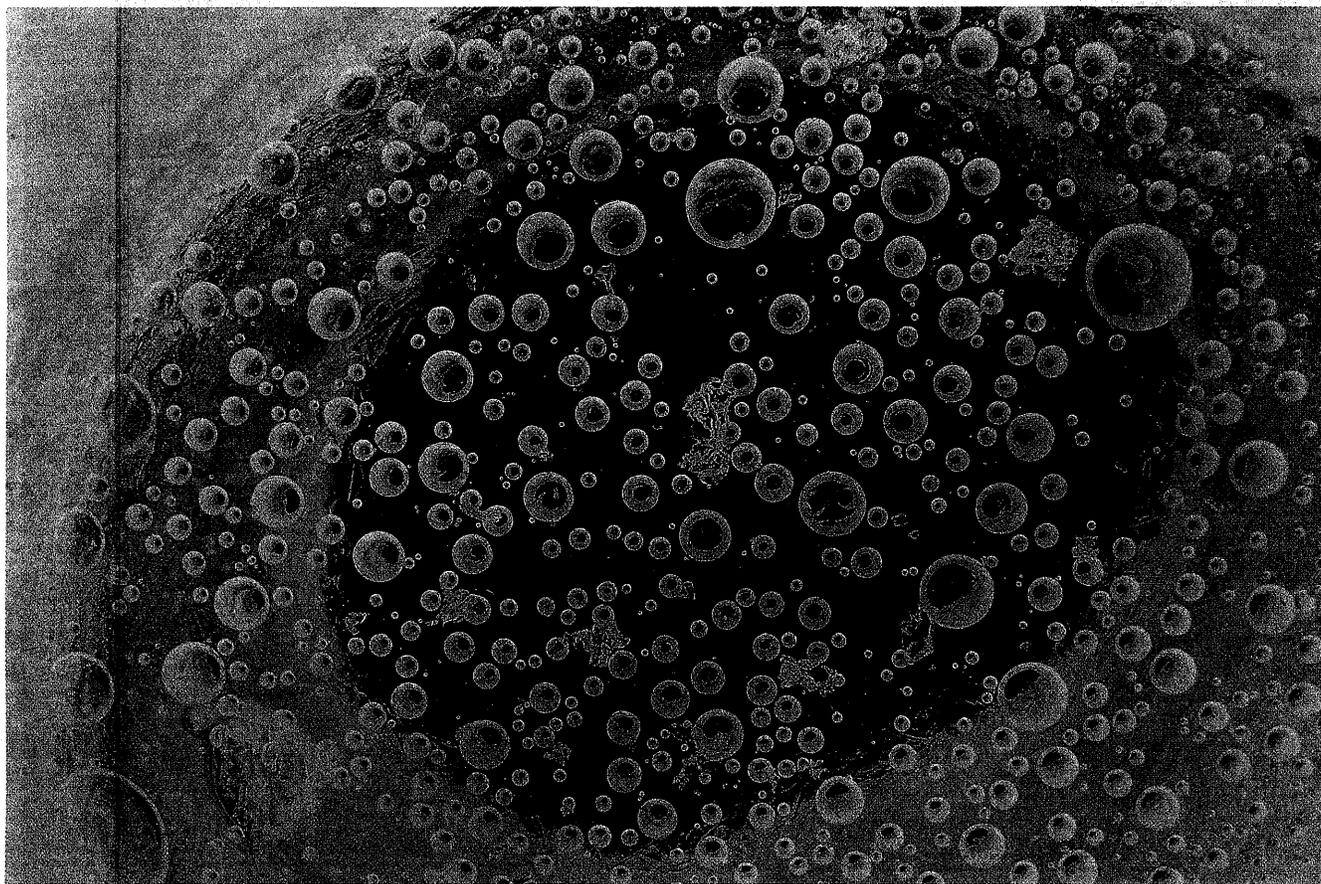


# PROMISES, PROMISES

Can Obama redeem his environmental failures?

By Mark Hertsgaard



**J**ohn Podesta first began advising Barack Obama in the summer of 2008, when the junior senator's improbable rise from mixed-race son of a single mother to president of the United States was acquiring a giddy sense of inevitability. Climate change

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was a top concern for Podesta—and, it seemed, for Obama himself. In July, a group of experts informally representing the Democratic candidate traveled to Beijing for confidential talks with Chinese officials, hoping to foster a new era of climate cooperation after eight years of obstruction on the part of the Bush Administration.

