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A Vulgar Act of Bravado

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Three hundred and ninety days after taking his oath of office, President George W. Bush of the United States of America announced his long awaited policy for addressing global climate change. The White House brought laughs from politicians and the public by calling it "a bold new strategy," when in fact the announcement amounts to a continuation of the administration's unilateral policy of ignoring the topic and thumbing its nose at the public and the world.

Mr. Bush affirmed America's commitment to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (adopted in 1992) and announced that America will cut greenhouse gas "intensity" by 18 percent over the next 10 years. While he intends to show that the U.S. is taking its obligations seriously and is reclaiming international leadership, in reality he is committing his administration and the nation to precisely what it has been doing all along: increasing domestic oil production and use and scorning binding regulation. It is mere sleight of hand to tie any reduction in carbon emissions to an increase in economic activity. The fact is that without any leadership on the part of government, the efficiency of energy usage in support of economic activity has increased dramatically in recent years. Governmental interest might speed the transition, but Mr. Bush is proposing no action at all, electing instead to coast on a well-developed trend.

Worse, the policy enunciated today spurns the obligations that the U.S. accepted with its ratification of the 1992 agreement. Under U.S. laws, once an international agreement is signed with the advice and consent of the U.S. Senate, it becomes the law of the land. The United States formally agreed to bring its greenhouse gas emissions in the year 2000 to 1990 levels. The policy released today ensures that even in the year 2012 U.S. emissions will be about 28 percent above those of 1990. If one were to add to this the 1997 Kyoto Protocol commitment (that the U.S. signed and all nations but the U.S. now support) of 7 percent reductions from 1990 levels, the U.S. will be releasing emissions annually in 2012 at a rate 35 percent above its agreements.

Any suggestion that this policy is going to reclaim international leadership for the U.S. is laughable. All countries, including the U.S., have agreed that the world is confronted with the threat of global warming, primarily due to the greenhouse gas emissions from the industrialized countries. The rich countries also agreed that they should take the first step in reducing greenhouse gas emissions from 1990 levels before asking the developing countries to do the same. By failing to join the other industrialized countries, which have unanimously agreed to support agreements reached thus far, the U.S. is pursuing its isolationist approach to global problems.

Although a step in the right direction, we should not forget that these agreements deal primarily with stabilizing emissions, not with stabilizing the heat-trapping gas content of the atmosphere as set forth in the 1992 agreement and agreed to by all nations. There is widespread consensus that this is a global emergency and the objectives agreed to under the 1992 agreement must be met immediately if we are to avoid further dangerously unpredictable and costly changes in global climate.



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Mr. Bush's February 14th initiative seems designed to give the impression that some dramatic, innovative, aggressive and even generous policies are being introduced. Upon analysis, however, none of them stands up to scrutiny. The U.S. has tried voluntary commitments in restricting pollution, including control of heat trapping gases, and realized that such measures fail almost universally. Today's policy only continues voluntary approaches by industry. The nominal increases in financial resources presented today are no more than a repackaging of existing initiatives. In some instances the proposals actually reduce investments in the development of certain clean technologies.

How is it possible to recite the objectives of the 1992 agreement, claim that the U.S. is firmly committed to those objectives, and then advance nothing more than a business-as-usual approach? How can one seriously say that the prescription offered today is in any way a response to the pronouncements of the scientific community within the United States and the world at large? How will developing countries, whose greenhouse gas emissions are set to soar as they begin the process of meeting the basic needs of their people, react to this action that says that in order to increase industrial growth, greenhouse gas emissions must also increase?

During the past twelve years, the United Nations and its member countries, with strong participation by the United States, worked conscientiously to generate agreement on science surrounding climate change, creating interest and participation within civil society, particularly its private sector, while encouraging desperate countries with struggling economies to join in common action. Since the beginning of the Bush administration, however, a great deal of damage has been done to this series of fragile but vital developments. Despite obvious steps to the contrary, the world community held onto the hope that the U.S. would ultimately, as it has in the past, do what is right. With the set of measures introduced on February 14, it has once again scorned the rest of the world, and, in a vulgar act of bravado, shown those hopes to be futile.