

Mike Tidwell, executive director of the Chesapeake Climate Action Network, wrote this column for the December 6, 2009, edition of The Washington Post. The meeting in Copenhagen to which Tidwell refers was the United Nations-sponsored climate conference designed to address global warming.

TO REALLY SAVE THE PLANET, STOP GOING GREEN

BY MIKE TIDWELL

As President Obama heads to Copenhagen next week for global warming talks, there's one simple step Americans back home can take to help out: Stop "going green." Just stop it. No more compact fluorescent light bulbs. No more green wedding planning. No more organic toothpicks for holiday hors d'oeuvres.

December should be national Green-Free Month. Instead of continuing our faddish and counterproductive emphasis on small, voluntary actions, we should follow the example of Americans during past moral crises and work toward large-scale change. The country's last real moral and social revolution was set in motion by the civil rights movement. And in the 1960s, civil rights activists didn't ask bigoted Southern governors and sheriffs to consider "10 Ways to Go Integrated" at their convenience.

Green gestures we have in abundance in America. Green political action, not so much. And the gestures ("Look honey, another *Vanity Fair* Green Issue!") lure us into believing that broad change is happening when the data shows that it isn't. Despite all our talk about washing clothes in cold water, we aren't making much of a difference.

For eight years, George W. Bush promoted voluntary action as the nation's primary response to global warming—and for eight years, aggregate greenhouse gas emissions remained unchanged. Even today, only 10 percent

of our household light bulbs are compact fluorescents. Hybrids account for only 2.5 percent of U.S. auto sales. One can almost imagine the big energy companies secretly applauding each time we distract ourselves from the big picture with a hectoring list of "5 Easy Ways to Green Your Office."

As America joins the rest of the world in finally fighting global warming, we need to bring our battle plan up to scale. If you believe that astronauts have been to the moon and that the world is not flat, then you probably believe the satellite photos showing the Greenland ice sheet in full-on meltdown. Much of Manhattan and the Eastern Shore of Maryland may join the Atlantic Ocean in our lifetimes. Entire Pacific island nations will disappear. Hurricanes will bring untold destruction. Rising sea levels and crippling droughts will decimate crops and cause widespread famine. People will go hungry, and people will die.

Morally, this is sort of a big deal. It would be wrong to let all this happen when we have the power to prevent the worst of it by adopting clean-energy policies.

But how do we do that? Again, look to the history of the civil rights struggle. After many decades of public denial and inaction, the civil rights movement helped Americans to see Southern apartheid in moral terms. From there, the movement succeeded by working toward legal change. Segregation was phased out rapidly only because it was phased out through the law. These statutes didn't erase racial prejudice from every American heart overnight. But through them, our country made staggering progress. Just consider who occupies the White House today.

All who appreciate the enormity of the climate crisis still have a responsibility to make every change possible in their personal lives. I have, from the solar panels on my roof to the Prius in my driveway to my low-carbon-footprint vegetarian diet. But surveys show that very few people are willing to make significant voluntary changes, and those of us who do create the false impression of mass progress as the media hypes our actions.

Instead, most people want carbon reductions to be mandated by laws that will allow us to share both the responsibilities and the benefits of change. Ours is a nation of laws; if we want to alter our practices in a deep and lasting way, this is where we must start. After years of delay and denial and green half-measures, we must legislate a stop to the burning of coal, oil and natural gas.

THE PLANET, STOP GOING GREEN

Of course, all this will require congressional action, and therein lies the source of Obama's Copenhagen headache. To have been in the strongest position to negotiate a binding emissions treaty with other world leaders this month, the president needed a strong carbon-cap bill out of Congress. But the House of Representatives passed only a weak bill riddled with loopholes in June, and the Senate has failed to get even that far.

So what's the problem? There's lots of blame to go around, but the distraction of the "go green" movement has played a significant role. Taking their cues from the popular media and cautious politicians, many Americans have come to believe that they are personally to blame for global warming and that they must fix it, one by one, at home. And so they either do as they're told—a little of this, a little of that—or they feel overwhelmed and do nothing.

We all got into this mess together. And now, with treaty talks underway internationally and Congress stalled at home, we need to act accordingly. Don't spend an hour changing your light bulbs. Don't take a day to caulk your windows. Instead, pick up a phone, open a laptop, or travel to a U.S. Senate office near you and turn the tables: "What are the 10 green statutes you're working on to save the planet, Senator?"

Demand a carbon-cap bill that mandates the number 350. That's the level of carbon pollution scientists say we must limit ourselves to: 350 parts per million of CO₂ in the air. If we can stabilize the atmosphere at that number in coming decades, we should be able to avoid the worst-case scenario and preserve a planet similar to the one human civilization developed on. To get there, America will need to make deep but achievable pollution cuts well before 2020. And to protect against energy price shocks during this transition, Congress must include a system of direct rebates to consumers, paid for by auctioning permit fees to the dirty-energy companies that continue to pollute our sky.

Obama, too, needs to step up his efforts; it's not just Congress and the voters who have been misguided. Those close to the president say he understands the seriousness of global warming. But despite the issue's moral gravity, he's been paralyzed by political caution. He leads from the rear on climate change, not from the front.

Forty-five years ago, President Lyndon B. Johnson faced tremendous opposition on civil rights from a Congress dominated by Southern leaders, yet he spent

GREEN

the political capital necessary to answer a great moral calling. Whenever key bills on housing, voting and employment stalled, he gave individual members of congress the famous "Johnson treatment." He charmed. He pleaded. He threatened. He led, in other words, in person, and from the front.

Does anyone doubt that our charismatic current president has the capacity to turn up the heat? Imagine the back-room power of a full-on "Obama treatment" to defend America's flooding coastlines and burning Western forests. Imagine a two-pronged attack on the fickle, slow-moving Senate: Obama on one side and a tide of tweets and letters from voters like you.

So join me: Put off the attic insulation job till January. Stop searching online for recycled gift wrapping paper and sustainably farmed Christmas trees. Go beyond green fads for a month, and instead help make green history.

Explore



According to Tidwell, American citizens should demand a carbon-cap bill that mandates 350 parts per million of CO₂ in the air. Use your library to research the rationale behind a carbon-cap bill. What is it, and how would it work? Do you think this is a viable proposal for preventing climate change?

Invent



According to Tidwell, the movement to personally "go green" has distracted American citizens and political leaders from taking real political action to prevent climate change. How does this claim undermine the lifestyle choices espoused by Beavan (page 99) and Matheson (page 83)? Write a response paper in which you describe the crucial differences between these authors. Which approach (personal or legislative) do you think is the most crucial to preventing further environmental damage? Is there a way to reconcile these opposed positions?

Compose



Tidwell argues that we should urge our representatives to pass laws that would protect the environment. Follow Tidwell's advice and write a letter to your senators or representatives asking them to sponsor a particular statute that would help the environment.