Podesta, who as White House chief

of staff had steered Bill Clinton's presidency through the impeachment crisis, soon became Obama's transition manager, helping him identify and vet prospective Cabinet members and other high-ranking officials. "I fought very hard to create a separate office [in the White House] for climate and energy," Podesta told me. And the person initially chosen to run that office—the

Bubbles of air trapped in snowstorms 5,000 to 10,000 years ago emerge from an ice sheet melting as deposits of soot and small rock particles, or cryoconite, increase heat absorption © James Balog/Aurora Photos

former EPA administrator Carol Browner—was, in Podesta's opinion, "extraordinarily well qualified."

But when I interviewed Podesta last November, he did not pretend that Obama's climate record as president had been satisfactory. Seated at his kitchen table in Washington, D.C., Podesta was dressed in running clothes; at age sixty-five, he still competes in marathons. I began by asking, "How will history judge President Obama on climate change, if history is still being written fifty years from now?"

Obama will be viewed as someone "who tried to address the challenge," replied Podesta. He was willing to take risks and expend political capital on the issue—a rare and commendable thing. "But fifty years from now, is that going to seem like enough? I think the answer to that is going to be no."

Of course, the president faced bitter opposition from the Republicans. But Podesta believed that some of Obama's top aides shared the blame for his lackluster record. "There were people inside the White House in the first two years who were not there" on climate change, he said. Their attitude was dismissive at best: "Yeah, fine, fine, fine, but it's ninth on our list of eight really important problems."

"You headed his transition team," I pointed out. "Do you feel any responsibility for helping select those people?" "Which people?"

I mentioned that Rahm Emanuel, the White House chief of staff during Obama's first two years in office, was frequently accused of being climate non-enthusiast number one. Lawrence Summers, the president's chief economic adviser, was criticized in similar terms.

Podesta stared at me in silence, then he asked if we might speak off the record. We did. When we returned, he limited himself to noting that decisions about the economic team and its policies were "made by the president, and they were not made around the question of climate change. We were in the middle of a fiscal crisis."

What Podesta did not tell me in November—perhaps he didn't know yet—was that he would soon return to Obama's inner circle to try to salvage his climate legacy: in January, he

began serving as White House counsel. Since then, the president seems to have begun tackling the issue with renewed vigor. In his 2014 State of the Union address, he framed it as a moral imperative, pledging to "do everything we could" to leave our grandchildren "a safe, stable climate." And in June, the EPA is scheduled to announce what may be among Obama's furthest-reaching initiatives: new regulations on the greenhouse gases emitted by the nation's 1,500 power plants, historically the largest source of U.S. carbon pollution.

But Podesta seemed to realize, if only privately, that Obama had a long way to go on climate change. In November, the once and future presidential aide told me that Obama would likely go down in history as someone "who couldn't break through contemporary politics to the place we need to go."<sup>1</sup>

Obama's record on climate change is important not only for the obvious reason that everyone on earth requires a livable planet, but also because his approach to the climate issue reflects a great deal about his presidency as a whole. As much as his handling of the economy, health care, or foreign policy, it illuminates both his early promise and his subsequent shortfalls; both the victories won and the defeats suffered, the blunders committed and the mysteries begging explanation.

As I rushed to Grant Park to cover Obama's victory speech in 2008, I saw group after group of people in their twenties streaming through the streets of Chicago, their faces flushed with elation, chanting, "Yes we did!" It was the young, after all, who were largely responsible for his victory. They made up the bulk of the volunteer army that did so much—from raising record amounts of money online to registering more than 800,000 new voters—to give the nation its first African-American president.

And they did so in no small part because of what the candidate said about climate change, which polls showed was a major preoccupation of

<sup>1</sup> President Obama, through a White House spokesman, declined to comment.

voters under age thirty-five, regardless of party affiliation. There was the poetry of Obama pledging, on the night he clinched the Democratic Party's nomination, that this would be remembered as "the moment when the rise of the oceans began to slow." More pragmatically, there was his endorsement of tough, ambitious policies, including making polluters pay for the right to emit carbon and cutting greenhouse-gas emissions by 80 percent by 2050.

When Obama took the stage in Chicago, flashing that incandescent smile and flanked by his wife and daughters, he did not disappoint his young supporters. "A planet in peril," he announced, would be one of his top three priorities. This was a first. By implicitly giving climate change equal status with the economic melt-down and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, Obama was elevating it to a level of importance no previous U.S. president had granted.

So why, aside from the demands of the financial crisis, did he change course so completely? For many of his supporters, it's something of a puzzle. "It was as if the issue evaporated into thin air," said Lee Wasserman, the director of the Rockefeller Family Fund.

To be sure, Obama took some important steps to combat climate change once he was elected. He included an unprecedented \$80 billion for clean energy in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), the stimulus bill that passed a month after he took office. The legislation was primarily viewed as a life preserver for a foundering economy, but as the journalist Michael Grunwald writes in *The New Deal: The Hidden Story of Change in the Obama Era* (2012), it was also "the biggest and most transformative energy bill in U.S. history."

