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The Need for Personal Commitment to Address Climate Change

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My generation is, as Obama said, the first to notice the effects of climate change. We see them almost daily, in the natural disasters that plague our lives with ever increasing frequency; in the abnormally hot and cold spells that have struck the West and Northeast (1,2); and in the surreptitious creep of sea level rise that threatens our coastal cities (3). These effects of climate change present the greatest threats to the world as we know it, according to leading thinkers at the 2018 World Economic Forum in Davos (4), and yet, the American public has been largely ignorant of them until almost the present day. While there have been prescient scientists and politicians warning us for years now of the dangers of climate change, from the formation of the IPCC in 1988 to the Kyoto Protocol in 1997, it has only been in the past few years that the general public has become aware of the chilling realities of climate change, and of the necessity for immediate and drastic action to prevent them. With historic wildfires in California (5) and record-breaking floods in Nebraska (6), the American people are beginning to see for the first time the harm that climate change can cause; for the first time, it is even becoming a central issue in the coming presidential election (7).

These warnings, however, are useless without action. That is where the second part of Obama's pronouncement comes into play, as it reminds us that, unless emissions are reduced drastically within 10-30 years (8), our world is headed for a runaway climate disaster. We need awareness, involvement, and action to combat this global threat, and we need it soon.

Luckily, however, the public conscience has been raised, and climate change is a topic at the center of public debate. To enact positive change, we must keep this awareness present. We must elect public officials who acknowledge climate change, and who are committed to fighting it. Finally, we must support those programs that they ought to enact, which include: carbon-pricing systems that accurately reflect the true social cost of carbon, which has been estimated at \$75/ton (9); the ending of subsidies to fossil-fuels,

which reached \$300 billion globally in 2017 (10); and drastic public investment in clean energy, as promoted by the Green New Deal (11).

These measures, of course, are the backbone of an effective response to climate change, but they will not happen without individual initiative. That is where our part comes in; what we, the vast majority not in elected office or working as a major CEO, can do. We can begin by having conversations with others on climate change; by voting with the environment in mind; and finally, by doing our best to create climate-friendly practices in our own lives. Without this person-by-person commitment to change, nothing will happen; with it, we might have a chance after all.

Footnotes

- 1: <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/2018/11/climate-change-california-wildfire>
- 2: <https://www.cnn.com/2019/01/21/weather/winter-weather-monday-wxc/index.html>
- 3: <https://www.miamiherald.com/opinion/editorials/article212844644.html>
- 4: <https://qz.com/1190913/the-world-economic-forums-2018-global-risks-report-suggest-climatechange-natural-disasters-and-cybersecurity-are-humanitys-biggest-threats/>
- 5: <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/2018/11/climate-change-california-wildfire/>
- 6: <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2019/03/20/nebraska-floods-more-water-comingheres-what-mankind-should-do/3214576002/>
- 7: <http://time.com/5543102/2020-election-climate-change/>
- 8: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/michaelmarshalleurope/2018/10/08/why-its-misleading-to-say-we-only-have-12-years-to-avert-dangerous-climate-change/#583ca027806c>
- 9: <https://www.vox.com/2016/4/26/11470804/carbon-tax-political-constraints>
- 10: <https://www.iea.org/weo/energysubsidies/>
- 11: <https://ocasio-cortez.house.gov/sites/ocasiocortez.house.gov/files/Resolution%20on%20a%20Green%20New%20Deal.pdf>