



# Cambridge Climate Research Associates

## *Climate Science for Human Survival*

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## Eco Views & News

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## Transitions and Transformations

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We have all been made aware that we live in a time of transition. After the recent election in the United States we have been updated through all the available media -- almost on a daily basis -- about what the "transition team" of the new President was doing or proposing to assure a change of government from the Cheney-Bush White House to a brand new administration in Washington.

In many instances the new policies proposed by the Obama administration have been heralded by the press as if they represented major transformations. Consider, for example, how MSNBC presented one of the administration's first policy announcements on environmental matters after assuming control in Washington (see: "[Obama reverses Bush policy on climate change.](#)" MSNBC, 26 January 2009). In this report we are told that "[Today this country's environmental policy changed dramatically.](#)"

Well, perhaps this is so. Certainly, there are many American citizens who hope this is true. In fact, after Barack Obama won the election in November 2008 and before he was formally sworn in as President in January numerous environmental groups launched public campaigns to get him to commit himself and his new administration to take a more positive stance in the world community on both the fundamental reality of climate change and the willingness of the his administration to take a leadership role in devising international diplomatic agreements to address the crisis facing humanity.

Perhaps most notable among these groups both in the American domestic context and internationally

was a citizen's group calling itself [350.org](#), inspired and spearheaded by the well known and highly respected author and environmental activist, Bill McKibben (see: "[Bill McKibben: 350 seconds on 350.org.](#)" YouTube, 25 August 2008). The group seeks to educate the public about the urgent necessity of the goal to reduce green house gas (GHG) levels in the atmosphere to the level no higher than 350 parts-per-million (ppm), a level which the globe has already exceeded.

The outreach program of this group included an explicit campaign which used YouTube and the Internet to present the world with a dramatic animation of the circumstances the human community now faces. The animation was cleverly designed and carefully constructed so that in less than two minutes of viewing time it could reach over all linguistic barriers by using commonly recognized symbols throughout the international community. (See: "[350.org: Because the world needs to know.](#)" YouTube, 9 June 2008).

Before the American election was complete, this organization sought explicitly to get each of the major candidates -- Senators Obama and McCain -- to take seriously the international climate negotiations that were scheduled for December of 2008 in Poznan, Poland. Specifically, the organization, 350.org, undertook to mobilize an international write-in "petition" designed to to request that whoever won the election should begin their respective administration by attending the UNFCCC meetings in Poland (see: "[350.org: The World Invites the Next Prez to Poland.](#)" YouTube - 350org, 23 October 2008).

As it turned out, shortly after the Obama win was confirmed, 350.org sharpened its appeal, focusing a message directly at President-Elect Obama. In effect they called upon him to assume a level of leadership on a global scale, reminiscent of grand gesture made by President John Kennedy's trip to an embattled Berlin and President Nixon's trip to China (see: "[Send Obama to Poland for the U.N. Climate Meetings!](#)" YouTube - 350org, 12 November 2008). In this instance, as in the earlier appeal to both candidates, the message was aimed at a broad, international viewership of YouTube, in an effort to urge people to build a sense of global public demand for the American political leaders to rise to the challenge of international negotiations that the United States has for so long during the Bush administration either ignored or tried effectively to subvert.

There is no doubt, then, that organizations like 350.org greeted the Obama presidency with a sense of great expectation. While President-elect Obama did not decide to go to Poznan, Poland to articulate a new approach to climate policy, there were, nonetheless, several encouraging signs in the period of transition before the inauguration on 20 January that in the realm of climate policy, at least there were going to be substantial changes in store, once President-elect Obama formally assumed office. At Poznan, Poland, for example, several Democrats close to the administration were present, and presumably represented his views to delegates, at least informally. Further, they no doubt, returned to tell him what the mood and thinking was of the international community gathered in the UNFCCC meetings. Senator John Kerry was interviewed by the BBC correspondent, and stated quite directly that President-elect Obama expected that America would henceforth take a leadership role on this issue in the international arena (see: "[US 'willing to lead climate push'](#)," BBC News Online, 11 December 2008 21:58 GMT, Thursday).