"We'll look back and say, 'That was a turning point,'" Carol Browner told me. Renewable-energy executives and analysts agree. ARRA's ample investment in green technologies lowered production costs and market barriers, stimulating the extraordinary spike in wind and especially solar power over the past five years. By 2013, the cost of rooftop solar was falling so rapidly that Jon Wellinghoff, then the chair of the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission,

was telling reporters that it was “going to overtake everything.”

There were also the tougher fuel-efficiency rules that Obama mandated when his administration rescued the failing U.S. auto industry. Gina McCarthy, who succeeded Lisa Jackson as EPA chief in 2013, told me that the new standards will produce “one of the biggest reductions in carbon pollution that this country has seen.” She put the number at about 6 billion metric tons—an amount equal to the emissions of the entire United States in 2010.

Last but not least, the White House gave its blessing to legislation cosponsored by Representatives Henry Waxman of California and Edward Markey of Massachusetts that aimed to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions through a “cap and trade” system. Obama, however, largely kept his distance from the bill, declining to give a major speech or otherwise use the bully pulpit to educate the American people about the issue. And his willingness to water down the bill was an early indication that the president would be backpedaling from his transcendent campaign promises.

**H**enry Waxman introduced the American Clean Energy and Security Act on the House floor on May 15, 2009. The bill’s endorsement of cap and trade was championed by the U.S. Climate Action Partnership (USCAP), a coalition of large corporate polluters such as General Electric and Duke Power, along with three large, Washington-based conservation organizations: the Environmental Defense Fund, the Natural Resource Defense Council, and the National Wildlife Federation.

Despite the imprimatur of these groups, the Waxman–Markey bill was much less popular with grassroots environmentalists across the country than with their Beltway counterparts. One reason for this was the complexity of cap and trade, a market-based, loophole-susceptible system that essentially turns the right to pollute into a commodity. As one activist who tried to rally support for the bill complained, “Most people don’t support cap and trade. They can’t even understand it.”

A second criticism of the Waxman–Markey bill was that it undermined the Clean Air Act—and here we encounter one of the towering ironies of Obama’s climate policy. On paper, he has all the authority he needs to slash U.S. greenhouse-gas emissions. Indeed, he has not just the authority but the *obligation* to do so, according to the Clean Air Act. The verb the act repeatedly employs is “shall”—as in “must.”

Signed into law by President Richard Nixon in December 1970, just months after 20 million Americans filled the streets on the inaugural Earth Day demanding government action, the amended Clean Air Act is arguably the most powerful and far-reaching environmental statute ever enacted in this country. It says that Americans have an absolute right to clean air—so absolute that economic considerations, such as the cost of a given pollution-abatement technology, shall play no role in the government’s decision-making. Moreover, the act explicitly states that regulations should be “technology forcing”—that is, they should push industry to go beyond its normal practices and devise new solutions that deliver the stipulated public-health benefits. That’s how Americans got catalytic converters on their cars in the 1970s, for example.

To attract enough votes to pass Waxman–Markey on Capitol Hill, however, the Obama Administration dangled the prospect of a weakened Clean Air Act. This tactic was not lost on environmental advocates. “Of course we noticed,” said Lisa Heinzerling, an EPA administrator from 2009 to 2010 and Jackson’s senior adviser on climate policy. “There was a White House strategy of using the EPA as a scary monster in the closet. If you don’t pass a cap-and-trade bill, then the EPA will regulate greenhouse-gas emissions through the Clean Air Act and [that] will be much harder and less flexible.”

Waxman–Markey eliminated the EPA’s authority under the Clean Air Act to limit greenhouse-gas emissions from a specific power plant or other major polluter. Defenders of the bill said such restrictions were substantively unimportant and politi-

cally unavoidable. After all, the bill established a nationwide limit on emissions, so it did not much matter if this or that individual facility kept polluting—such a facility’s owners would be required to pay for a corresponding amount of emissions reductions elsewhere. In any case, without such restrictions on the Clean Air Act, energy companies and their allies in Congress would simply sink the bill.<sup>2</sup>

“There were only a few instances in which Clean Air Act authority was curtailed,” Waxman told me. “Don’t restrict anything, was my position. But you have to make compromises to pass any piece of legislation.” Waxman emphasized that, under his proposal, every coal-fired power plant built in 2020 or thereafter would be required to include “carbon-capture-and-sequestration” technology—filters that would collect the plant’s greenhouse-gas emissions for storage underground, where they could not warm the atmosphere.

