

Facing the Hard Ones

Helping to Preserve Our Global Future



Getty Images/Ami Vitale

Malawian workers rest after unloading corn donated by the U.S. that will be distributed to relieve the food shortage in the capital of Lilongwe, Malawi.

This fourth approach stems from a strong belief that we should be focusing on very different obligations and possibilities. From this perspective, the most important problems facing us are long-term ones that know no borders. Americans, in this view, must focus on global problems because they are the real threats to us and the future of the world. And, what we must realize, say advocates of this choice, is that these are problems we cannot deal with alone — they require cooperative efforts with governments, international organizations, and citizens around the world.

“Issues of poverty, health, and the environment dominate the lives of a vast majority of the world,” explains Princeton Lyman, formerly U.S. ambassador to Nigeria and South Africa, “and if we cannot be responsive to them we will find ourselves facing increased unpopularity and anger throughout much of the world.” Without cooperation, Lyman fears, “we will not be able to address problems like the increased pressure of immigration, spread of infectious diseases, climate change” and conflicts that upset our security objectives.

The 2002 U.N. World Summit on Sustainable Development, held in Johannesburg, South Africa, took place just a year after September 11. Yet the summit’s focus was not on terrorism. It called attention to urgent and growing global problems that are not generally front-page news. President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa, in his opening address, observed that problems such as poverty and a worsening ecological crisis are “dark shadows under which most of the world lives.”

That “dark shadow” was literally true. Newspapers, some weeks before the Summit, had reported a massive brown cloud of pollution in South Asia. It is responsible for hundreds of thousands of deaths each year from respiratory disease. The pollution, mainly man-made, also reduces sunlight penetration, thereby reducing rainfall, affecting agriculture, and in other ways changing the climate. It is an example of many of the environmental problems whose effects are felt around the world. The main task of the 10-day Global Summit was to develop a plan for a world increasingly marred by dying lakes, retreating forests, scarce drinking water, and desperately poor people.

As advocates of this approach see it, the World Summit demonstrated something about how the most important advances will be made over the next few decades. Heads of state from every major nation except the United States attended. But so did about 50,000 individuals from all nations, representing hundreds of dif-

ferent nongovernment groups, including environmental organizations and international alliances. In that sense, the summit suggests the possible influence and power that thousands of people from all over the world might have when they acknowledge common problems.

To advocates of this approach, this suggests a scenario of action led in part by individual citizens and nongovernmental organizations such as Greenpeace, the Red Cross, CARE, Save the Children, and the Sierra Club. The collective influence of millions of individuals who belong to such groups can bring about widespread change.

Every Nation's Concern

We live in a world where we are all wired together, say advocates of this approach. Many problems — the destruction of the tropical rain forests, deadly epidemics such as AIDS, ozone depletion, refugee crises, starvation — are not problems of any one nation, or any particular group of nations. They affect everyone, and they demand a global solution, in part because no nation acting alone can solve them. Our success in dealing with these issues will, to a large extent, determine the kind of world we leave to future generations.

A major worldwide concern is the spread of deadly diseases. Borders do nothing to stop them, say advocates of this choice. If we had any doubt, it was removed in recent years by finding on our shores strange and exotic diseases like West Nile virus and the Ebola virus.

Advocates of this approach are very concerned about a report from the CIA's National Intelligence Council released in September 2002. It warned that the HIV/AIDS pandemic continues to spread around the world at an alarming rate. It estimates that AIDS cases may triple by 2010 to as many as 75 million cases in 5 "next-wave" countries — Nigeria, Ethiopia, Russia, India, and China — which have over 40 percent of the world's population. The CIA report warns that life expectancy in each country will fall. For example, it predicts that in Nigeria life expectancy will fall from 61 before the AIDS epidemic to 47 by 2010. The report points out that all five countries are major regional or global players, and the growing AIDS cases have the potential to dramatically affect their political, social, military, and economic future.

What Needs to Be Done ?

Government Actions

- The U.S. must take the lead both figuratively and financially in cooperative multinational efforts to deal with global problems, although this will cut into our military and domestic budget needs.
- The government should accept and support the goals of international agreements, even if signing them limits our own freedom. this means reducing military spending.
- The U.S. should share any medical knowledge acquired in the fight against AIDS in this country, and push drug companies to provide proven treatments at low or no cost to needy nations.
- Domestically, the United States should use its regulatory power and tax incentives to make environmental protection a priority, ensuring this nation becomes a positive example.

Citizen Actions

- Work with other Americans and people around the world through various environmental and humanitarian organizations to help solve global problems.
- Help create a worldwide movement to end injustice and economic disparities that afflict the poorest in the world.
- Set an example of unselfish use of the world's environmental resources by cutting home energy use and giving up gas guzzling cars.
- Accept that we may have to pay more for medicines so drug companies can cut their prices in developing countries.

