



THE WOODS HOLE RESEARCH CENTER

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The Kyoto Protocol: Waiting for Godot?

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01:00 AM EST on Thursday, February 17, 2005, The Providence Journal

WHEN THE 1992 Rio Earth Summit adopted the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change, there was no question that it was one of the most far-reaching accomplishments in dealing with a global environmental problem by the world community. When the science underlying the issue was firmed up, the same world community adopted, in 1997, the Kyoto Protocol, an agreement that contains binding legal commitments for industrialized countries to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions.

The 1992 agreement was ratified by the United States long before any other industrialized country did so, yet the 1997 Protocol goes into force today without the United States -- a fact made graver by the Bush administration's now active opposition to it.

What has changed?

Before and after the Rio Summit, there was a sense that multilateralism mattered. However, since President George W. Bush took office, in 2001, and particularly after Sept. 11, 2001, what appears to matter most is the administration's unilateral determination of what is in its best interest. Despite assertions to the contrary, there hasn't been a single initiative that the Bush administration has undertaken that will go toward even partially meeting the nominal obligations contained in the 1992 Rio agreement -- signed and ratified by the United States, and hence the law of the land.

Until the Russian ratification was announced, last November, the countries that had ratified Kyoto were contemplating various ways to further the goal of stabilizing the greenhouse-gas concentrations in the atmosphere. Throughout, our administration maintained that while it considered the Kyoto Protocol fatally flawed and would have nothing to do with it, the United States would not get in the way of other countries' carrying on with their plans to stabilize the greenhouse-gas concentrations.

But now that more than 140 countries are raring to go with yesterday's implementation of the Protocol, the tactics of the United States have changed dramatically. As seen at the recent global Conference of the Parties in Buenos Aires, the United States has apparently decided to forgo diplomatic niceties in responding to the proposals on the table and resorted to "in-your-face" retorts. Consequently, even the simple question of holding an intergovernmental workshop to explore the steps for the post-2012 period -- after the conclusion of the Protocol's first commitment period -- was met with fierce U.S. opposition.

The United States has only 4.5 percent of the world's population, yet produces more than 23 percent of its greenhouse-gas emissions. There is no indication that the Bush administration is willing to do what is right, but pressure is mounting from the international community -- including one of our closest allies, the United Kingdom. Prime Minister Tony Blair announced that he would like to ensure that climate change is a key topic at the G-8 Summit this year. He also quite appropriately said, "[I]f America wants the rest of the world to be part of the agenda it has set, it must be part of their [the rest of the world's] agenda, too."



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In Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*, the characters are not to be deflected from their compulsive task of waiting. In literature, there is perhaps small damage in adhering to such passiveness. In real life, however, subsiding into the futility of the situation -- reiterating, "Nothing to be done" -- is not an option.

Fortunately, the rest of the world is moving ahead. It is now incumbent on the United States to do so.