

We Are the Fossil-Fuel Freedom Fighters

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Everything and nothing about the planet has changed in my lifetime. I am twenty-seven. Everything, because I have never known a time when our home didn't have a man-made fever. And nothing, because we've done so little to stop stoking it. "Global warming is all we've ever known," Ben Lowe, a founder of Young Evangelicals for Climate Action, explained to the *Wall Street Journal*. This conundrum makes Bill McKibben's 1989 book, *The End of Nature*, into Cassandra in a time capsule: prescient, ignored, and almost buried.

But only "almost." In the past decade, hundreds of thousands of Americans (and millions of people worldwide) have taken part in a social movement for climate solutions. Folks are marching from all walks of life: grandparents and students, businesspeople and people of faith, farmers and veterans, health advocates and parents. People are organiz-

ing local food co-ops and carpools, and developing wind farms in their towns for clean energy and greater local tax revenues. Voters are approving municipal bonds to build better transit systems, and they're petitioning legislators for renewable energy policies. They are lobbying Congress to price climate pollution, and are marching on the White House to stop the Keystone XL tar sands pipeline.

For those of us who have come of age "after the end of nature," we march with our unique means and dreams for a safer world in the face of global warming.

People used to take security in the way things were because the world seemed too big and too old to change. It seemed impossible that people could pave the prairies, mow full forests, or strip-mine the seas of protein. We could never exhaust the Earth's supply of compacted fossil life to fill our gas tanks. And never could we belch so much gas that we'd suffocate under the planet's safety blanket, choking our cool atmosphere with heat-trapping gases. Never could mere mortals call forth the seas to rise against our own cities, or hold off the rain clouds that quench our own crops, or deluge our own homes with bidden storms. The world was too big and old; we were too small and soft. So surely the way things were would be the way they'd always be.

But now all these impossibilities are terribly real. We've changed the climate, and as we feel our home failing, we're realizing that the Earth is not as big in size as it is in importance. There is no Planet B; Earth is too big to fail.

Or at any rate, it's too important that it not fail if we're to continue on a home we recognize.

Winners and losers are becoming starker as the planet fails. Monsoons fail and food prices soar in Southeast Asia. Summer rains fail in North America, congressional coffers run dry from subsidy payouts, and the Mississippi sinks too low to ship what grain survived the season. Fires char Australia and force a family under a dock. Sub-Saharan parents must work even harder to pull viable crops from desertifying fields. Superstorm Sandy decimates bankers, Brooklynites, and boardwalk roller coasters all at once. Canadian kids hear fond stories of pond hockey, but get few fond memories of their own. Again and again, Joplin, Missouri, and other towns hear tornado sirens as more powerful thunderstorms spawn more twisters. Bangladeshis, Floridians, Malaysians, and Pakistanis wade through their neighborhoods to reach higher grounds where they are not wanted. Where resources are already marginal, refugee camps are growing, and conflicts like those in Darfur and Somalia are edging further from control. As the planet's oil supply drains, American troops are in ever more danger patrolling Middle East supply lines. These are all victims of climate change, and their suffering is unjust. They—we—have the most to lose.

But walking through the Doha Exhibition Center last December, that's not who you'd think had the most to lose from a destabilizing global atmosphere. I was there in Qatar for the United Nations' annual Framework Convention on Climate Change. For nearly two decades, the world has

gathered to hammer out climate solutions in a new city each year, and while the process is painfully slow—and may never succeed—at least it publicly applauds leaders and shames laggards. Taking a break from the frenetic convention, I strolled through the nearby Doha Exhibition Center to check out the booths set up by visiting institutions.

The Doha Exhibition Center is 3.7 acres of concrete and fluorescent light. Stretching over most of the acreage were exhibits for the world's largest oil companies and sovereign oil states. Saudi Aramco had turrets with plush-carpeted aeries to recline and watch PR videos. The Exxon and Chevron pavilions gleamed bleachily. BP had pastel graphics.

