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Red Sky at Morning: America and the Crisis of the Global Environment

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Introduction

JOANNE MYERS: Good morning. I'm Joanne Myers, Director of Merrill House Programs, and on behalf of the Carnegie Council I'd like to welcome our members and guests to our Books for Breakfast program.

This morning, Earth Day, we have as our guest speaker James Gustave Speth. He will be discussing his book, *Red Sky at Morning: America and the Crisis of the Global Environment*.

Why should we care about the environment? If you pose this question to a European, he or she may point to global warming as a reason for concern. In Asia or South America, people there will tell you that it is air pollution that causes them the most difficulty, while Africans will share with you their concern over premature death and illnesses emanating from water-related diseases. People the world over are apprehensive about the future of our planet and they wonder how we can protect the global environment for the next generation.

On a day that commemorates our planet, it seems only fitting to have as our guest speaker a man who not only shares these concerns but has always taken an active role in stimulating popular support for environmental issues. And now, with the writing of *Red Sky at Morning*, he has once again challenged us to do something about the environmental problems we are facing today.

In this recent work Mr. Speth warns about the failures to protect the global ecology and the competence of the international community to prevent biological impoverishment. He offers intriguing insights into why we have been able to address domestic environmental threats with some modicum of success while largely failing to do so at the international level.

The central hypothesis of the book is straightforward. It is about challenging those who believe that international negotiations, treaties, and agreements of the past decades have prepared us to deal with global environmental threats, because he believes these efforts have failed. He tell us why and what we must do to address these dangers.

Throughout his career, Mr. Speth has provided leadership to those seeking to combat environmental degradation and has either created or directed many of the most important environmental institutions of the past thirty years. He was one of the co-founders of the Natural Resources Defense Council, founder and President of the World Resources Institute, advisor to both Presidents Carter and Clinton on environmental issues, and Chief Executive Officer of the UN Development Program. Today he is a Dean at the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies.

It gives me great pleasure to welcome to our Books for Breakfast program Mr. Gus Speth. Thank you for joining us.

Remarks

JAMES GUSTAVE SPETH: Thank you, Joanne, for that introduction. It was better than the book and should have been the preface.

A recent article in *The New York Times* read: "Any blind spots Condoleezza Rice had upon taking office in January of 2001 might have been rooted in the fact that she emerged from a generation of scholars trained to focus on great-power politics, with terrorism seen as a troubling but subordinate element."

We're missing the boat on environmental issues, much as we were missing the boat on the seriousness of terrorism before, and the community in our country and many other communities that worry about international affairs treat these issues as decidedly secondary.

I was talking to a group of Yale undergraduates the other day, and wondering out loud, "What is going to be their Cold War, the galvanizing challenge for this new generation that's coming along?"

The more challenging struggle, the more difficult struggle, the more long-lasting struggle, will be the fight to save the planet, and we must start that fight right away.

The story that I tell in the book begins about twenty-five years ago. During the Carter Administration, we were doing a lot on domestic environmental issues. They had come forward with the first Earth Day in 1970. Almost all of the environmental legislation that we have in our country was passed in the enthusiasm of the early 1970s—the Clean Water Act, Clean Air Act, Endangered Species Act. It was a bipartisan period, and we spent the decade getting these programs off the ground.

But as reports came in about global-scale issues, all of a sudden it dawned on us that there was a new generation, a new agenda of environmental problems, that was very different from the local issues that we tackled at the first Earth Day and have been tackling since in the United States. This was an agenda of global-scale concerns that seemed more remote, more chronic, but also more threatening and difficult.

In 1979, the Carter Administration sponsored the first National Academy of Sciences' report on global climate change which warned: This is a deathly serious problem that governments must take seriously and must act on.

Information on deforestation was coming in. We were losing an acre a second of tropical forest. Associated with this was would be the greatest wave of extinction of species on the planet since we were probably hit by an asteroid 65 million years ago. We were losing arid and semi-arid lands through the processes of desertification. And on down this list of global-scale concerns.