As the search for votes proceeded, fossil-fuel interests demanded and got giveaways that went well beyond the Clean Air Act restrictions. Obama’s earlier requirement that polluters be compelled to pay to emit carbon was largely reversed, instead granting them free allowances to continue business as usual. In addition, “cost-containment measures” were inserted that would suspend the bill’s mandates if fossil-fuel prices rose too high. What “started as a horse ended up a camel,” said Larry Schweiger, the president of the National Wildlife Federation, who ultimately withdrew his group from the USCAP coalition.

<sup>2</sup> Carol Browner argued that the Clean Air Act was far from gutted. It was under the act’s provisions, she insisted, that the Obama Administration had mandated tougher standards not only for automobile fuel efficiency but also for new power plants. “What we got on cars is huge,” Browner said. “If you buy a new car today, it’s more efficient because of President Obama.” But Kassie Siegel, the director of the Center for Biological Diversity’s Climate Law Institute, told me that the new efficiency standards fell short of what both science and law dictated—that however stringent they sounded, they were “low-hanging fruit” for an auto industry already moving in that direction.

None of this deterred industry opponents from turning Waxman-Markey into a punching bag. Dubbing the measure “cap and tax,” the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the American Petroleum Institute, and the ascendant Tea Party blasted it as a hideous example of Obama’s socialistic plan to demonize business and impoverish hardworking Americans.

With the help of some arm-twisting from Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, the bill squeaked through the lower chamber by a vote of 219 to 212 on June 26. But it was so discredited in the process, and its opposition grew so strong, that it never made it to the Senate floor. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid withdrew it a year later.

“The biggest shock to me,” Waxman told me, “was that we took the idea for this bill from the U.S. Climate Action Partnership, which had on its board the CEOs of major industries, [yet] the business community was so unable to influence the party that calls itself the party of business.”

When I spoke to Steven Biel, a lobbyist for the liberal advocacy group MoveOn at the time Waxman-Markey was under consideration, he lambasted the Democrats’ strategic failure. “I understand the political logic of getting the polluters on board to help push the bill through,” Biel said. “But you can’t win a political fight in which you have a strong opposition and you give away your base on day one.” Worse, he added, was that advocates of climate action were defeated not only on Capitol Hill but also on the battleground of public opinion. “On the question of whether climate change was real, man-made, and serious, we lost about twenty points during the debate—when our guy had the megaphone. That’s not supposed to happen!”

Continuing this retreat in the fall of 2009, White House officials refused to say until the last minute whether Obama would even attend, much less lead, the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen in December 2009. This summit was widely described as humanity’s “last, best chance” to avoid catastrophe. The president ended up

spending a mere twenty-four hours in Copenhagen, where he delivered perhaps the worst speech of his young presidency. Flat, sour, lecturing, the tone of the address suggested a bad case of jet lag.

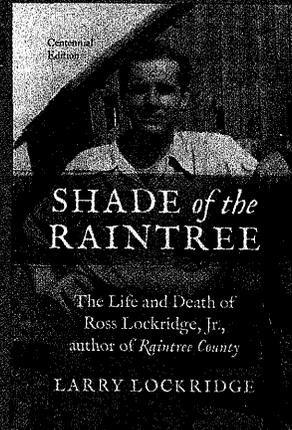
The content was even worse. By 2020, Obama promised, the United States would reduce its emissions by 17 percent from 2005 levels. That sounded impressive, but in fact the president was blatantly moving the goalposts. The standard base year in such comparisons, long employed by governments, scientists, journalists, and climate advocates around the world, was not 2005 but 1990. Measured from that year, Obama’s promised cuts shrank to less than 4 percent—hardly a strong enough commitment to stop the rising oceans in their tracks.

“President Obama has a way with words that works for the media, for the general public,” Richard Klein, a policy analyst at the Stockholm Environment Institute, told me after we watched the speech in Copenhagen. “But it doesn’t work for seasoned negotiators who know the ins and outs of these issues.” The ensuing talks yielded no mandatory emissions cuts or binding agreements, and the summit was widely condemned as a failure.

After the Copenhagen debacle, Obama went downright mute on the climate issue. He did, however, speak glowingly about his “all of the above” energy strategy. Like cap and trade, this was an idea that Republicans originated. Embracing it enabled Obama to advocate “a balanced approach”—a phrase that soon became one of the president’s favorites as he groped for compromise on federal budget deliberations, immigration reform, and other initiatives. On the one hand, such an approach meant increased support for solar, wind, and other environmentally friendly technologies in the stimulus bill. But it also meant even more generous support for oil, natural gas, and coal—or, as Obama called it, “clean coal” (a term coined by the coal industry that had as much relationship to truth as “healthy arsenic”).