And yet in none of these vast exhibits was another soul visiting with me. All the other tourists were in the corner enjoying lively cubby-booths of clean-tech inventors, urban-agriculture advocates, and aggressively friendly vegans passing out cupcakes. You can guess how I felt struck by these companies' investments in empty monuments to the golden age of fossil hegemony. But hey, it makes sense: these guys have the most to lose if we build a cleaner way of life.

I left the exhibition center with losers and winners on my mind. Who has the most to lose from climate instability, and the most to gain from a cleaner, more durable, more equitably prosperous world? All of us who aren't fossil-fuel corporate executives, that's who. So who is most desperately denying us progress toward that better world? Who's polluting our landscape, our politics, and our airwaves? You guessed it. The kingpins of "clean coal," the oil barons, the

fossil-fuel fat cats. My generation is fighting for climate justice, for freedom from fossil fuels.

Climate change is a problem of tremendous scale in geography—it's *global* warming—and time, as today's pollution locks us into warming a hundred years from now. The size of solutions varies wildly, too, from changing light bulbs to international treaties. And at the root of it all, the people causing climate change are very different in scale from those actively impeding solutions.

The people causing climate change are all of us. In fact, as a middle-class North American, the amount of carbon pollution I put into the atmosphere is an order of magnitude greater than that of my peers in rural India. Even as I'm "thinking green" 24/7, I still enjoy chicken, and I drive my gas-powered car to the grocery store that sells it. I flip on the heat when it's cold. And shoot, I flew across the world for a conference on climate change.

And there are millions like me, belching a lot of carbon even as we work flat-out for a better world. It's not that I want no one to drive; it's that I want new options other than oil for getting around. And it's not that I want us to live in the dark; it's that I want my electricity to come from durable sources. I want the choice to be able to live well without compromising my kids' ability to live well someday, too. My generation knows we contribute to climate instability, but that's exactly why we're working so hard to solve it. It's satisfying to be part of something hopeful and necessary. It's satisfying to be actively freeing our communities from fossil fuels.

But I'm small potatoes. There are people an order of magnitude guiltier than I for climate injustice: those who see that their profitable pasts are over. Fossil magnates are terrified of a cleaner economy. To hang on a little longer, they have spent billions of dollars in recent decades to confuse the public about the danger of climate disruption. They've paid off fake researchers to say that energy has "always" come from coal so could never come from the sun. They've set up talking heads on news channels bought and paid for, to remind people how much we like traffic jams to prevent us from voting for faster trains. They've won politicians' allegiance with campaign donations in return for ever more oil subsidies from taxpayer dollars. These fossil-fuel fat cats are poisoning our planet and our democracy's ability to solve it. They are the real culprits of climate change.

Fossil fuel companies from BP (Gulf oil spill) to TransCanada (tar sands) to Massey Energy (Big Branch mine explosion) to natural gas (fracking Pennsylvania's groundwater) have everything to lose if we innovate in safer, cleaner energy. Wind power, solar, a more efficient electrical grid, better public transit systems, more vibrant food systems independent from fossil-based fertilizers—all of these make energy safer and cheaper for us in the long term. So the fossil-fuel fat cats are proportionately petrified.

In politics, an industry with everything to lose cannot be trusted. Do you believe anything Marlboro says about lung health? No, you're much smarter than that. Anything the fossil fuel industry says on climate change or clean energy is said in fear and desperation, and those bleached booths

in Doha talking up "clean coal" only prove it all the more. Sure, the climate truth hurts—it hurts a whole lot to realize we've broken our planet—but the truth is better than fossil-fuel fat cats feeding us comforting lies. But they'll feed us all they can, because people who know the truth begin to fight back.

I'm angry—can you tell? I'm angry at the insider energy powers for spending so much to derail a safe future for my generation. Their calculated denial of climate disruption earns them a place right next to those denying the Holocaust. Slow genocide or fast, it's just as cruel.

