

Scientists Warn: The Paris Climate Agreement Needs Massive Improvement

The current text doesn't even mention "fossil fuels" and lacks strong language on human rights.

By [Mark Hertsgaard](#)

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PARIS, FRANCE—The long-running clash between climate science and climate politics again took center stage at the Paris summit on Friday as the talks headed into overtime and activists prepared an unauthorized march near the Arc de Triomphe on Saturday “because climate justice won’t wait for governments—it is up to us to keep fossil fuels in the ground.”

Friday began with the French hosts, United Nations officials, rich nation governments, and US and UK media expressing confidence that an ambitious agreement will be reached, though not before Saturday, a day later than scheduled. “I’m optimistic,” the BBC quoted French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius as saying, adding that Fabius had told reporters he was “sure” the 196 assembled governments would approve a new

text that would be “a big step forward for humanity as a whole.” *The New York Times* reported that the draft text “skates on the edge of historical significance,” adding that the biggest missing piece is “clear language on monitoring and verifying whether and how countries will follow through on their promises to cut emissions.”

At noon, however, an all-star international panel of climate scientists delivered a far harsher judgment, warning that the current text needs massive improvement to deliver on its stated goal of limiting temperature rise to “below 2 degrees C or 1.5 C above pre-industrial levels.”

“The current text is weaker than the final agreement that came out of [the failed] Copenhagen [summit in 2009],” said Kevin Anderson, deputy director of the Tyndall Center for Climate Change Research in the UK, to a packed-to-bursting press conference at the Le Bourget convention center. Noting that the text does not even contain the words “fossil fuels,” Anderson added, “It is not consistent with science. It calls for peaking greenhouse gas emissions ‘as soon as possible.’ That is not consistent with a 2 degrees limit. Negotiators are praising this text as ‘practical,’ but for whom? For poor, non-white people in the southern Hemisphere, it falls somewhere between dangerous and deadly. But we still have 24 hours here to pull something more serious together.”

China and the United States, as the world’s leading climate and economic superpowers, obviously will be critical to whatever outcome emerges over the next 24 hours. Many developing nations have been unhappy with the US position, which they

charge does not reduce heat-trapping emissions anywhere near fast enough to honor a 2 degrees C goal (much less a 1.5 degree C goal) and does not provide the scale of financial assistance poor and vulnerable nations need to cope with intensifying climate impacts and shift to zero-carbon economic development. The US has pledged, in what is known in Paris summit lingo as its INDC (Intended Nationally Determined Contribution) to reduce its emissions by 26 to 28 percent from 2005 levels by 2025.

The Chinese vice foreign minister, Liu Zhenmin, told a press conference late on Friday afternoon that, “The US Secretary of State said that his government would face domestic difficulties if the INDCs are included in the Paris agreement.” Liu added, “We must have the United States on board for a successful Paris agreement. We need to find a solution that is acceptable to all.”

The Nation was told separately that Kerry specifically blamed “resistance in the Congress” for the relative weakness of the US position in Paris. A request for comment from the US delegation’s press office is pending.

“Rather than blame Secretary of State Kerry and President Obama, who I think understand the climate crisis and want to do what they can to reach a just agreement in Paris, we should blame Charles and David Koch, because it is their funding of climate deniers in Congress that has made it impossible for the US to be more ambitious at this summit,” said Victor Menotti, director of the International Forum on Globalization.

“To achieve the 1.5 C limit, we’d need complete decarbonization of the world economy by 2050,” Hans Schellnhuber, founder of the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research and former chief climate-science adviser to the German government, told *The Nation*. “That means that, once we leave Paris, every country should set up a plan to decarbonize its economy.”

“To limit warming below 1.5 degrees C, there is no scenario available that says that we can delay action to 2020 and beyond,” said Joeri Rogelj of the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis in Austria, who authored one of the few scientific studies to analyze a 1.5 C scenario. “We need a global peak of emissions by 2020 to limit warming to 1.5 degrees C.”

Such a schedule is light-years ahead of what the current text calls for. Although the point has gotten little attention in media coverage, it is arguably among the most critical facing the negotiations: How soon and how vigorously must emissions reductions begin?

The current text is based on voluntary commitments submitted by 186 governments—Intended Nationally Determined Commitments, or INDCs. These pledges in most cases cover the period from now until 2030—and, as has been widely reported, would yield a temperature rise of roughly 3 degrees, a catastrophic amount. Many poor and vulnerable countries and civil-society groups have urged that the Paris accord call for much greater commitments, starting much sooner. But the current text only envisions convening a

“dialogue” in 2019 that would “take stock” of the collective efforts of all nations to de-carbonize, but would not single out high emitters nor impose obligations for additional action.