A telling moment came in September 2011, when the president declared

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that he had personally ordered the EPA to withdraw a proposed regulation on ground-level ozone. According to the agency, this regulation would have annually prevented as many as 12,000 premature deaths, 5,300 heart attacks, and 58,000 asthma attacks (particularly among children).

Obama attributed his decision to concern for America's struggling economy. "I have continued to underscore the importance of reducing regulatory burdens and regulatory uncertainty, particularly as our economy continues to recover," he said. Some observers suggested the move had more to do with wanting to carry coal-dependent Midwestern states in 2012. In any case, the announcement was a humiliating reversal for Lisa Jackson, who had promised to overhaul the existing ozone standard, put in place by Obama's predecessor. Jackson resigned the following year.

"Here was a decision by the Bush Administration that was illegal, based on bad science," said the former EPA administrator Lisa Heinzerling. It was also, in its reliance on projected economic effects, "bad public-health policy." A 2001 Supreme Court ruling had actually forbidden the EPA to take the costs of ambient-air-quality regulations into consideration; public health was supposed to be the sole criterion. "So if there was one standard that [the White House] should not have messed with, it was that one," said Heinzerling. The effect of the president himself overturning the regulation after EPA staff had spent two and a half years preparing it, she added, was reportedly crushing for the agency's mission and its workers' morale.

Obama's willingness to placate the energy industry also figured in one of the signature moments of his 2012 reelection bid. On March 22, he traveled to Cushing, Oklahoma, a major oil-transport hub that was the terminus for the second leg of the proposed Keystone XL, the pipeline designed to carry tar-sands crude from Alberta to the Gulf of Mexico. Standing before a huge stack of pipes, Obama bragged that "America is producing more oil today than at any time in the last

eight years." He noted that his administration had helped open up millions of acres for gas and oil exploration: "We've quadrupled the number of rigs to a record high [and] added enough new oil and gas pipeline to encircle the earth and then some."

Climate advocates were outraged. "Instead of listening to the scientists, he has embraced this balancing act that tries to please everybody," said Betsy Taylor, a philanthropic adviser and president of Breakthrough Strategies, a consulting company. "So one day [the White House's message is] better energy efficiency. The next day it's, 'Let's drill in the Arctic, now that it's melted.'"

Since winning his second term, Obama has promised, publicly and repeatedly, to resume the climate fight. Hurricane Sandy helped. The 2012 election took place a week after the storm hit much of the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic. Its assault on New York City in particular, the headquarters of the U.S. news media, made climate change real to many journalists who had previously disregarded it. *Bloomberg Businessweek* responded with a cover story: "It's Global Warming, Stupid." And in his first postelection news conference, Obama vowed to lead "a national conversation" about climate change.

He kicked off that conversation with his 2013 State of the Union address, in which he made clear that he would no longer wait on science-denying Republicans. "If Congress won't act soon," the president said, "I will." Five months later, in a much-touted speech at Georgetown University, Obama unveiled his Climate Action Plan. He repeated his unambitious pledge from Copenhagen to reduce emissions by 17 percent from 2005 levels, drawing applause from an audience that was clearly unaware of his goalpost-shifting techniques. He praised the EPA for announcing regulations that, as a practical matter, made the construction of new coal-fired power plants highly unlikely. (He did not mention that grassroots activists, along with the falling price of natural gas, had already achieved this goal, blocking 164 proposed coal plants by 2012—arguably the greatest climate victory

of the Obama years.) Finally, the president thrilled climate activists by vowing to approve the Keystone pipeline only if it did not "significantly exacerbate the problem of carbon pollution."

If the president does eventually approve the pipeline, "he gets an F," said Van Jones, a green-jobs adviser under Obama until an attack by Glenn Beck led him to resign in 2009. If Obama departs the Oval Office having held the pipeline at bay, "he maybe moves up to a B minus." (In April, the State Department announced that it would delay any decision on Keystone until a lawsuit regarding the pipeline's route through Nebraska is resolved.)

"I'm not ready to write him off yet," said Elijah Zarlín, who as an Obama campaign worker in 2008 drafted the fund-raising emails that brought in an unprecedented flood of small-scale contributions. "I helped elect the man, and deep down I still hold out the hope he'll do it. But if he continues on the current trajectory—the 'all of the above' energy strategy—then I think history will judge [his climate policy] as one of the biggest squandered opportunities of our time."

No fair evaluation of Obama's record can ignore that he has encountered some of the most ideologically hostile, historically entrenched, and deep-pocketed opposition ever faced by an American president. In the case of climate change, however, he has faced an additional and very specific obstacle. To take action on a scale commensurate with the problem would put him on a collision course with the richest business enterprise of the modern era: the oil industry.