There was a concerted effort in the early 1980s, starting with the Carter Administration's Global 2000 Report, to put these issues on the international agenda. A huge outpouring of effort has occurred over the last twenty-five years to deal with these global-scale concerns, our first attempt at global environmental governance.

On only one of the ten major issues I address have we seen substantial progress, and that is in protecting the ozone layer. Since we have taken many of these ozone-depleting substances out of our economy, out of spray cans, out of refrigerants, by 2050 the famous ozone hole over Antarctica will perhaps have closed. If we keep doing the right things between now and then, we won't have to wear as much sunscreen or broad-brimmed hats.

The Montreal Protocol is the big success of global environmental governance. The rest is tragic.

It is estimated that about 15 percent of the species in the tropics have been committed to extinction because we've now cleared perhaps half of the tropical forests. We're losing species at an estimated 100-to-1,000 times the natural rate that species do disappear. Lord May, the head of the Royal Academy in the United Kingdom, says, "We're on the breaking tip of the sixth great wave of extinction on our planet, and this one is the only one caused by humans."

Every year we are losing an area about the size of Maine to arid land deterioration globally, the land reduced to virtually zero agricultural productivity, and that has continued at that rate for most of this period.

In 1960, 5 percent of the ocean fisheries were fished to capacity or over-fished. Today that number is 75 percent. It's estimated that 90 percent of the big predator fish of the oceans are gone; we're down to a 10 percent remnant. About 75 percent of the hard coral in the Caribbean has been degraded, virtually died. If you add one more degree of global climate change to the oceans, you will have repeated coral bleaching incidence and the rest of the coral will likely go.

The global climate change issue remains the most serious. Between 1980 and 2000, emissions of climate-changing gases have increased by over 20 percent. The projection for 2025 is to increase it by a lot more than that continually.

One of the models has the southeast of the United States becoming a big grasslands savannah, too hot and too dry to support trees or crops.

The maple-beech-birch forest of New England disappears in all of the models. Half of the land area of the United States is projected to be unable to sustain the plant and animal communities if we allow the base case, the "business as usual" scenario on climate change, to unfold throughout this century.

The following rivers no longer reach the ocean in dry season: the Colorado, the Yellow, the Ganges, the Nile, and

several of the rivers going into the Aral Sea.

And I haven't even talked about the toxic substances soup that we live in. The head of the European Environmental Commission decided she'd have her own personal fat tissue tested for the presence of toxic organic substances, and lo and behold, she found what everybody has been saying, which is that each one of us is carrying around literally dozens of highly toxic, sometimes endocrine-disrupting, chemicals at very low levels, and who knows what this is doing to our society and what it will do over time.

This is one problem where we just don't know what the effects will be. We know the chemicals are toxic, we know that they are synergistic, we know they are in us, but we don't know the long-term effects. We know that it is also global. The population on the planet with the highest level of these chemicals are the Inuit.

So, if you look back, this first attempt at global environmental governance was a failure. It wasn't a complete failure, but by and large the situation is deeper and more urgent today than it was twenty-five years ago.

If we don't understand how serious the situation is, if we don't understand what we are doing, how we are homogenizing and impoverishing the planet's biology, how we are disrupting the planet's climate, how we are toxifying ourselves and natural systems, we will never be willing to undertake the serious action that we need to deal with them. That's where we are today: we don't understand and we are not acting.

So you have to ask two questions at this point: Why did this first attempt at global environmental governance fail so thoroughly? What do we do now if we want to deal with these issues? And how urgent is the situation?

Why? We had a mindset in the 1980s when we began to formulate how to deal with these issues. On the domestic scene, we had had an air pollution problem, so we enacted a Clean Air Act; we had a water pollution problem, we enacted the Clean Water Act. This was extended to the international level: "If we have a climate problem, let's have some climate legislation, a climate treaty. We have a biodiversity loss problem, let's have a biodiversity treaty. We have a desertification problem, let's get a desertification treaty."

The main thrust of this first attempt at global environmental governance was international environmental law, the development of hundreds of international conventions and protocols to deal with these issues. There were huge negotiation processes going on all over the world.

