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THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

October 6, 1997

REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT
AT WHITE HOUSE CONFERENCE ON CLIMATE CHANGE

Georgetown University
Washington, D.C.

10:30 A.M. EDT

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you very much. Thank you, Mr Vice President, for your remarks, and your remarkable leadership to help us keep our Earth in the balance. Thank you, Father O'Donovan, for letting me come home to Georgetown one more time to discuss a matter of immense importance to America and its future. I thank the members of Congress and the members of the Cabinet and the administration who are here, all those who have agreed to serve on the panels, and all you who have come to be a part of this important day.

Six years ago last Friday -- I can hardly believe it, but it was six years ago last Friday that I announced my intention to run for President -- challenging America to embrace and to vigorously pursue a vision of our country for the 21st century: to make the American Dream alive for every person responsible to work for it, to keep our country the world's strongest force for peace and freedom and prosperity, to bring our people together across all the lines that divide us into one America.

Shortly afterward I came here to Georgetown to this great hall to outline specific strategies and new policies to achieve that vision, rooted in our values of opportunity and responsibility, faith and family and community; designed to help Americans seize the opportunities and solve the problems of this new age. It was clear to me that our new direction had to be rooted in some basic guideposts -- that we had to be oriented toward the future, not the past; toward change, not the status quo; toward partnership, not division; toward giving all a chance, not just the few; and finally toward making sure America leads, not follows.

We tried to develop a new approach to government, where we didn't claim to do everything and we wouldn't tolerate doing nothing, but instead we focused on giving people the tools to make the most of their own lives and creating the conditions that would allow them to succeed.

And we had new policies -- the economic policies and trade policies, education policy, crime and welfare, policies toward the working poor, policies to bolster families and help them balance work and child-rearing, policies in health care and foreign policy and, yes, policies in the environment.

In the last four years and eight months, I think it's fair to say that, together, we have made real progress toward that vision for the 21st century. We stand at the threshold of that century stronger than most people thought was possible back in 1991, with our economy thriving, our social fabric mending, our leadership in the world strong. We have a solid foundation of achievement on which to stand as we take on the remaining challenges to build that bridge to the 21st century.

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We are back here at Georgetown today because global climate change clearly is one of the most important of those challenges, and also one of the most complex, crossing the disciplines of environmental science, economics, technology, business, politics, international development and global diplomacy; affecting how we and all others on this planet will live, support our families, grow our food, produce our energy and realize our dreams in the new century.

That's why we've put together this White House Conference on Climate Change, bringing together experts and leaders with a wide range of knowledge and a wide range of views. People of goodwill bring to this conference many honest disagreements about the nature of the threat we face and how we should respond. That is healthy in a democracy like ours. My hope is that we will take advantage of this forum to actually talk with each other rather than past each other. For it is our responsibility to work together to achieve two vital and compatible goals, ensuring the continued vitality of our planet and expanding economic growth and opportunity for our people.

Despite the complexities of these challenges, we have good reason to be optimistic, beginning with our 220-year record of making all manner of difficult problems solvable, and, importantly, a very good record in the last generation of environmental progress. ~~For in the last generation alone, we came together to heed Rachel Carson's warnings and ban DDT and other poisons. We cleaned up rivers so filthy they were catching on fire, phased out lead in gasoline and chemicals that were eating a hole in the ozone layer. We worked with citizens to conserve the headwaters forest of Northern California, restore the Florida Everglades, protect Yellowstone National Park from the assaults of mining -- in each case, proving that environmental stewardship does not have to hamstring economic growth.~~

Indeed, in tackling the difficult task of cutting sulphur dioxide emissions with an innovative system of permit trading, the United States is well ahead of the schedule we set for ourselves and well below the projected cost in cleaning the environment. I believe we can find that same common ground as we address the challenge of climate change.

Before we begin our discussion today, I think it's important for me to explain the four principles that will guide my approach to this issue. First, I'm convinced that the science of climate change is real. We'll hear more about this today from our first panel. But for me the bottom line is that, although we do not know everything, what we do know is more than enough to warrant responsible action.

The great majority of the world's climate scientists have concluded if we don't cut our emission of greenhouse gases, temperatures will arise and will disrupt the global climate. In fact, most scientists say this process has already begun. I might add that I had nothing to do with scheduling this conference on the day which is predicted to be the hottest October 6th that we have ever had in Washington, D.C. (Laughter.)

I know not everyone agrees on how to interpret the scientific conclusions. I know not everyone shares my assessment of the risks. But I think we all have to agree that the potential for serious climate disruption is real. It would clearly be a grave mistake to bury our heads in the sand and pretend the issue will go away.

