



Woodrow Wilson
International
Center
for Scholars

Environmental Change and Security Program

Energy, Climate Change, and the Military: Implications for National Security

Thursday, May 28, 2009

Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars

Edited Transcript—Sherri Goodman

I'd like to start by paying tribute to Geoff for your leadership here at the Woodrow Wilson Center for Environmental Change and Security; you have been, Geoff, doing this work now, as you noted, since at least 1994. The Wilson Center has become really a hub for intellectual leadership and building intellectual capital in the field of environmental security, and it's through your leadership, your persistence, and the good team that you've built here that you have really made a difference in this field. So I want to thank you for that, for your continued efforts.

So I'd like to say a little bit about this report we just released last week and also about the – and how it connects with our work that we started a couple of years ago with the CNA's Military Advisory Board. The effort has been designed to address the national security implications of climate change and energy security and to bring the voice of the military on to these fundamental set of, in my view, national security questions. Those of you who, like me, were working on environmental security back in the '90s, some of us even before that the discussions and the debates at that time had a different character.

We were either talking about how we could improve of military installations, or we were going around in various ways trying to look gingerly at carbon emissions during the time of Kyoto, and we were beginning the effort that has, I think, really developed some intellectual capital now to really look at the security implications of environment. And what we really did in this first report was, with our group of military leaders, is to define climate change as a national security risk. And of course we did that a couple of years ago when the debate about “Was science about climate real?” and “Did it matter?” and “Could we take action now or not?” We really, I think, laid that to rest by saying from the perspective of a military planner, “You can't wait for 100 percent certainty on the battlefield,” as General Sullivan, chairman of our first Military Advisory, said. “If you wait, you know something bad is going to happen.” And that has helped, I think, move that debate forward.



environmental change & security program



Woodrow Wilson
International
Center
for Scholars

Environmental Change and Security Program

We also characterized climate change as a threat multiplier for instability in fragile regions of the world. Retreating glaciers, rising sea levels, reduced agricultural production, increasing health risks, increased migration of people across the globe as they seek higher land, more food, shelter, clean water. These are all threats that we are beginning to face even now -- face now and will face at a much increased rate in the future. So it's important from a national and international security perspective that we understand those risks now and put in place systems and processes and work collaboratively with other nations to address them.

That was really the essence, and I could say it in many more ways much longer [spelled phonetically] off the first report, and fortunately action was taken immediately following it, and the first National Intelligence Assessment on Climate Change and National Security was produced. The National Defense Authorization act required that the Department of Defense integrate the National Security Implications of Climate Change into the National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy of the United States and the Quadrennial Defense Review. Some of the people working that action are in the room right now, and more power to you because I think it's very important, very critical work that is under way to do this, and that will shape the force structure and our national security strategy into future decades.

The report we released last week, chaired by General Wald, who will speak in just a couple minutes, really brings together this question of energy, climate change, and national security to look at our -- the vulnerabilities of our energy posture: the risks that we face as a nation and as a planet from our over-dependence on fossil fuels and from our dependence on a vulnerable electric grid. Those two energy vulnerabilities have significant national security implications; they present an urgent and serious risk to our national security. They also, at the same time, present opportunities for us to use those challenges to transform our energy posture in the United States in ways that will result in our -- in lower carbon sources of energy in the future, bring us new technology. And the military is an important piece of this equation because the military is the nation's single largest user of energy in this country. Now it's only about one percent, so that's relatively small, but what the military does can affect the nation, and the military has been a leader, both in technology and in cultural change, historically in our country. And so in the Wilsonian tradition of restoring American leadership globally, this is an opportunity in our view for the U.S. to meet its leadership challenges globally on energy and climate change, also looking at how we move our nation's largest energy user to lower carbon sources of fuel that at the same time will improve military effectiveness and reduce the burden on our troops when they go into battle.



environmental change & security program



Woodrow Wilson
International
Center
for Scholars

Environmental Change and Security Program

So those are all important components of what we -- of the work that we've done, that is underway in the Defense Department and across the government today, as the Obama administration has made very much a part of its priority looking at the challenges of energy, climate change, and national security, confronting those together and advancing technologies that will transform our economy and, at the same time, create green sector jobs.

So I want to close just with one of my favorite stories. When I was at DoD in the '90s, I was working with Carol Bronwer, who was then head of EPA, and Bruce Babbitt, who was Secretary of Interior at the time, and Carol Browner said to Secretary Babbitt, "You know, the Defense Department and Sherri at Defense has, you know, all these military bases to clean up, and that's just a really horrendous job, and it's a really tough job." And Secretary Babbitt, who at the time was trying to bring all the parts of the Interior Department together, looked at Carol Browner and said, "You know, I think she has a really good job because she has the military behind her, and they know how to get things done." And that's absolutely true in my view, and so there's great opportunity in our nation today to really transform our military to improve effectiveness and efficiency, save the lives of our troops, and at the same time help lead our nation to a better energy future.

So with that I'd like to introduce the chairman of our Military Advisory Board, General Wald, who has been with us now on two projects, has had a very distinguished career in the United States Air Force.



environmental change & security program