What we neglected to do was to go after the drivers of these problems. We under-invested, and it cost money. You can't just legislate and walk away.

Let me discuss a few of these drivers.

1) Population. It's not the only source of these difficulties, but clearly we are severely under-funding the UN's Cairo Plan of Action to help developing countries and others deal with population pressures.

2) Concern about globalization. There are anti-globalization demonstrations every time the World Bank, IMF [International Monetary Fund], WTO [World Trade Organization] meet. We are finding ways through these processes of globalization to jump-start growth at a point where we haven't done anything to make that growth sustainable.

3) The routine deployment of environmentally-ignorant technology. We have continued all over the world to invest heavily in technologies that came along at a time when nobody was concerned about the environment. We keep using them in the radically new world in which we live today.

4) The scale and size of economic activity on the planet. In 1950, the world economy was about $7 trillion. It has taken all of history to get to $7 trillion. How long does it take us to add that amount today? Five to ten years. The world economy has doubled in size and then redoubled since 1960, and it is very likely to double and redouble again in the next fifty years. If this is done with anything like the techniques, technologies and sensitivities that we have applied to date on environmental issues, then you can kiss the planet goodbye.

I am not arguing against the growth. But when George Bush said he was not going to support the Kyoto Protocol, he made a very simple statement: "It will hurt the U.S. economy." That was the end of the conversation. And we haven't yet revisited the question.

So there is a list of drivers that we haven't dealt with. Instead, we put all our effort towards international environmental law and developing agreements. It's not like domestic legislation at all. You can't have majority votes in international negotiations. Every country gets to have its way or walk out. They are sovereign states. Any country that wants to water down an international agreement to some level that its economy, its industries and its businesses can live with can do so.

The United States fought to keep the Kyoto Protocol weak, and then they walked away from it. The Japanese try to keep any fishing controls weak, and that's why we're losing all the fish. The Brazilians have kept any kind of

forestry treaty from even getting to the starting gates.

We have invested all of our energies in a system that is fundamentally flawed. The problem with these agreements is not weak compliance or weak enforcement, but fundamentally weak treaties. We have toothless treaties and we have a system that will inevitably generate toothless treaties unless we change it.

That's my diagnosis of what happened and how we made one of the biggest mistakes that governments have ever made, because we have let twenty-five years go by, and while we have learned a lot, we must act with real urgency as we are on the brink of appalling environmental deterioration globally.

This brings me to urgency. You can see from these growth rates, from the fact that we've already lost half the forest, half the mangroves, 40 percent of the fresh water is already extracted, the fish are going fast, the coral are going fast, biodiversity is going fast, that it's already urgent, it's already late, too late in many cases.

What can we do?

1) Go after the drivers to turn this around, to start investing in sustainable human development around the world. If countries face severe problems of underdevelopment, poverty, failing economies and prospects for their people, they will not pay much attention to what we are thinking about on climate.

We know so much about how to tackle the population issue internationally, and we should be investing very heavily in that today.

The developing world is critical to making these agreements work and to making international governance work. We promised at the Rio Earth Summit that we would double development cooperation to get this job done, to bring them into an international program of sustainable development. We walked out of Rio and cut development assistance rather than doubling it.

The United States has been a bad actor on these issues. One issue where the United States did go out of its way to get the job done was in protecting the ozone layer, and it worked. We sent people all over the world to negotiate with other countries before the big meetings and get everybody primed to act. We led that process and it worked. Since that time, the United States has been a foot-dragger on essentially every agreement, and the current Administration has raised this to a high art form.

I mention it in the context of development assistance because the United States has been in the basement of the OECD [Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development]. The most generous country on earth? No, the chintziest country on earth when it comes to providing development assistance, last in the OECD in terms of development cooperation as a percentage of GDP.

You can have action forcing regulations, you can have R&D policies, you can provide tax incentives to radically transform the technologies that are being used in the economy.

We have an economy that gives all the wrong signals environmentally. We are not incorporating the full cost of environment into prices, and so we have prices that are very misleading, and people over-consume environmentally destructive products. It's simple neoclassical economics: why aren't we internalizing the full cost of the environmental externalities in price?

