

Acceptance Remarks by

Al Gore
for the

Global Environmental Citizen Award

Harvard Medical School
Center for Health and the Global Environment

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Thank you, Meryl Streep thank you. And Eric Chivian, thank you. To those of you who have supported Eric's Center, Paul Epstein and others who are part of this fantastic scientific team, I want to say personally this Center has been extremely important to my understanding of the global environmental crisis. And I have learned from the scholars who have dedicated themselves to a study of the relationship between human civilization and the Earth's ecological system at this Center as much as from any Center and I am very grateful. I have personally visited there, I've taken images to include in my slide show that I'm obsessively giving everywhere around the world. I gave it last week in Beijing and translated it into Mandarin characters, twice. This is a wonderful Center and to those of you who are on the board, to those of you who are corporate supporters and thank you very much, to Swiss Re physically represented here and others thank you. We should honor and lift up the corporations that have a conscience and express that conscience and understand that they have a license to do business.

There are so many distinguished thinkers, scholars, advocates here who have been about this work for longer than I have. I want to pay my respects. David Suzuki interviewed me many, many years ago in Canada about this topic, 1987, before I wrote *Earth in the Balance*. E.O. Wilson, a great teacher to me, and one of the founders with whom I joined, along with the late Carl Sagan, to create the joint appeal of science and religion which has now given birth to the religious partnership for the environment.

As we meet this evening another category 5 hurricane is making its way, perhaps, from the Caribbean to the Gulf of Mexico. It's not a mystery any longer why there has been a significant increase in category 4 and 5 hurricanes. They're fed by warmer water. The oceans are warming because the gaseous pollution of industrial civilization has changed the relationship between the earth and the sun. We're trapping more of the outgoing infrared radiation that would otherwise naturally escape from the earth and keep our relationship to the rest of the universe in balance.

I joked earlier about hubris in personal terms, but hubris has a distinguished pedigree as a noun. When we exceed the boundaries that creation has placed around our place in creation we run the risk of consequences. Fifty-five years ago, a little less, another kind of storm was brewing on the continent of Europe. Winston Churchill, in England, warned his countrymen that this storm was different from anything they had ever experienced before. The marriage of the industrial revolution, electronic mass communication, and totalitarian politics created a concentrated destructive force that was new and much more powerful than anything politics had ever encountered.

And he said the time for vacillation, for dithering, for indecision is now over. We are entering a period of consequences. Hurricane Katrina convinced many Americans that we have now entered a period of consequences. The images of Americans starving, *in extremis*, abandoned, helpless, fearful, nowhere to go, no salvation in sight, labeled as refugees in one of our great cities was a startling realization that we have entered a period of consequences.

More than 200 American cities set all time records for high temperatures this year. One of them was New Orleans. And the waters around New Orleans also set an all time record. When Katrina hit the southern tip of Florida it was a category 1 hurricane, but then it crossed over the Gulf, and the extraordinarily warm waters of the Gulf, warmed beyond the boundaries of previous human experience, fed the energy of that hurricane and it grew to a category 5. And it collected much more water than hurricanes have in the past and it drowned one of our greatest and most elegant cities.

There were warnings, but they went unheeded. The chief meteorologist in Louisiana working for the Federal government was beside himself trying to get attention for the clear scientific consequences of what he saw developing. We will see conditions, he said, that are unprecedented in modern times.

They predicted exactly which sections of this great city would be drowned when the levees broke. But the warnings, as I said, went unheeded and a lot of people died unnecessarily and America was shamed before the world. When our founders wrote about the new message of this great revolutionary departure in human history they said that we should humbly always maintain a decent respect for the opinions of mankind, by which they meant humankind. We've been shamed before the opinions of humankind.

I was in China last week as I mentioned and a student at Ching Wah University asked a question through the interpreter. "We've always respected the United States," she said "but after the recent hurricane we saw degradation that puzzled us. How could this happen to Americans?" she asked.

Four years ago, in August, during another time that is often described as the dog days, there was a warning that, and I quote, that "Osama Bin Laden is determined to strike in the United States of America." And that warning was not heeded either. If it had been, if a meeting had been called, and if the head of the FBI and the CIA had been asked to collect the available intelligence from their field offices they would have found the full names of 80 percent of the hijackers who later flew the planes into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and the field in Pennsylvania. They would have found the plot, they would have found the training on how to fly planes received by people who were not curious about how to land the planes, they would have found enough evidence to prevent that tragedy.

But my purpose in drawing a comparison between the warnings unheeded in New Orleans and the warnings unheeded prior to 9/11 is to point toward other warnings that are right now being given to us and that are also being unheeded.

The scientists who follow the rule of reason and respect the principle of the best evidence, now tell us that we are creating an imbalance in the relationship between civilization and the earth and that the most prominent manifestation of this dysfunction is global warming. Perhaps a term that could have been better when it was first formed but there it is. What it really means is that we are destroying the ecological balance that has existed since just prior to the beginning of human civilization.

At the end of the last ice age 11,000 years ago the climate balance formed, stabilized and has remained persistent since that time. The first cities only emerged 1000 or 2000 years later. The places where people live have been selected according to where the rain can reliably be predicted to fall, where the crops can be reliably predicted to grow, where the harbors are benign, where people can find fresh water, where people can raise families and create communities in which they can pass on knowledge from one generation to the next and build the sum total of civilization's value. And all that balance is now at risk because the places where the rain falls, where the droughts occur, where the crops will grow, where the harbors are accessible, where the shores are friendly, all of that is now subject to change. Not because of the gods, but because of us, and because of hubris and because the relationship between human civilization and the earth has been utterly transformed.

In the last 100 years we've quadrupled our population and population is a success story but there it is and the dynamic and the momentum is very powerful. And technology magnifies the ability of the average person everywhere on earth, especially in advanced countries, to have an impact on the environment and our philosophy, again a Greek word, has somehow changed. What has been stripped out is a concern for the future. Why? The economists use discount rates and precisely, mathematically quantify the meaning of the future for the present. And our grandparents, all of us, felt that we should take care in our present generation to act in ways that did not diminish the prospects of the generations to come.

One of my professors at Harvard when I was an undergraduate was Erik Erikson, one of only two human beings, the other being Anna Freud, who became a psychiatrist without becoming an MD. And he drew a map of the stages of individual growth and the stages of awareness in the human life cycle and one of them which is reached in middle age he called 'generativity' the concern for future generations, and of course Ed it has an evolutionary advantage, as you know better than anyone here ever could. Have we lost that?

I wonder. I don't know the answer. I believe the answer is no. I believe the answer is that we, as Lincoln said, even we here have the capacity to rise above ourselves, and the true message of America is that even we here have a transcendent capacity to become more than we ever thought we might become. But now is the time to call on that capacity. Now he said, Lincoln did, that "we must disenthral ourselves and then we shall save our country."

We are now enthralled with illusions, shadows and light. Plato wrote that his representative people in the cave who saw the shadows thought that was all there was. But then they learned that there was a source of reality greater than that. T.S. Eliot wrote that between the thought and the deed falls the shadow. We are enthralled by shadows and light: on televisions and movies and advertising and culture. We must disenthral ourselves, realize the reality of our situation and save our country.

I'm hopeful. I'm optimistic. And I want to close by saying that I truly believe that we, even we here, have everything we need to change our present course, to reestablish balance, to provide an avenue for the emergence of a way of life that enables us to find that transcendence. We have everything we need, save perhaps one element, and that is political will. But in America, political will is a renewable resource.

Thank you.