But there is nothing so powerful as self-righteous anger, and millions of us are marching on it. My grandmothers have told me stories of the World War II years, when Americans knew they had to work together and hard, because justice was not a given. My parents' generation then fought for social and environmental action, but they thought they could fully succeed—their signs said "Save the Earth" because they thought they could. Like my grandmothers, we twenty-somethings don't assume climate justice will be done; we know that we must work for it. But unlike our parents, we who have come of age after the end of nature have grown past that naïveté about the planet's durability. We know we cannot stop the climate from destabilizing.

My parents used to introduce me to their friends by offering with pride that I wanted to "save the world." My gut clenched every time, because I'm not that dumb. I have no illusions that we'll save the planet from the fossil-fueled

binge of recent centuries. The planet we evolved on is over; we're now locked into the crazy weather that's on the news every night. But we can prevent collapse. We can protect our home enough to protect the human lives and livelihoods that depend on it. It's too late to save the polar bears, but it's not quite too late to save ourselves.

And in seeking that salvation, we might end up building something better than the status quo. After all, we're aiming for an economy powered by energy that doesn't blow up, innovations that require tons of new jobs, and a democracy disinfected from the desperate campaign donations of fossil-fuel fat cats afraid of the future.

My generation is hopeful, practical, strategic, and muscular—and not naive. In fact, we are staking our very sense of self on it; we want history to write us as the ones who got to work. We are the fossil-fuel freedom fighters, and we're on the move.

More and more young people around the world are raising their communities' voices for climate solutions. In the United States, we're shutting down proposed fossil-fuel infrastructure that would lock in decades more dependence. We're hosting press conferences and town hall meetings, commissioning economists, consulting tribal elders, and publishing op-eds with medical professionals. We're lying down on the train tracks to coal export facilities proposed in the Northwest and the Gulf Coast, and we're chaining ourselves to the White House fence to demand that President Obama decline the Keystone XL tar sands pipe-

line. Yes, we're radical: our lives and our livelihoods depend upon it.

And thousands of students are mobilizing to press our university endowments to divest of fossil fuels. We believe that in graduating the world's next generation of leaders, universities should not simultaneously profit from the pollution that destabilizes the world we graduate into. Our means is divestment not because we can impoverish Exxon, but to send the message that fossil fuels have lost their social license. Hundreds of campuses are working to divest, joined by houses of worship, city budgets, and more.

And a new generation of entrepreneurs is starting companies in practical, profitable climate solutions. Business is booming in energy efficiency, more affordable fossil-free food, electric car-charging stations, and smarter buildings. And besides doing well for themselves by doing some good for all of us, these industries are hiring.

We proudly think of these jobs as work that needs doing, compared to the few gigs on offer from extractive industries. Those are mature industries; they do most of their mining and drilling with machines, so very few people get a career from each additional project toasting the planet. "You can create a lot of jobs drilling holes in a ship," said one retiree against the coal-export facilities proposed for his home in Bellingham, Washington. "But the ship will still go down."

By contrast, we're taking pride in careers that power us past fossil fuels. Clean-economy technologies are too new to be so mechanized; they require real skills from real people. From solar engineers to electric-car mechanics and

home-weatherization experts, many of these are jobs that can't be outsourced. And this work builds a cleaner world for all of us; it's work that people are proud to do because it's work that needs doing.

Instead of trying to "save the world," my generation is building the new institutions and industries that will support a just and resilient world. We're changing systems, we're changing rules, and we're hiring.

We who have come of age after the end of nature know that we have inherited damaged goods. But we're strong and we're smart, and we can and we will rebuild.

And most importantly, we have found our very calling in doing so. We are the cool kids; "we were created to be awesome," says Kid President. We are the ones building past the assumptions handed to us, the ones building a safer, more equitable, more durable world. We are the fossil-fuel freedom fighters.

And you're invited. Will you join?