Then, on top of that, our governments come along and create about $800 billion annually in environmentally-perverse subsidies. So the prices are all wrong and we don't have environmentally honest prices, and we've got to face up to that.

2) We need to re-jigger the whole way in which we go about making international agreements. A story from The New York Times not too long ago: "European Commission takes four European countries to the European Court to enforce drinking water standards agreed to at the European Union level." That's what we need internationally.

We need to create a World Environment Organization. We have a World Health Organization. We need a strong specialized agency of the UN focused on environment, and we need to give it some power and money.

It is no accident that the weakest UN agencies are those that deal with the environment. The UNEP [UN Environment Program] has a budget that's not much bigger than the budget of the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC). The Nature Conservancy budget is many times bigger than UNEP's budget.

3) We have to encourage what I call "jazz," or "green jazz," because if there's one thing that's working in the world today, it's the voluntary initiatives that the Rotary Club and business people are taking in international development. We've got scores of big companies in our country that are voluntarily reducing their greenhouse gases. And they are doing it far ahead of any governmental requirement.

NGOs are the maestros of jazz. The NRDC chased Mitsubishi with the Mexican groups off of a whale calving ground

in the Laguna San Ignacio in Mexico. The Wildlife Fund joins with the government of Brazil and they set aside a protected area in the Amazon twice the size of the United Kingdom.

These initiatives are being taken spontaneously. New Haven has a 20 percent renewable energy goal. Twenty-six states are taking actions that will improve the climate situation. California is regulating carbon, the principal climate gas, from tailpipes. Massachusetts is regulating carbon from power plants.

If you look out across the country, you see a slow but steady emergence of a green consumer movement, a very powerful green investor movement with trillions of dollars now in environmentally-screened investment portfolios of mutual funds and pension funds, and environmentally-conscious families and communities and religious organizations.

We talk about the environmental movement loosely, but we need a real movement of citizens, scientists, concerned business leaders and leaders in all sectors of our society to step up to the plate, because the politicians have let us down. If citizens don't take the helm, we will lose this fight.

JOANNE MYERS: Thank you very much.

I'd like to open the floor to questions.

Questions and Answers

QUESTION: Would you comment on the for-profit private-sector ability to undertake some of what governments will not finance?

SPETH: My book has been criticized by some as not being sufficiently anti-corporate. Corporate power is a serious problem in our world, and abuse of it is serious, but many corporations are taking extraordinary initiatives.

Paul O'Neill left Alcoa with a greenhouse gas phase-down goal and went to Washington and couldn't get the Administration to move on this issue. In the meanwhile Alcoa went ahead with the goal and achieved dramatic change.

Many companies are getting interested in international development issues. It's not entirely altruistic. There's a streak of leadership in it, there's a streak of altruism in it, but the biggest undeveloped market in the world are the three billion people who live on less than $2.00 a day.

The most interesting thing that happened at Johannesburg, and the high point of the meeting, was when Greenpeace and the World Business Council jointly convened a press conference.

You have classical music being played over in Treaty Hall, where all the treaties are being negotiated endlessly, and then you have jazz being played over here by the NGOs, companies and religious organizations. What they were saying at Johannesburg is: "What we need is fusion to bring the jazz and the classical music together and provide the norms, and turn the creativity of the private sector loose."

QUESTION: I gather that you don't think the politicians in the United States are steering the decision-making. Does it matter who wins in November, for example?

SPETH: I've been asking people that: do you think this upcoming election is the most important election we've ever had in the United States in recent years? Almost everybody says yes. I bumped into somebody the other day and they said, "No, no. The most important election was the last one."

I've never seen such a mobilization of people who are concerned about the issues that I've addressed. People are alarmed, people are frightened, and they are deeply distressed that these issues haven't made it into the political dialogue.

Imagine John Kerry getting elected and his not having had to address these issues because the voters didn't care about them. He has had to address a dozen other important issues. He comes into office with no mandate on these issues. He has mandates that he must deal with on the other issues. And he's got a split Congress, a split country.

