Most dangerously, unilateralism will empower less regulated economies, such as China and India, and they will secure significant competitive advantages.

Against these adverse effects, the U.S. climate change movement promises an improbable fiction. To achieve the altruistic salvation of the planet, the movement seeks a profitable migration of capital and public investment to develop “green technologies,” “green jobs” and ultimately, a “green economy.” The goals may be admirable when viewed in a “green vacuum” or with “green blinders,” but destroying the nation’s current energy infrastructure in a race to achieve them is madness. This is especially true when none of the proffered “alternative sources,” either separately or collectively, are remotely capable of meeting our needs in the foreseeable future.

While the Obama administration makes war on fossil fuels, obstructs traditional exploration and production, and pursues confiscatory tax policies against private capital, it offers nothing but hope and uninformed optimism to encourage consumers who will feel the bite of artificially diminished resources. Such hope is truly audacious, but it offers no comfort, minimal security, and little warmth to citizens left out in the cold.

Since unilateralism promises nothing to avert planetary disasters, and since the fabled “green economy” is, at least presently, an elusive myth, one can only conclude that there must be another agenda: wealth redistribution for its own sake. If any other result is intended, it has not been credibly articulated. Unless a realistic, reliable and transparent program
for replacing our wealth is created, siphoning current resources will diminish and ultimately extinguish American prosperity.

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Now that the fears of global warming are subsiding, and now that the political climate permits a reasoned dialogue, the American people are entitled to far more than platitudes, posturing, palliative rhetoric and political bickering. They are entitled to a clear explanation of why they should sacrifice their resources. They are entitled to understand why existing industries and jobs should be marginalized in favor of a dream that, in its present form, cannot be realized.

Americans understand sacrifice, and they will accept privation if they believe that their resources will be used responsibly to protect and further the greater good. After all, Americans have previously pursued and realized dreams once thought to be science fiction, most notably by placing men on the moon. If reducing greenhouse gas emissions is an equally laudable goal, it must be done in the same rational, focused and sustainable manner, and the goals of the program must foster our national economy, not jeopardize it.

For all their rhetoric, America’s current crop of “green leaders” failed to energize the public’s resolve. Instead of focused diligence, the public hears of endless options. Instead of targeted efforts, the people perceive a host of interconnected ideas gathered under an incredibly expensive umbrella of hope. Instead of resolve, citizens see uncertainty, doubt and unquantified risks. Although Americans are famous for taking informed risks, they are not known, like lemmings, for following their leaders over the cliff.

In the final analysis, neither responsible nations nor prudent individuals will spend money without guarantees that the funds will be used responsibly to achieve the purpose for which they were intended. As Yvo de Boer discovered too late, dramatic hype and theatrical hyperbole may prompt emotional reactions, but diplomatic achievements, especially those involving gigantic sums of money, are motivated by sober reflections and economic realities. Many American leaders may soon learn, to their dismay, that the same principles govern American politics.

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