Another huge concern raised by civil society: The current text has gutted or outright removed language stipulating that human rights, gender equality, indigenous people’s rights and ecosystem integrity are fundamental to making a climate accord work in the real world. “The people we’re here to represent are being left out of this document, by state parties, and we’re looking for them to rise to the occasion,” said Roberto Borrero of the Indigenous People’s Caucus, a coalition of the indigenous people’s groups attending the summit. “The United Nations estimates that there are 370 million indigenous people in the world. Our lands cover 22 percent of the earth’s surface and contain 80 percent of the earth’s biodiversity. Climate change threatens the very survival of our people and we want to see language [to that effect] restored to the legally binding portion of the agreement.”

The world—and the United States in particular—has one possible trick up its sleeve to help keep the 1.5 C target in reach, but it would mean banning shale gas, said Robert Howarth, a professor at Cornell University in New York who has done some of the most cutting-edge research on fracking. Shale gas is composed largely of methane, a greenhouse gas that has escaped notice in the official proceedings at the Paris summit, where the focus is overwhelmingly on carbon dioxide. But methane is actually a much more powerful trapper of heat than is carbon dioxide over the short term—which,

paradoxically, means that reducing methane emissions offers a much quicker way to reduce the increase in the total concentration of heat-trapping gases in the atmosphere.

“If we continue methane production at current rates, the world will run up against the 1.5 degrees limit in 12 to 15 years,” Howarth told *The Nation*. “If we stop producing methane, which means stop doing fracking of natural gas and oil, the world wouldn’t run up against that limit for about 50 years. So we could buy ourselves 25 to 35 years of time, which is critical. That could allow us to improve our political and socioeconomic responses to climate change and de-carbonize our societies accordingly. But if we’re serious about a 1.5 degrees target, or even the 2 degrees target, we can’t keep on fracking.” ●

0 COMMENTS

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ARMED CONFLICTS AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM NAKED DEMOCRACY

How Obsolete, Triumphalist Militarism Is Destroying America

Like the hero of Milton's great drama Samson Agonistes, we're blinded by our own hubris. Here's a way out—one in which the military can help.

By William Greider

JANUARY 29, 2016

PARIS, FRANCE—The long-running clash between climate science and climate politics again took center stage at the Paris summit on Friday as the talks headed into overtime and activists prepared an unauthorized march near the Arc de Triomphe on Saturday “because climate justice won’t wait for governments—it is up to us to keep fossil fuels in the ground.”

The generals turned out to be right in ways they did not foresee but that now plague the Middle East and have created new burdens for Washington. Pentagon leaders are now whispering to favored national security reporters that endless war is harder than they promised.

The problem is that distant adversaries are no longer so scared of US military might. They have figured out how to avoid the traditional battlefield, where they would surely lose in the face of superior American firepower. They know that irregular warfare can sow rampaging fear among comfortable US citizens, whose government is bombing their villages (the United States has been bombing the Middle East off and on since 1991; Iraq is still a favorite target).

Americans call this irregular warfare “terrorism” and see themselves as innocent victims of incomprehensible, mindless violence. But this is what our enemies know: The United States trashed the international rules of war a long while back with its own irregular terrorism, which includes the Army’s Special Forces and the CIA’s secret armies, the sponsored overthrow of selected governments we don’t like, and the assassinations of unfriendly leaders through drone strikes and by other means. When American bombs kill defenseless villagers, we write it off as “collateral damage.”

The United States cannot win these conflicts, yet it cannot easily get out of them, either. Why not? Because America’s governing elites have declared us the “indispensable nation,” an exceptional status not mentioned in the Geneva Conventions. President Obama has tried to back away from our aggressive posture, promoting diplomacy over armed conflict and making important progress in some areas. But he’s also tried to have it both ways. One day he talks softly, the next day he’s swinging the big stick, personally supervising individual assassination by drone—arguably a crime when

soldiers do it. Right-wing warriors ridicule the president's limp leadership, but what will they say when one day a foreign power decides to murder an American leader?

Why not victory? That was the battle cry of right-wing politicians when the United States was knee-deep in the big muddy of Vietnam. Their complaint is being recycled by the current generation of chicken hawks. Despite our disaster in Vietnam, the United States has continued to misuse its awesome killing power, often not to conquer adversaries but to persuade their leaders to change policies. That's why modern US wars are so prone to failure: Our violence is tailored diplomacy.