Big Oil's perennial sway in Washington helps explain the climate hole that the newly elected president found himself in. Under Republicans and Democrats alike, Washington had bowed for so long to the political muscle and financial inducements of the fossil-fuel industry that the United States had become by far the world's largest source of cumulative greenhouse-gas emissions. (Around the time Obama entered office, China overtook the United States as the

largest source of net *annual* emissions, but it is cumulative emissions that drive global warming.) The U.S. refusal to limit its emissions gave China and other emerging economies the perfect excuse to shun limits as well. Global emissions skyrocketed, and Obama was confronted with a climate system that was deteriorating almost as rapidly as the financial system was. (By May 2014, scientists would report that part of the West Antarctica ice sheet was “irreversibly” melting, which could cause sea levels to rise an additional four feet over the next 200 years.) To stop or even slow the disaster, Obama would have to lead a virtual U-turn in global policy.

But he would also have to overcome a central contradiction in his own climate policy. On the one hand, he has endorsed the industry-friendly “balanced approach.” On the other, he has officially committed the United States to limit global warming to two degrees Celsius above the level that prevailed before the Industrial Revolution—or, as the former NASA scientist James Hansen has written, the level at “which our civilization developed and to which life on earth is adapted.” Although media reports sometimes describe 2°C as the threshold between safe and unsafe, the latest science disputes this distinction. Britain’s Royal Society has recently concluded that such an increase would cross the threshold between a “dangerous” and an “extremely dangerous” amount of global warming. The World Bank warned in 2012 that the planet is on track for *four* degrees of temperature rise by 2100, a scenario it described as cataclysmic.

“The president says that fighting climate change is a moral obligation as well as a matter of national security and economic competitiveness,” said Michael Brune, the executive director of the Sierra Club, the nation’s largest environmental organization. “But he has an energy policy in direct conflict with all those goals.”

Mainstream research institutions, including the International Energy Agency and the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, have declared that the 2°C target will require leaving at least two thirds of the earth’s remaining fossil-

fuel reserves underground. “You can’t simultaneously say we have to cut carbon pollution and then maximize the amount of carbon coming out of the ground,” said Brune. “You don’t go on a diet by shopping for more Twinkies at Safeway.”

The Obama aides I interviewed seemed unable to square the president’s energy policies with the 2°C target. John Holdren, the president’s science adviser, declined to answer the question. Carol Browner initially assured me that future historians would say Obama “made a real down payment on reducing greenhouse-gas emissions.” But asked if Obama’s actions in total, including his massive expansion of fossil-fuel production, were consistent with hitting the target, Browner paused at length. “Wow, I don’t know,” she replied in a doubting tone. “I don’t know about two degrees.”

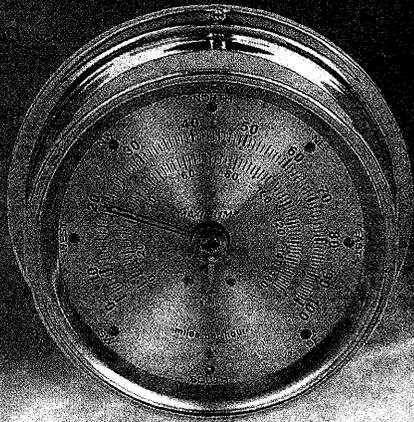
Podesta, in our November interview, went further. Obama grasps the importance of 2°C “in an intellectual way,” he told me. The president is a “very smart guy and he studies these kinds of problems in great depth. His instinct, though, is to try to stretch but not be hysterical.” Even if fully implemented, Podesta said, Obama’s climate policy would not hit the target: “Maybe it gets you on a trajectory to three degrees, but it doesn’t get you two degrees.”

**W**hat advocates lamented most when I spoke to them about Obama’s climate record, besides his “all of the above” energy strategy, were his long periods of silence on the issue, which enabled climate-science deniers to confuse public opinion and block urgently needed government action.

“He’s been like a weak radio signal,” said James Gustave Speth, who chaired the presidential Council on Environmental Quality in the 1970s, which published the first U.S. government studies identifying global warming as a serious concern. “You hear it for brief intervals and think maybe it’ll be an interesting show,” he added back in January, “and then it fades away.”

Senator Sheldon Whitehouse expressed similar frustration. As the

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most outspoken member of Congress on the topic, the Rhode Island Democrat has delivered a climate-change-related speech on the floor of the Senate almost every single week the chamber has been in session since April 2012. I asked Whitehouse whether there had been any presidential reaction to his speeches, which numbered fifty-two by the time of our interview. "Yeah," he said. "We got a tweet out of the administration when I did the fiftieth one."