Would it be better? Absolutely, it would be much better. But will we have the momentum to tackle these issues with the seriousness that they deserve? So we need to get into this political process this season in a major way.

QUESTION: In the U.S. world of commercial self-interest, perhaps your enthusiasm for fusion can result in something. I'm always puzzled why solar energy has not been the most primary drive of this country. That is, the fossil fuel problem would be so solved with solar energy, or converting cars to electric motors.

SPETH: I didn't talk much about energy, but the biggest problem that the United States has is our energy system in terms of its contribution to these challenges globally, as well as many domestic and security issues. It is reprehensible that our political leaders are not directing us towards a decent energy strategy.

Go back and look at some of the things written at the time of the oil embargo, mid-1970s, about what we should be doing in this country on energy, and it's as fresh today as it was then.

We desperately need to move to high energy efficiency. We are half as efficient as the rest of the OECD in energy use. We could milk our current energy supply for twice the production.

Wind is one form of renewable energy that is taking off. Germany has the equivalent of ten big nuclear power plants in wind now. The Europeans are setting major goals for wind energy development. Warren Buffet is investing in the largest land-based wind farm in the world in Iowa.

If we made serious efforts, we could get the price of photovoltaic cells down to the point that they would be affordable.

And if we taxed fossil fuels and other destructive forms of energy to incorporate the environmental externalities, make us pay for the environmental and the security costs of oil and gas, and particularly coal, we would see a huge transformation in these directions.

The best thing that is happening in Washington right now is the McCain-Lieberman bill to establish a climate goal for the United States. They got forty-three votes in the Senate. McCain is determined on this issue and the Democrats are mostly in favor. It would establish a climate policy with a cap-and-trade scheme for greenhouse gases for the United States.

QUESTION: Are there efforts, should there be efforts, will there be efforts, to put together a broad-based, localized public relations campaign, so that people who live, for example, in the southeast, areas that down the road could be decimated by climate change, can begin to see these problems affecting their own lives, which is what is necessary to put the political pressure to bear on these issues?

SPETH: If I had $100 million right now, I'd spend it on doing just what you said. But you asked is somebody doing it, and I don't see it happening.

I'll tell you a story that will upset you, if you're not already upset. I was with a group of people that the Rockefeller Brothers Fund convened. These were storytellers, people who do film and ads on these issues that I've been discussing. There was one company that produces innocent, beautiful pictures of the environment that they show in theaters in the United States along with the previews. Apparently they were catching on.

They got a call from something like the National Association of Theater Owners, and the theater owners said, "We're sorry. We're going to stop showing your things."

"Why?"

"Too political."

There was no message except pictures and maybe something at the end—"save nature," or "love your mother"—but it was not a political message, it wasn't even a policy message. They have been told that until after the election it's too political to be for the environment.

We need to get the advertising talent in this city well funded to do a sophisticated public education effort. We had the beginnings of that in the 1970s. Everyone remembers the Native American standing by the polluted river, and a car flies by and throws trash near his feet, and a tear comes out of his eye. It was powerful stuff. Walter Cronkite had a series, "Can the World Be Saved," every week, on his evening news. We need to get back to that.

QUESTION: Because President Bush announced that he hates the Kyoto Protocol, the Japanese people are very disappointed. And it is not only the Japanese. The reason for their disappointment with the American attitude is two-fold.

One is whether America loses leadership to the multilateral agreements or negotiations, because from our point of view, the American leaders will be going to unilateralism. We are wondering if the American people will accept this trend to unilateralism, even after the election?

The second reason why the Japanese or the international community are disappointed at the American attitudes is that the American people, especially Congress, always use the excuse of China, that because China is not signing on, the United States doesn't have to either. But at the UN or other international organizations, people think that there is a clear difference between developing countries and developed countries, especially on the issue of

climate change.

Supposing that presidential candidate Kerry, or the new generation like you will elect the new President, will the new leadership still use the excuse of China to escape the duty of the developed countries?