Obama is guilty of this misconception, but so are the GOP hawks. When the president boasts about the nation's military dominance, as he did in his last State of the Union speech, he's really invoking our nation's nostalgia for World War II—the glorious past when America stepped up and took on the role of singular global power.

The bellicose Republicans who sneer at the president are essentially peddling their own nostalgic version of false bravado. Limited war may seem to be smart politics in the short run, especially when Americans are freaked out by terror attacks. But the war whoops draw the country into one more battlefield, and then another, until patriotic fervor is exhausted. What Americans want is peace, not another confused war on yet another ambiguous battlefield.

The American people are pro-war so long as it happens somewhere else. When the war comes home, military doctrine has failed. This is, essentially, the predicament that faces our military institutions, though the failure rightly belongs with the politicians. The long-term implications of this abuse of military power are far more threatening to America's future than any rogue terror groups. Most politicians don't want to talk about this contradiction. They stick to familiar bromides about America's obligations to the world. They moon over generals and soldiers, as well as the military contractors who make these wars possible with their advanced weaponry.

History tells us that what brought down mighty empires of the past was hubris—the confusion of weakness for strength.

Might America be next? Cheerleaders insist that the United States is exempt from the lessons of history, but don't count on it.

We are now governed by an obsolete militarism that does not serve the national interest. The obsession with arming ourselves for World War III is backward-looking, and so, too, is the madness of deploying forces in hundreds of overseas bases. The warrior nation goes looking for trouble in other people's neighborhoods. Sure enough, we sometimes find it.

Our over-reaching military doctrine suggests masculine insecurity among military planners—a crisis of virility, so to speak. If America looks weak, then the Pentagon must keep pushing for more and smarter guns that will bolster our national self-confidence. On the home front, this feeling of inadequacy is expressed in the new “open carry” laws. It's not

enough simply to own a deadly weapon; a real man needs to wear his “piece” holstered on his hip. He needs to take it everywhere, so no one can doubt that he’s a tough character.

The point is, American culture and politics are drenched in warrior celebration. Faith in military might is deeply grounded in the national psyche. After the failing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, we began to see patriotic rituals staged at baseball games and other public events to thank the returning veterans and their families, including the dead and wounded. But thank them for what? For their service and sacrifice, of course. It would have been offensive—unpatriotic—at those commemorations if anyone had talked about the utter failure of these costly wars. Yet even in defeat, the authorities stick to cloying triumphalism and tell stories of American goodness that people long to hear.

The national dilemma boils down to this: We cannot tell ourselves the truth about who we are and what we have become. In the history of nations, that failure has often led to tragedy.

Brooding on the American predicament, I began to grasp that our situation threatens to resemble the tragic fate of Samson, the legendary biblical warrior. Samson’s struggle was portrayed in *Samson Agonistes*, the epic drama by 17th-century English poet John Milton. I first read Milton’s work in college, long ago. Re-reading it now was a disturbing experience.

Samson was the Old Testament giant said to have slain a thousand foes with the jawbone of an ass. When he was captured by the Philistines, however, the mighty warrior was

shorn of power—they cut off his hair, the source of his God-given strength, and plucked out his eyes (“O dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon”).

“Blind among enemies! O worse than chains,” Samson laments, in Milton’s great poem. The fallen Samson is rendered “eyeless in Gaza, at the mill with slaves / Himself in bonds under Philistian yoke.” Samson’s agony was never being able to escape his own habits of violent mind and thought, and his prison was “the dungeon of thyself.” The hero ended badly: Samson pulled down the temple and destroyed the Philistines, but also himself.

The United States, I decided, is trapped in *America Agonistes*. The country could still avoid Samson’s fate, but to do so it has to let go of its egotistical presumptions. The delusion of being all-powerful and always virtuous is a dangerous road.

America has to back away from self-righteousness and ignorance because, sooner or later, rival nations will become powerful enough to ignore US intimidation. They will devise methods and weapons to push aside the myth of US invincibility. They will target our obvious weaknesses, including economic ones. This warrior nation finances its arsenal by borrowing abroad. What happens if China decides to stop lending?

The United States has to discard the superpower’s strategy for peace before it is too late. Obviously, that’s not going to be accomplished by the 2016 election. It will require a generation

or longer, in the best circumstances. What we can do now is start a serious conversation about how to escape our warrior agonies. That is, we start telling ourselves the truth.