The second principle is that when the nations of the world meet in December in Kyoto, Japan, we must be prepared to commit to realistic and binding goals on our emissions of greenhouse gases.

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With 4 percent of the world's population, we enjoy more than 20 percent of the world's wealth -- which helps to explain why we also produce more than 20 percent of the world's greenhouse gases. If we expect other nations to act on the problem, we must show leadership.

The third principle is that we must embrace solutions that will allow us to continue to grow our economy as we honor our global responsibilities and our responsibilities to our children. We've worked far too hard to revitalize the American Dream to jeopardize our progress now. Therefore, we must emphasize flexible market-based approaches. We must work with business and industry to find the right ways to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. We must promote technologies that make energy production and consumption more efficient.

There are many people here today from companies that are addressing the climate change in innovative ways, taking steps that will save money for American families even as we reduce the threat of global warming. For example, a number of leading electric utilities, including AEP, Southern Company, Niagara Mohawk and Northern States Power, are working with homeowners to promote a new technology called geo-exchange, using geothermal pumps to heat and cool homes far more cheaply than traditional systems while reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 40 percent or more. Ballard Power and United Technologies are leading pioneers in developing fuel cells that are so clean, their only exhaust is distilled water.

Right now, Ballard is working with Chrysler, Mercedes Benz and Toyota to introduce fuel cells into new cars. Both of these technologies represent the kind of creative solutions that will make our job much easier.

The fourth principle is that we must expect all nations, both industrialized and developing, to participate in this process in a way that is fair to all. It is encouraging that so many nations in so many parts of the world are developing so rapidly. That is good news for their people and it is good for America's economic future. But as we've seen right here at home, rising energy demands that accompany economic development traditionally have meant large increases in greenhouse gas emissions. In fact, if current trends continue, emissions from the developing world will likely eclipse those from the developed world in the next few decades.

But they have an opportunity to pursue a different future without sacrificing economic growth. The industrialized world alone cannot assume responsibility for reducing emissions. Otherwise, we'll wind up with no reduction in emissions within a matter of a few decades. In Kyoto, therefore, we will ask for meaningful, but equitable commitments from all nations. Second, we must explore new ways for American businesses to help these rapidly growing countries to meet their developmental needs with cleaner and more efficient energy technologies.

Today I hope we can take a step forward in putting all four of these principles into effect. We have studied this issue long enough to know that there are sensible options for action. It is our job now to pull them together into a coherent plan.

Nearly three decades ago when the Apollo astronauts first went to the Moon, we gained an entirely new perspective on the global challenge we face today. For looking down on Earth from the vantage point that revealed no political boundaries or divisions, the astronauts had the same chilling sensation. They were simply awestruck by how tiny and fragile our planet is -- protected from the harsh void of space by an atmosphere that looked as thin and delicate as the skin of an onion. Every astronaut since has experienced the same insight, and they've even given it a name -- the Overview Effect. It has instilled in each new astronaut a passion to convince people we must work together on Earth's behalf.

Rusty Schwieckart has said, you realize that on that little blue and white thing, there is everything that means anything to you -- all history and music and poetry and art and death and birth and love -- all of it on that little spot out there you can cover with your thumb.

To the best of my knowledge, only one person here has actually experienced the Overview Effect firsthand -- Dr. Mae Jemison, a former shuttle astronaut and current international development expert who will participate in our third panel discussion this afternoon. Nonetheless, I challenge everyone in this room to rise to a vantage point high enough to experience the overview effect. It will enable us to reach common ground.

Let me say when the Vice President was talking and Father O'Donovan was talking, I was looking around this old hall that I have loved for so long, and I found it utterly amazing that I first came here 33 years ago. I was reading this morning up at Camp David the list of people who were going to be here today, and I found it utterly amazing that a few of you I first talked to as long as 20 years ago about the need to build an alternative energy future for America. And I find it completely amazing that five-eighths of my presidency is behind me.

I make these points for this reason: If you think about the benchmarks in your own life, it doesn't take long to live your life. And what seems at the beginning of your life a very long time, seems to have passed in the flash of an eye once you have experienced it. These great developments, such as the one we're here to talk about today, occur over many life spans. And popular democracies are far more well-organized to take advantage of opportunities or deal with immediate crises than they are to do the responsible thing, which is to take a moderate, but disciplined approach far enough in advance of a train coming down the track to avoid leaving our children and our grandchildren with a catastrophe.

So I ask you to think about that. We do not want the young people who sat on these steps today, for whom 33 years will also pass in the flash of an eye, to have to be burdened or to burden their children with our failure to act. Thank you. (Applause.)

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