While the disease continues to take an enormous toll on sub-Saharan Africa, attention is now being focused on the Eurasian epidemic, which is about to become the largest in the world. The Clinton administration called the global spread of AIDS a national security threat; the National Intelligence Council and political experts from opposing sides now agree that it could be. They warn that the more HIV/AIDS spreads among the young and educated who are the skilled workers, teachers, government elites, and members of the military, the greater the economic cost of their disease to their countries and the world.

Advocates of this choice say the political instabilities and economic losses created by this disease in far-flung regions cannot be contained within borders. So, besides being the right thing to do, they say, it is in our own self-interest to share our

A Rwandan child cries while he waits in line at a feeding center in the ruins of the Biaro refugee camp, south of the Zairian town of Kisangani, Africa.



AP Photo/Adil Bradlow

medicines and knowledge. They point out that the AIDS situation in the United States is improving because of education, early detection, and treatment. The estimated annual number of AIDS related deaths in the U.S. fell approximately 70 percent in 6 years, from 51,670 deaths in 1995 to 15,603 deaths in 2001.

Drug companies, in reaction to the world outcry over their efforts to prevent low-cost generic HIV drugs from being produced, are slashing prices of their drugs for the poorest and hardest-hit countries. Yet estimates made by UNAIDS are that \$10 billion is needed yearly to mount a global response to HIV/AIDS. Advocates of this choice say the United States needs to take the lead in providing this money.

A Good International Steward

Proponents of this approach say that because the major problems of today are global ones, we must realize the importance of being part of cooperative international efforts to solve them. They say President Bush's refusal to attend the Johannesburg World Summit was a particularly clear example of a negative role the U.S. has often played. Repeatedly, we have acted as the spoiler on international issues, dragging our feet. One example is the Kyoto

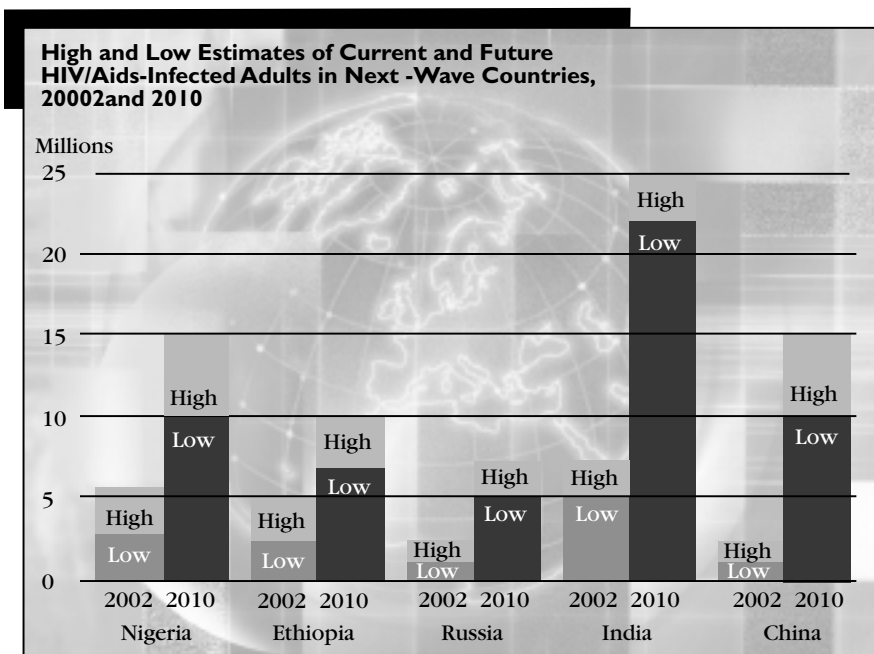
Protocol of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, which reached fruition in 1997, after ten years of intense international negotiations. It imposes on the developed countries that sign it, mandatory reductions in carbon dioxide and other greenhouse-gas emissions that are linked to global warming. Environmentalists consider it a beginning step in desperately needed efforts to deal with a critical environmental problem that impacts everyone's future.

Yet the United States government continues to oppose the Kyoto Protocol, in the belief that the targets set for greenhouse-gas reductions would cause serious damage to the American economy. Corporations and business groups say the targets are too burdensome, and many experts agree that the treaty is not perfect.

Advocates of this choice say that as the worst polluter among nations — responsible for more than 25 percent of the world's greenhouse gases — we must be an example of both an economic power and an environmentally conscious nation. Any effort to clean the air and water are worth the short-term economic costs, they say. And, they add, we can always work to change the agreement once we have signed on to its major goals.

The lack of willingness by the United States government to work cooperatively with other countries to confront global problems is a great concern for advocates of this choice. Former Assistant Secretary of Defense Joseph Nye points out that the United States played a prominent role in promoting other such multi-lateral projects as the Law of the Seas Treaty, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, the Land Mines Treaty, and the International Criminal Court. But it has failed to ratify them. Advocates of this choice say this makes it appear the United States is willing to go along with international accords only when they suit its purposes.

The point is our lack of cooperation on the issues that affect not only us but the rest of the world weakens any attempts to solve the problems and creates deep resentment toward Americans. It is, to many people, inconceivable that the American government would refuse to sign agreements such as the Land Mines Treaty, which could protect the lives of innocent civilians as well as our soldiers. Advocates of this choice say such actions make us seem two-faced when we try to preach to the world about human rights and democratic values.