SPETH: We haven't brought out the extent to which Europe and Japan are both taking these issues with a degree of seriousness which we are not even approximating in this country. Japan deserves much credit for its leadership in new technology across a wide front. They just sold or licensed the hybrid vehicle technology to Ford, symbolic of this.

The problem is deeper than the change in administrations, because quite honestly the Senate was a graveyard of environmental treaties and others, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Land Mine Convention, the Convention Against All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, and half the major environmental conventions, before the Bush Administration. The problem of American exceptionalism and thinking that we can go our own way in the world is quite entrenched.

We desperately need multilateral approaches and a strong sense of multilateralism. We need leadership from the top and thus a change in leadership.

QUESTION: Speaking as a European, we have a perception of this country as a place where corporate interests are very powerful politically, and particularly under this Administration, that it has been able to get where it is largely through corporate funding of political campaigns and that it is extremely responsive to certain corporate pressure.

Now you come and tell us: but the corporations are the good guys, they're doing all these wonderful things, they're playing the jazz, and we want more jazz in Treaty Hall.

Shouldn't these good-guy corporations be less squeamish about going to the political arena, because the ones on the other side are clearly not squeamish at all, and shouldn't they be aggressively funding campaigns and candidates who say that they will take action on these issues? After all, a corporation that is introducing environmental restrictions on itself or incorporating environmental costs into its budgeting is to some extent penalizing itself if there are other people who are free riders who are allowed by the governments, whether global or national, to avoid those constraints. So they would have a very strong interest in getting into Treaty Hall and getting their music played there. I would have thought that in a polity that is so open to corporate interests as this one appears to be, they could afford to be much more aggressive about this.

SPETH: I would second your statement. It is the next step, to go to some of the companies that are taking the right positions and talk politics.

But the corporate picture is very mixed. There are many good things happening and there are a lot of bad things happening.

The Administration made a determination as soon as the election was over that they were not going to risk the loss of the coal states, the coal-burning states, the coal-producing states, and they have not done a thing in four years that would put them at risk of losing that industry. Getting reelected is behind the Kyoto position and a lot else.

QUESTION: Implementation is very different from advocacy. This environmental movement is not new. More than thirty-five years ago, I was the Public Relations Director of the Natural Resources Council of Maine and on the governor's Task Force on the Maine Environment, and we did implement measures that would significantly change the environment of the state of Maine. Those were the early days of the NRDC. We were working with the Sierra Club.

The corporations were responsive to it over time, but it has to be financially feasible for them to do so. When you bring up West Virginia and the coal industry, remember that the political leaders of West Virginia were Democrats and that the coal-mining unions controlled the state and still do. These unions do not want any change in status through environmental measures.

Remember that in Eastern Europe and in Russia the ecocide was dramatic during the Soviet period, and in the post-Soviet period there have been significant clean-ups in Eastern Europe and now in Russia.

Ultimately, the solution is not only to be technologically advanced, but also to cut down on population. Western Europe is literally killing itself because populations have not been reproducing themselves. But other areas of the globe are reproducing themselves significantly. So where is the leadership to reduce population around the world? Who stands to make those decisions?

SPETH: There's so much we could do about global population issues. We know what works, we know how to bring fertility rates down: empower women, educate girls, maternal and child health care, employ women,

non-coercive family planning services. We could see global populations level off at 8.5 billion people if we did the right things. There is a huge opportunity there that we're not fully seizing.

Putting international pressure on the United States is very important, and not just political pressure. The Chinese just implemented a corporate average fuel economy standard for China that will keep a lot of U.S. automobiles off the market there if we keep selling what we are selling now.

The higher the standards are set in Europe on many issues, the more companies that try to operate in both markets will be pressed to comply with the European objectives, standards and goals, and ratchet up their behavior in other places and put pressure on the United States to get with it.

There is much that the international community can do. When Tony Blair says we've got to move to 60 percent, phase-down in greenhouse gas emissions, way beyond anything that the Kyoto Protocol calls for, that's very important. The Brits could do a lot right now to put pressure on the United States on many issues because of their special relationship.