



THE WOODS HOLE RESEARCH CENTER

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More Disconnected Dots...

by George M. Woodwell

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Several recent front-page stories have carried an unusually disturbing series of messages, even for this sad time, reflecting governmental or institutional policies designed to exploit, frustrate or corrupt the public's interests that we establish governments to define and defend. They have ranged from our administration's rescinding a paltry and previously approved \$34 million subvention to the UN Population Fund; Israel's latest state-sponsored attempt to murder a moderate Hamas leader that resulted in 11 incidental Palestinian deaths and countless injuries, a report that banks were involved in the Enron scandal; to the news that the administration's new interpretation of a constitutional right to carry guns is being used in courts to defend criminal behavior.

One might hope for a word of objection, a voice of reason, speaking for, say, a well-defined program of a Democratic Party, strong in its knowledge that it had a majority in the last election and still represents that constituency. But no. Richard Gephardt and House Democrats are reported, not as opposing a right-veering minority administration off on the wildest ride of a century, but as pandering to illegal immigrants by offering them amnesty and citizenship. Legal immigrants struggle for years and may have to pay high fees to become citizens, but those who evade our laws and exploit our open system of government and administration are to be rewarded in hopes that they will vote for their saviors. Is that the best we can do in this frightening time?

There has also been a report that people intrinsically favor cooperation as opposed to competition, and that cooperation among cosmologists combined with new information from the recent advances in telescopes is unifying views of cosmic history and evolution. These are remarkable advances in science, noteworthy because they signal a sea change in perspectives. Similar advances in insights into human behavior and global biophysics exist.

What is wrong with global governance right now that it is so thoroughly inverted and destructive of any sign of progress toward reconciliation?

The major problem is bad, even stupid, US leadership and incredibly weak internal US opposition. Scorning international agreements and abrogating treaties while flexing military muscles and moving toward weapons in space threatens the welfare of all, nationally and internationally. And a "war" against terror, with an occasional focus of threats against wayward nations such as Iraq (and who knows what's next?), may play well with some of the political right, the gun lobby and elements of industry, but it does not make for easy collaboration around the world. And there is an urgent need for collaboration, all the more evident as the World Summit on Sustainable Development, scheduled for August 24-September 6 in Johannesburg, approaches.

The big issue is global climatic disruption. It is not a distant threat. It is underway and costing the world more daily. There are many effects centered around the warming (and drying) of the continental centers. Unprecedented wildfires have occurred this summer in the West associated with drought. Similar drought has afflicted central Asia and caused erosion and dust storms and famine as well as an increase in the frequency of fires across Siberia. Alaska, once dreaming of the advantages of a significant warming, has discovered the reality of the disruption. A rapid warming has caused insect



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populations to soar, trees to die, once permanent ice to melt and soils to collapse and houses to tumble and roads to decay and a pipeline to collapse into a thawing tundra. And this is only the beginning of a series of changes that are irreversible once entrained and can be as costly as a sudden rise in sea level of feet to several yards and an equally sudden change in oceanic currents that alter climates grossly. Yet it is the announced official policy of the current administration of the US to ignore this issue, to avoid having it discussed among all the nations at the Johannesburg World Summit, and to advance an energy policy of the United States that scorns the problem and will in fact make it worse.

If the opposition is inchoate or uncertain as to just where to go and what to do at the moment, it might reconsider such a simple question as to just where the public interest and the expectations we all have of democratic governments might lie. It might have a look at the energy problem and decide that it is essential that the US stand forth in leadership immediately at Johannesburg and offer a way of reducing emissions of heat-trapping gases, not as agreed to under the Kyoto Protocol, but far beyond it. An immediate reduction of 20% in greenhouse gas emissions by the US is a realistic possibility through simple steps in conservation alone. We could do it as a national contribution to environmental stability, but also as a contribution to political stability by reducing internal dependence on foreign oil from unstable and undependable nations. We could do it as a contribution to reducing a soaring balance of payments problem and a sinking value of the dollar. And we could do it as a sign that the US is rejoining the world as an actively helpful citizen, recognizing an inherent human characteristic favoring collaboration over competition. Or we could do it out of selfish motives in wishing for a sustainable human habitat for ourselves and our children.

Come, Mr. Gephardt and Democrats, connect up a few more dots...