When Secretary of State Colin Powell addressed the Johannesburg Summit, his remarks were nearly drowned out by protestors. Many of them called on the United States to take a major role in addressing pressing problems.

As advocates of this approach see it, that is exactly what we should do. Instead of standing on the sidelines, the United States has an obligation to take a leading role in a collaborative, multinational effort to deal with global problems. We must set an example of what global stewardship means in the twenty-first century.

We must judge all our actions, public and private, on an unselfish basis, say advocates of this approach. We must decide whether they help to create a sustainable and healthy world that takes the well-being of our children and grandchildren (and the well-being of future generations around the globe) as seriously as we do our own.

Tradeoffs

Advocates of this role realize it will mean that we must reevaluate our spending priorities and target more money for international assistance and for support of international organizations. This money will have to be cut from our domestic and defense needs. Also, more corporations — like the pharmaceutical companies that are dramatically reducing their prices for drugs to combat AIDS in Africa — may have to use profits from sales in the developed countries to offset lower prices in underdeveloped nations. And, individual Americans may be compelled to change gas-guzzling habits for less self-indulgent and perhaps more expensive ways of living within environmentally acceptable limits.

We will also need to reconsider the refusal of our government to abide by the rules of international agreements. We will need to embark on new, international, collaborative efforts to address problems that ignore national boundaries. This will have to happen, even if in some instances — emissions controls over power plants or mandating fuel efficient vehicles — they subordinate our self-interested choices to efforts for achieving long-term global good.

In almost every respect, from the point of view of this approach, progress is likely to depend on the tradeoff of some immediate U.S. habit or assumption — even some modification



AP Photo/Dario Lopez-Mills

in our typical independent stance. Yale professor Paul Kennedy says, “Our deepest national interest lies in taking the fate of our planet seriously and investing heavily in its future.” In the not-so-long run, according to advocates of this view, the payoff will be apparent to the next generation of Americans.

WWF activists, protest leaders to wake up to global environmental issues, outside the Sandton Convention Center at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Opposing Voices

If most people acknowledge that the intent of this approach is noble, many, nevertheless, voice reservations about the measures it favors. Both the data and the diagnosis, they say, need to be carefully examined.

In the late 1970s, a U.S. government report entitled *Global 2000* contained an alarming message about more world hunger and food scarcity by the year 2000. The forecast was substantially wrong. In fact, according to the U.N.’s Food and Agriculture Organization, the number of malnourished people in developing countries declined by 40 million between 1992 and 1997. Most of the alarming forecasts contained in *Global 2000* about a world in decline were inaccurate, say critics of this approach.

And, they say, we are committing the same mistake again by giving too much weight to forecasts of rapid environmental decline and worsening conditions in developing nations. Danish political scientist Bjorn Lomborg, author of the book *The Skeptical Environmentalist*, says that far from degrading the environment, “we are actually leaving the world a better place than when we got it.”

Prudent measures can and should be taken, say critics, to address the overuse of nonrenew-

able resources. But it is virtually impossible for anyone to know what resources future generations will need, beyond clean air and water. The American way of life is about freedom of choice, and about making technological innovations to deal with new conditions.

Critics of this approach say we don't need international agreements like the Kyoto Protocol to get results. Americans are already working to improve the environment in various ways including state efforts to deal with greenhouse-gas emissions. For example, New England Governors along with officials in Canada have agreed to a plan to decrease emissions to 1990 levels by 2010. And Washington's public-private partnership to reduce traffic congestion, which began in 1991, has taken 20,000 cars off the road every morning, reducing carbon dioxide emissions by 53,000 tons.

Our Interests

There are other valid reasons why we should go-it-alone rather than sign on to many international agreements, say critics of this approach. We need to protect American interests, and at times these differ from what the rest of the world sees as its needs. For example, while many countries see the need for banning land mines, the United States sees a need for land mines to defend South Korea from North Korean tank incursions. And, as long as the United States continues to play a major role in international peacekeeping operations, we have to protect American soldiers from unjustified charges of war crimes before the International Criminal Court.

Critics of this approach also argue against increasing our assistance to developing nations.

They say it may well be used by corrupt or inept governments for their own purposes. For example, they say, more American money and interference is not the

answer to the HIV/AIDS crisis in the rest of the world. What it takes is commitment by countries themselves to do something about the problem, as has been proved by the success of Thailand and Senegal in controlling the rate of HIV infection.

Of critical importance, say opponents of this approach, is that we balance our global commitments to environmental protection, improving health care, and reducing poverty, against all of our other commitments, at home and abroad. Our first priority as a nation has to be our own domestic needs and problems. Spending billions of additional dollars trying to solve the world's ills will deprive us of funds needed to deal with a wide range of domestic concerns. Before undertaking a larger commitment to the world's problems, we have to attend to our own security first, and to the problems of those who are poor and underprivileged here at home.