* * *

I was in kindergarten when Japan bombed Pearl Harbor and the United States mobilized to fight World War II. War is a terrible thing, my mother explained, but she assured me that America would win. For small boys like myself, that war was truly glorious, if no one in your family got killed. We built models of American fighter planes and cheered the newsreels reporting on US victories. We scanned the skies over Ohio for enemy bombers and collected tin cans for the “war effort.” We didn’t learn about the Nazi death camps until after Hitler was defeated.

I experienced American military institutions up close many times across the years, but by lucky timing, I never got shot at myself. Unlike the chicken hawks who talk tough but never wore the uniform, I actually served in the Army. My brief tour was in the 1950s, between wars (Korea and Vietnam). Life in our multiracial barracks was a new experience for most of us—North and South, white and black. We got along more or less because the drill sergeants told us we had to.

Later on, as a young newspaper reporter, I covered intense political crises that confronted the military during the Vietnam War. The antiwar movement, the long trial of Lt. William “Rusty” Calley for commanding the massacre in the village of My Lai—those events helped formed my perspective.

Like so many young people, I was antiwar. Yet I retained an abiding respect and selective admiration for the military as a social institution.

As the years went by, my disgust swelled for the increasingly deranged assumptions of what passed as defense strategy. But I came to recognize the virtuous strengths of the military organization—virtues society needs, beyond preparing for war. I described this potential in some detail in my book *Come Home, America* (2009). My notion is that the military can and should somehow become more integrated with society—not through restoring the draft, but by using the military's skills and rigorous performance standards to meet large domestic challenges. In time, this could transform the military and make it more useful.

Other than fighting wars, what could the military do for America? From my personal experience, I would say quite a lot. In some ways, it already does accept social change and sometimes leads it. By presidential order from Harry Truman, the armed forces became integrated long before the rest of society (and now tackles gender stereotypes).

The great achievement of the volunteer army is the military's expertise as a teacher. High-tech weaponry is not for dummies. The armed services do training and education at a very sophisticated level. They know how to teach by disciplined repetition. They know how to select capable students.

I have seen this up close at various military installations. On a destroyer off the Atlantic Coast, I watched a 22-year-old kid from Los Angeles, Petty Officer Eddie Ramirez, repairing the jet engines that powered the ship. He told me he had signed up for the Navy's "Seaman to Admiral" program but didn't really aim to become an admiral. "Number one, I want an education," he told me. "Number two, it's like payback time. The Navy did for me. I'm going to do for the Navy."

The military, in other words, provides a ladder of upward mobility. The opportunity promotes ambition and loyalty, gratitude and fierce identity, within the ranks.

At their best, the military services make and keep an unwritten social contract with men and women in uniform—top to bottom. Loyal troopers agree to follow the orders from command. The services agree to take care of the troops and their families. Indeed, the great irony of conservative American politics is that the armed services actually operate a paternalistic subculture that has strong resemblances to socialism. Housing, healthcare, clothing, entertainment, and education are provided without charge to the workers and retirees. In return, soldiers agree to take life-threatening risks on behalf of the larger society.

* * *

The nation is now in need of another antiwar movement, but this time its approach should be different. Instead of trashing the military, antiwar activists should study the institution's

virtues as a social organization and imagine how those skills and organizational assets could be adapted to correct some of the nation's domestic failings, including growing inequality.

Naturally, some old soldiers as well as old peaceniks would resist mixing military with domestic obligations, but I'm hoping they will be able to see this is a necessary alternative to the tragic fate of Samson, the warrior. A defense strategy that simply pursues messy new wars is a dead end for the country. The United States is not going to disarm, but it desperately needs a plausible exit from the irrational status quo.

Number one, the new politics must forsake wars fought not to win but to teach diplomatic lessons. Wars should be engaged only if the nation is truly attacked and directly endangered. That was the condition that compelled America to fight and win World War II. None of our subsequent wars have met that standard. A lot of old soldiers agree: Don't go to war unless you truly must, unless you have no choice but to seek victory.

Number two, reforming US military posture can help to restore international laws and limits on war-making—the universal principles that America helped to create after World War II. American invasions since then as well as the secret tactics of our Special Forces and our drone killings have helped to undermine those old rules and have badly tarnished our values, degrading what was one of America's highest achievements. We Americans have a moral obligation to help restore the principles.

The United States has a compelling moral burden to address its own grave errors and insure they are not repeated. This difficult task is one of the key moral issues that can unite the military with peace advocates.

Think of it this way: Imagine that a rival military power arises in the world with the influence and the authority to demand a contemporary version of the war trials that followed World War II. Would American leaders be in the dock, accused of war crimes? What would they say in their defense? ●

5 COMMENTS

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