Perhaps more significantly, although President-elect Obama did not go himself to Poznan, he chose the occasion of the Poland meetings as an opportunity to make his first significant statement after the election on climate issues. He used the Internet and YouTube as the vehicle to convey the message in one of his Saturday statements to the American people. In fact, he targeted the message directly to a group of American state governors and international representatives of business who had traveled to California at the invitation of Governor Arnold Schwarznegger to attend what was called

the "Governors' Global Climate Summit." Governor Schwarznegger proudly introduced the video that President-elect Obama prepared for his conference to a grand hall of conference attendees who were quite moved by the message (see: "[Barack Obama Address at Governors' Global Climate Summit](#)," UCTelevision, 18 November 2008)

The impact of the video message was immediate and impressive for all those that heard it in the grand assembly hall. So extraordinary was the sense of change that Obama's message conveyed, that several of those attending openly cried for joy. The mood of this 17 December event was captured by the NPR program, "This American Life," and it was included as a segment of the 16 January 2009 devoted to describing this impact of this speech among key environmental activists in California and beyond (see: Excerpt from "[This American Life - The Inauguration Show](#)," NPR - This American Life, (16 January 2009). The full message of President-elect Obama was made available by the President-elect's transition team to the whole world through the YouTube - ChangeDotGov website (see: "[A New Chapter on Climate Change](#)," YouTube - ChangeDotGov, 17 November 2009).

But those who have been keeping an eye on how the media has been covering climate issues have begun to point to a new set of "controversies" that seem to be rehearsed now in the media coverage. (See: "[The Cost of Being Green](#)" NPR - On The Media, 13 February 2009). Given the fact that large corporations have a "dog in this fight," we should not be surprised that corporate media is likely to present these issues with a measurable bias. In addition, the collapse of many traditional media outlets -- whether newspapers or broadcast stations -- has led to the cutting back of professional journalistic coverage, just at a time when the public is starved for intelligent and sustained coverage of environmental issues.

In the face of the collapse of effective commercial media coverage and in the attempt to reach the public more directly, the Obama transition team turned to YouTube and the Internet both to consult the public and to reach out to the public in a new manner never before seen by an incoming President. Specifically, the transition team developed a structure on YouTube called "The Citizen's Briefing Book." (See "[Announcing The Citizen's Briefing Book](#)," YouTube - ChangeDotGov, (14 January 2009). Moreover it sought to use this vehicle for newly designated appointees to reach out to the public and explain some of their

considerations and priorities. (See "[Steven Chu Reacts to the Citizen's Briefing Book](#)," YouTube - ChangeDotGov, 15 January 2009, and "[Citizen's Briefing Book - Nancy Sutley Reacts](#)," YouTube - ChangeDotGov, (14 January 2009).

Further information about the environmental appointees was, in fact, readily available on the Internet. Dr. John Holdren, for example, had been appointed to the position of the President's chief science advisor. During the previous year, Dr. Holdren -- who holds positions both at Harvard and as the Director of the Woods Hole Research Center -- had been President of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (the AAAS). As the world's largest professional scientific organization, it had considerable visibility. Under his direction, the AAAS produced a very remarkable video for public distribution in conjunction with its 2008 annual meeting (See: "[AAAS Climate Change](#)," YouTube, 24 March 2007). Never before has a direct advisor to the President taken such a forthright and categorical stand on climate change.

Nevertheless, although everything about the "transition team" and its announcements about environmental policy and advisors looked as though the new administration wanted to signal a total transformation of its climate change policy and a radical shift in on the environment, there were other events occurring as well during the transition period. In particular, the President-elect made several key economic appointments, including people like Lawrence Summers -- who among others would be advising the President on how to cope with the failure of large American banks and how to address

the auto-industry executives who were asking for billions of dollars from the U.S. taxpayer. In addition, it has become apparent that even the military has begun to re-package its appeal to the President and to Congress as a form of "jobs" initiative to put America "back to work." (See particularly: [Bank Eat Bank: Bailout Encourages Mergers](#) [YouTube]; [Auto Execs Again Ask Congress for Money](#) [YouTube]; and Weapons programs re-branded as jobs programs (YouTube).

In these circumstances, then, it is not clear that the much promised "transformation" of America's climate, energy and environmental policies will turn out to be all that radical. If all that is achieved by the economic stimulus package is to re-stimulate the dying automobile technology and prop-up public works job rolls to provide for roads and bridges to service that dying industry, then the hoped for transformation that many Americans are waiting for will probably never materialize.

On a national scale, one of the lone spokesmen for using this transition moment for something that can truly transform America's economy and culture has been an activist called Van Jones. For several years he has been traveling across the country calling for the development of a "Green Collar Economy." (See "[Van Jones - Green Collar Jobs](#)," YouTube, 13 December 2007; and "[Green Jobs Not Jails - The Third Wave of Environmentalism](#)," YouTube, 19 January 2008). If this country is going to move successfully to a post auto-industrial society -- as many have suggested it must, in order to survive -- it would seem that the leadership of Van Jones deserves our extended attention.

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*In forthcoming programs of Eco Views & News we expect to devote more time to the elaboration and discussion of the views of Van Jones and those of others involved in the broader environmental justice and climate justice movement*

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Van Jones