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Reflections on the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development

MITCH McCONNELL*

Several weeks ago, President Clinton announced that he would commit the United States to targets and timetables to stabilize greenhouse gas emissions and that he would sign an international agreement seeking to protect the world's biodiversity. These two policy decisions mark a dramatic shift from positions taken by former President Bush at last year's United Nations Conference on Environment and Development. I want to take a few moments to discuss these issues in light of the changing administration.

The "Earth Summit" was touted as an historic effort to rescue a world teetering on the brink of self-destruction. Unfortunately, it was at times difficult to discern what the priority was: rhetoric or substantive progress. Sustainable international development requires not only environmental protection, but a realistic consideration of economic ramifications. In the face of enormous political pressure, former President Bush reaffirmed his commitment to sustainable development. The President did not succumb to the cacophony of pressure groups and commit the United States to wrongheaded proposals which could have wreaked havoc on our economy and on the lives of millions of working Americans. He stood firm against binding targets and timetables for greenhouse gas emissions, which President Clinton now plans to reverse. President Clinton's position may be fashionable in some circles, but it is not supported by the facts, and is short-sighted in its regard for real long-term prosperity and environmental protection.

No conclusive evidence has been garnered to support the proposition that our planet is undergoing significant long-term

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global warming. Our understanding of the earth's climate is quite primitive and does not take into account the dynamic interaction of such factors as water vapor, sunspots, volcanic activity, variations in the earth's orbit around the sun, and the effect of oceans and ocean currents. I ask why should we risk shackling our economy and determine later whether carbon dioxide emissions, in fact, present substantial risks of climate change?

We must adopt a policy toward global climate change that is consistent with the principles of risk assessment. While measures must be taken to minimize the *potential* for climate change, these measures should be the least costly alternatives in light of the many uncertainties. Our limited economic resources must be targeted to the most pressing environmental risks, not those which are unclear or remote. The United States and the world can take steps to mitigate the possibility of global climate change through efforts that produce environmental benefits without harmful economic impacts. Many such "no regrets" policies are already being implemented as part of the energy package enacted by Congress last year.

This result is exactly what the Bush Administration sought to accomplish in Rio in negotiating the Framework Convention on Climate Change. The United States led the way in crafting a thoughtful, reasoned response in the face of shrill rhetoric driven by domestic and international politics. In the end, President Bush's initiative was grudgingly adopted by the rest of the world. It requires nations to submit action plans to stabilize greenhouse gas emissions at 1990 levels, provides for technology cooperation and commits funding. It does *not* bind the U.S. or any other nation to firm targets which have uncertain environmental benefits but portentous economic impacts. The indistinct risks and economic impacts make President Clinton's announcement that he will adhere to targets and timetables ill-advised.

Some scholars argue that the President's energy tax will play a critical role in meeting the 1990 stabilization target and make U.S. industry more competitive and energy-efficient in the process. While energy efficiency is clearly a laudable goal as part of a "no regrets" policy, a number of scholars question the effectiveness of the proposed energy tax in changing energy consumption patterns. In order to have any impact on consumer behavior, many economists argue that the tax must be substantially larger, enough to impact overall economic activity. This

type of disabling tax is not a rational response to a problem we do not even know exists.

Last year, as a member of the Foreign Relations Committee, I took part in the Committee's consideration of the Framework Convention on Climate Change. At the time, I was very concerned about the possibility that a future President could unilaterally interpret the Convention's goal of carbon dioxide stabilization as binding. Although I strongly supported the climate treaty as interpreted by the Bush Administration, I nevertheless asked the Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee for his public assurances that if the targets of the treaty were interpreted by a future President as binding, that its ratification be reconsidered by the Senate. The Chairman gave his assurances, and as it turns out, my concerns were justified.

I am now waiting to see precisely how the Clinton Administration will move in interpreting the Framework Convention on Climate Change. If it interprets the treaty differently than the terms ratified by the Senate on October 7, 1992, I will seriously consider asking that the treaty be taken up again for ratification in light of its revised interpretation.

On the issue of biodiversity, former President Bush was widely criticized for his hang-tough stance on the Biodiversity Treaty. While I supported the former President's stand at the summit, I believe it is now time to move ahead cautiously in pursuit of an agreement that adequately protects both the world's biodiversity and American interests in biotechnology. The American biotechnology industry is the world's most advanced. The reason we are number one in the development of high technologies in general, and biotechnology in particular, is because the United States has made a long-standing commitment to the protection of intellectual property rights. Unfortunately, the treaty offered at the Rio Summit did not provide similar protections.

Former President Bush was completely justified in not being pressured to sign a bad treaty for a convenient election year photo opportunity. That stand took political courage. Acknowledging it has "some flaws," President Clinton now indicates he will sign the Biodiversity Treaty former President Bush opposed. I hope that President Clinton demonstrates similar courage in making clear to the international community our reservations, and in hammering out an agreement that adequately protects American intellectual property. International cooperation on biodiversity is imperative. The United States must continue its work

in the international community to forge such cooperation. However, we should not sign a bad agreement just to appease Third World nations and "green" special interest groups.

Despite perceptions to the contrary, former President Bush repeatedly demonstrated his commitment to protecting biodiversity by aggressively pursuing policies to slow world deforestation. At a 1990 summit of industrial nations, the President called for an international convention to address this matter and moved ahead on this policy despite international foot-dragging. The international community was slow to follow President Bush's lead in this area, and hopes for a forest convention at the Rio Summit were dashed. As President, George Bush challenged other developed countries to commit more money toward international forest conservation efforts by doubling U.S. assistance to bilateral forestry projects. These efforts had a positive impact in slowing the destruction of rainforests, which contain over half the world's species of plants and animals. The Bush Administration committed money to help developing countries devise and implement advanced forest management practices to sustainably manage their forests. This assistance is an important step for impoverished countries whose economies depend on revenue from timber, but whose forestry practices threaten the world's biodiversity. President Bush also requested \$734 million in environmentally-related foreign assistance in fiscal year 1993, up from \$293 million in 1990.

Looking back at the Rio Summit, there were an array of interest groups who delighted in bashing the United States but whose preoccupations appear to be far from that of sustainable development. Many of our "best" allies supported carbon dioxide targets and timetables to give them an enormous competitive advantage over the United States, which relies on its natural endowment of coal. The emotionally-charged pleas of environmental groups threatened impending environmental Armageddon, but their simplistic positions and catchy sound-bites flew in the face of sound science and made poor environmental policy. The media's need to summarize complex scientific issues into pithy bromides came at the expense of exploring the legitimate positions of the U.S. throughout the negotiating process. Third World countries wanted more foreign aid with fewer strings attached. And finally, there were the politically driven diatribes of politicians in the United States. All had agendas tangential to reasonable environmental protection. But then, there were

also those critics without hidden agendas: the apologists for U.S. policies who fail to recognize that no nation has done more, or spent more, on environmental protection than the United States.

I sincerely hope that President Clinton does not succumb to the enticing urge to gloss sound science and smear prudent policies in favor of environmental extremism. It is my hope that the one-sided coverage of last year's Rio Summit will not effectuate a tragic shift in the level-headed policies advanced by the past administration.