The senator had tried to persuade the White House that this was a winning issue. "It becomes an even more winning issue if treated with real attention. The polling data [shows] that fifty-three percent of self-designated Republicans under the age of thirty-five see climate-change denial as ignorant, out of touch, or crazy. The current stance of the Republican Party in the denial camp is not one that can survive under scrutiny."

Tom Steyer, a billionaire Obama donor and climate activist, has tested this theory by bankrolling opponents of climate deniers in recent Senate and gubernatorial elections in Virginia and Massachusetts. His candidates—Edward Markey in Massachusetts and Terry McAuliffe in Virginia—both won. "Denying basic science is a disqualifier for high office at this point," Steyer told me. "It may not make people oppose you, but it may make them not turn out to vote for you. You're too ridiculous."

And even when Obama and his advisers attempted to convey some kind of vision on climate change, they failed. Indeed, inept messaging has been one of the most pervasive, and most baffling, features of his presidency.

"I don't think they ever paid attention to how they were going to explain this," said Timothy Wirth, a former U.S. senator from Colorado. Wirth, who now heads the United Nations Foundation, is still perplexed by this failure. Obama, he said, was "one of the most articulate campaigners ever, but one of the least able [as president] to explain what he was doing to the broad public."

Obama's rhetorical retreat left the field open to his adversaries, and be-

fore his first summer in the White House was over, he had lost control of the narrative of his presidency. To the extent that Obama's clean-energy policy was communicated at all, says Van Jones, it was "communicated by the right wing in the form of cherry picking and demagoguery about Solyndra. My understanding is that ninety to ninety-six percent of the president's bets in clean-energy investment paid off. But all everybody hears about is Solyndra."

**I** expect that the view of history will be that President Obama was the president who did the most to combat the climate-change problem," Representative Waxman told me. That statement is undeniably true, but it sets a very low bar. And climate change is not the only policy area in which Obama has fallen so woefully short. His record on environmental issues in general is similarly mixed, and for many of the same reasons.

On the positive side, the president has pledged to halt America's financing of new coal plants overseas. Without billions of dollars in U.S.-backed loans, most of the plants overheating the atmosphere and punishing people's lungs in China, India, and other developing countries would never have been built in the first place. Obama's reversal of decades of American policy was soon emulated by the World Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, demonstrating that White House leadership can still influence international practices on climate change.

These and other achievements have been overshadowed, however, by Obama's industry-friendly initiatives, many of which mimic or extend the anti-environmentalism of George W. Bush. Perhaps the most damaging policy is the least publicized: the enormous increase in coal mining on publicly owned lands that Obama's Interior Department has encouraged, particularly in the Powder River Basin of Wyoming and Montana.

"Starting in 2010, the Bureau of Land Management began proposing new coal leases, which would have authorized more than 6.7 billion tons of new coal mining in the Powder River

Basin," noted Pat Sweeney of the Western Organization of Resource Councils, a regional environmental group. If all that coal ends up getting mined and burned, the resulting carbon emissions alone would be sufficient to cancel out all the other climate progress Obama has made.

The Powder River Basin is only one part of a larger exploitation of public resources that began under Bush, argues Anna Aurilio, the director of the D.C. office of Environment America. "We saw a real push with the 2005 energy bill to open up much of this country to oil, fracking, coal," Aurilio told me. "Passage of that bill led to a fire sale on leasing our public lands. Unfortunately, the Obama Administration hasn't done much to tamp that down."

Fracking offers a particularly vivid example of the continuities between the Bush and Obama Administrations. Under Bush's 2005 bill, Aurilio pointed out, fracking was carefully exempted from the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, the Safe Drinking Water Act, and the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act. "So fracking isn't really regulated by the EPA."

Relieved of these statutory fetters, fracking has increased exponentially in the Obama years, notably in areas of Montana, North Dakota, and Pennsylvania that overlie shale-rich geological formations. The resulting jump in natural-gas production has slashed energy prices and boosted economic activity nationwide. But nearby residents have complained about contaminated water, and researchers have concluded that such concerns have merit.

Scientists have also challenged the climate argument made on behalf of natural gas. For years, it was portrayed as a "bridge fuel" to rely on while making the transition to a fully green energy system. After all, the methane that is released when natural gas is burned results in only half as much greenhouse-gas pollution as an equivalent amount of coal. But studies by scientists such as Anthony Ingraffea, a Cornell University professor who spent the first thirty years of his career advising oil and gas companies, have diminished this argument. They document the many

leaks in the infrastructure that brings natural gas into America's homes and businesses. When these pervasive leaks are taken into account, natural gas's climate advantage dwindles, perhaps to the vanishing point.

