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**POLITICAL AND SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS
OF POSSIBLE CLIMATIC CHANGES**

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There is something rather ludicrous about a learned paper on the political and social implications of the end of the world. Obviously, since we do not have much reliable historical information about this sort of event, the author can only offer some speculations which, however well-informed, are of debatable quality. And the reader, insofar as he or she actually believes in impending disaster, will doubtless be disappointed by the absence of any specific recommendations about how to survive. Yet while this exercise may seem foolish, it is undertaken because of the conviction that it would be even more foolish for our society to continue as if drastic climatic change were an impossibility.

Of course, it may be a little too dramatic to speak of "the end of the world." Human beings, as members of a hardy and cunning species, shall prevail; the human organism can cope. But man is more than an organism. He is a highly gregarious animal, and it is the social arrangements he has built up—which in fact define his existence—that would be imperiled by a severe modification of the environment. It is the end of the social world we speak of here, and that could be as deadly as a more tangible sort of disaster.

Again, past experience is a poor guide in contemplating twentieth-century responses to permanent climatic change. In pre-historic times, whole peoples may have been able to migrate in search of a more hospitable environment. Our complex social and political institutions make that alternative impossible today. Quite obviously, most of us are unlikely nomads; one cannot pick up and move a large metropolis. Just as important, even if we were mobile, there would be no place to go; aggressively guarded international boundaries prevent the peaceful movement of large numbers across the face of the earth. In fact, we know enough about the selfish side of our fellow Americans—the attempts of some communities to limit further growth is a notable example—to

realize that refugees would not be welcomed with open arms even in more temperate parts of the United States.

If we view social institutions as artifacts designed to provide stability in the face of scarcity (i.e., valued things in any society can seldom be equally distributed), then it is plain to see that an intensification of scarcity through natural causes would have serious consequences. The easiest doomsday scenario can be drawn from the field of international relations. The major military powers derive their strength from their access to natural resources. It would not be surprising if these powers, including the United States, should begin to covet the bounty of weaker neighbors if climatic change were threatening their gross national product. That is, to ensure national survival, the more powerful states might be inclined to impose their will on other countries. At the same time, those states living on a small reserve of food might well be impelled to follow an expansionist course. One can trace many routes from the onset of long-range climatic change to the Third (and last) World War. The redefinition of the "haves" and the "have-nots" would undermine what little international stability we now have.

Climatic change would also have the gravest impact on domestic politics. Even now, in what we consider to be "normal" conditions, there are clearly apparent defects in our political machinery. We have succeeded as a nation for two hundred years, but the strains in our system are now so noticeable that the next hundred is problematic. Our natural resources have given us a comfortable cushion so that we have been able to practice a relatively peaceful style of politics. With or without climatic change, it is not fearmongering to suggest that the good old days are gone forever.

It is already true that our society has become so complex, so fragile, so interdependent, that we are vulnerable to

even very brief deviations from the normal climate. The point was graphically illustrated recently in New York City. A century ago, a thunderstorm was only a passing nuisance; today, if we are to believe Consolidated Edison, it is enough to loosen the social fabric for millions of people and to disrupt communications throughout the entire nation. On the other coast, a bit of folk wisdom has it that two hundred years ago when it rained, people got wet; today in Los Angeles, when it rains—and brings traffic accidents, earthslides and flash floods—people get dead. Simply put, we are so complicated that natural events are no longer regarded as natural; we defy them and are the inevitable losers in our attempts to fool Mother Nature.

The issues posed by the distribution of natural resources, especially water, further illuminate the problem. Water resources policy has been, to use the jargon of political science, “distributive.” That is to say, water has been regarded as a nearly free good belonging to a single landowner or, at most, a very small geographic area; the idea that one can claim “This is *my* water” does not strike Americans as unusual despite the worldwide scope of the hydrologic cycle. However, in the exploitation or supplementation of this resource, small localities have demanded, and generally received, support from larger units of government. Water has been seen as something to which every American citizen has a god-given right, regardless of cost and of more economical uses. In the not too distant past, our apparently limitless supply of wealth and water convinced policy-makers that everyone could receive his payoffs. Government has seldom said “no” to anyone wanting water, for whatever purpose. We have been just as gloriously profligate in other areas, such as energy, which would also be affected by climatic change.