Yet President Obama has consistently championed natural gas as a vital component of his energy strategy. In his 2014 State of the Union address, he called it "a bridge fuel" to a clean energy future. The president was careful, though, not to utter the *F* word, despite the fact that a vast expansion of fracking is the only way to produce as much gas as his vision requires.

The EPA's Gina McCarthy told me that the Obama Administration would soon unveil a new strategy for limiting methane leakage, which it did in March. "There are very clear technologies available that can address that," she said. "We think it's another opportunity for us to work with those industry sectors and drive methane emissions down."

But it is the president's perpetual eagerness to "work with those industry sectors" on environmental matters that reminds Eric Schaeffer, former director of the EPA's Office of Regulatory Enforcement, of Obama's predecessor. Schaeffer resigned in 2002, charging that the Bush White House "seems determined to weaken the rules we are trying to enforce." A key culprit was the Office of Management and Budget, which often overruled environmental regulations because of their supposedly negative economic implications. Schaeffer, who now heads the nonprofit Environmental Integrity Project, told me that Obama's OMB is as bad as Bush's. Its officials still see "their primary job as killing regulations on the environment." Obama's withdrawal of the ground-level-ozone regulation—a withdrawal one OMB official, Cass Sunstein, advocated—was only the most overt example, Schaeffer said.

Besieged by pressure from industry and its favored lawmakers on Capitol Hill, and lacking strong backing from the White House, the EPA under Obama has seldom seemed committed, Schaeffer told me. He noted that the agency has been circulating for public comment a draft strategic vision for its future.

"Traditionally, the goal of the EPA has been to get the nation's rivers and streams in 'a fishable and swimmable condition,'" Schaeffer explained. "In the draft, the EPA says that in 2006, scientific assessments done by the states found that forty-two percent of America's rivers and streams were in poor condition." The draft then sets a goal for 2018: Don't let things get any worse. "Really? That's it? I mean, what happened to fishable and swimmable?"

**O** bama's shortcomings on climate change illustrate one of the basic truths of American politics: No president can bring about fundamental change—change that challenges the prerogatives of wealth and power—unless he or she is aided and pushed by vigorous, organized, and sustained popular pressure and protest.

This is especially true of the climate issue, for Obama has presided over a nation that qualifies (but is rarely described) as a petrostate. "The United States is as much of an OPEC nation as most OPEC nations are," Everett Ehrlich, an undersecretary of commerce in the Clinton Administration, told me.

Ehrlich, who chaired Clinton's interagency deliberations on the economics of climate change, was explaining why an administration that boasted Al Gore as vice president had been much more timid about reducing greenhouse-gas emissions than had the industrial economies of Europe and Japan. "The U.S. is more like an energy producer, while the Europeans and Japan are energy-consumer nations," he said. "Our natural-resource industries are very powerful and their executives saw dealing with climate change as punitive to their interests. We heard about it repeatedly from them."

Saying no to Big Oil is never simple. The record suggests that Obama is at least intermittently willing to do so: calling for the repeal of the industry's \$4.5 billion in annual tax breaks, as Obama has (unsuccessfully) urged year in and year out since becoming president, is like waving a red flag at the likes of Chevron and Shell. The record further suggests that Obama has genuinely wanted to

achieve a breakthrough on climate change. He hasn't gotten it done in part because he hasn't known how, making poor hiring and strategic choices and allowing the perceived requirements of winning reelection take precedence over rallying the American people around a vision of what is right.

But Obama is nothing if not persistent. And as he enters the final phase of his presidency, he seems determined to take another shot at climate change. Why else would he bring Podesta back to the White House to focus the executive branch on the problem, including the pursuit of a major deal with China?

To accomplish all that needs doing—to preserve a livable planet—will require the kind of leadership that Obama promised back in 2008. "The transformational presidents in U.S. history all stepped up to defeat the entrenched interests of their time and usher in a new national era," said Wasserman of the Rockefeller Family Fund. "All of them—whether it was FDR mobilizing the public to fight fascism, or Teddy Roosevelt taking on the crushing economic power of the trusts, or Lincoln fighting a civil war to end slavery—defeated the interests by grabbing the moral high ground and capturing the public's imagination."

But each of these transformational presidents also had to be prodded by an engaged citizenry. Elijah Zarlin, the former campaign worker, noted that more than 95,000 people have signed up to occupy construction sites and block bulldozers to keep the Keystone XL from being built. The outpouring of popular resistance to Keystone is the only reason the State Department didn't approve the pipeline years ago, said Zarlin, who argued that this engaged citizenry remains ready and eager to play its part.

"These are his people," said Zarlin. "They are still ready to do big things if they're asked to do big things. He needs to find his fire, and people will get behind him. But he's certainly not there yet. And if he keeps up what he's been doing, he's not going to get there." ■