We were given a cruel preview of what is in store during the winter of 1976-77. With extremely cold weather in the East and drought throughout the western states, many people could see that there simply was not enough slack in our economy to sustain everyone in the manner to which they had become accustomed. Yet the political system has not yet dealt with any of the hard choices implicit in the facts of the matter. Indeed, when President Carter made a bold move to re-examine a number of pending water projects, most of which are products of the traditional pork-barrel style of politics, he suffered a serious defeat. This was in spite of the fact that the completion of the projects, especially in the semi-arid West, will only encourage the further population of those areas most susceptible to future climatic shock.

The crunch has already arrived, even if we do not face further scarcity induced by climatic change. There is not enough to go around, at least as we presently make allocative decisions. We delude ourselves if we think there is some easy technological fix; even if we put scientists in Boston to work on turning water into gas, and those in Berkeley on converting gas into water, our finite resources cannot be stretched far

enough. Attempts at providing public relief to those areas impacted by natural disaster have become, even in the short term, prohibitively expensive. For example, by July 31, 1977, drought relief efforts had cost taxpayers nearly one billion dollars; and the number of affected areas included 41 states and over two-thirds of all counties. The question naturally arises: When the whole country is declared a disaster area, who will pay the bill?

Politicians have recently taken to orating about the coming “era of limits” and to issuing calls for the development of a less wasteful “life style.” So far, these leaders have found it hard to practice what they preach. But we cannot heap the blame on the deficiencies of our statesmen. This is, after all, a democratic society, and one can make a good argument that public decision-makers are only giving the public the sort of government it wants and, for better or worse, what it deserves.

The whole question gets back to the degree of congruence between social reality, which we can control, and physical reality. To a certain extent, any human progress depends upon the ability of people to overcome their reality; the course of civilization is a triumph over those doctrinaires of one true faith or another who are always happy to assure us that any change is impossible. We in the Midwest should be especially grateful that the pioneers displayed a heroic contempt for the facts of the situation and proceeded to develop what was then the Great American Desert. There must come a point, however, when the intractability of the physical world will overwhelm the most strenuous human efforts. For example, those migrants to southern California from Iowa and Illinois who feel that there is some inalienable right to a lush bluegrass lawn and ornamental ponds in their backyards are trying to live in a world which simply does not exist. Southern California is a desert and we cannot afford the cosmetics needed to disguise that fact.

Viable social institutions should be sensitive enough to adjust to changes in environmental reality. Unfortunately, that conclusion has often inspired technicians to assert that they should be society’s eyes and ears—and hands with which to force people to do what is “right.” But this is not a matter for social engineering and no easy institutional answers come to mind, beyond the most obvious, i.e., the imposition of a centralized allocation system which would have the power to beat each individual into conformance with some predetermined plan of distribution. Such systems have existed often enough in mankind’s history—Egypt, Persia, China, Peru—and all have ultimately collapsed. Moreover, to purchase sheer survival at the price of despotism would be repugnant to anyone with a sense of human dignity.

A democratic system requires that the scientists and other technicians remain “on tap and not on top.” But even in that role, the experts can perform a valuable service. To begin with, we need much more basic research into the relationship

between society and environment during periods of climatic stress. As we have just learned, there is no solid information about the impact of drought on social and political institutions and each time this sort of event occurs we are unprepared. In another area, scientists must continue to educate the public about the vagaries of climate. It would seem that we are a people obsessed with weather, and weather forecasting is both folk art and science. At the same time, we are climatological illiterates. Thus we brood about whether it will rain tomorrow on our picnic or parade, but we do not spend much time wondering if it will rain in ten years so that we can continue to eat.

In good times and bad, a democratic system must still depend upon the shared perceptions of all its citizens. All members of the community must adjust to a new physical reality, as painful as that adjustment may be. And if the adjustment is to be healthy, it must be more than a debilitating sense of resignation. To persevere in spite of a changing climate, that is the challenge. The results of this symposium on climatic change, it is hoped, will be one contribution to the difficult business of reconciling the social and physical realities.

To return to the original question, then, what will be the social and political implications of climatic change? The only reasonable answer is "it depends." The possible dislocations are now beyond calculation. How we will respond to these dislocations is still another matter. An informed public may be able to respond to new and terrifying environmental problems without a fatal amount of divisiveness if—and this is a very big if—the public cooperates in the construction of a new social reality.