

A Sustainable Environment: Our Obligation to Protect God's Gift

by
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The Origin and Future of the Green New Deal

About thirteen years ago, I read an excellent book by Thomas Friedman with the title “The World is Flat” where he describes ten different forces that have flattened the world. Because of the flattened world, outsourcing of jobs would become more prevalent. Something that I think about often from the book is the term referring to those people who don’t have to worry about their job being outsourced, the so-called “untouchables”. They are workers who are 1) special, 2) specialized, 3) anchored, and 4) really adaptable. Examples of “special” people are Bill Gates, Ariana Grande, and Michael Jordan. “Specialized” people cannot have their work outsourced because they may be a brain surgeon or a special type of lawyer. The “anchored” people include barbers, bartenders, plumbers, waiters, and even cleaning ladies. Their jobs are required at a specific location. The fourth and most difficult is being “adaptable”. These people have the capability to learn new skills and adapt to a different profession. An example would be people who may have worked in the oil industry for many years and then learn some new skills to move into the solar or wind energy fields. All other people run the risk of losing their job to another country.

I mention the above excerpt from this book only because it was followed by another book by Thomas Friedman called “Hot, Flat and Crowded”. From the title, it is obvious that he brings together climate change, the concepts of his previous “flat” book, and the concern of population growth – all more appropriate today than when he wrote it in 2008. A year earlier, Friedman wrote a column about the urgency to move forward rapidly with technology and innovation to mitigate these environmental concerns. Adapting from the name used by President Franklin Roosevelt to recover from the Great Depression which was The New Deal, Friedman has proposed his program as the “Green New Deal”. Even though President Obama supported this Green New Deal, it never took off. One of the reasons was probably because there wasn’t a climate change report like the one issued by the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in October, 2018. This is when it was reported that unless we take some drastic measures to reduce carbon emissions, there will be many more major catastrophes within 12 years. After this report was issued, two Democratic congressmen released their “New Green Deal” – even though it really wasn’t “new”.

This current New Green Deal is an excellent start to mobilize Americans to do something quickly about this major problem even though some of the recommendations in the proposal are probably not doable within 12 years and maybe not even necessary right now. In any event we must take action, and that includes all of our government agencies, Democrats and Republicans, corporations, NGOs and citizens. We all need to work together to reduce carbon emissions

before we are in big trouble. Despite all of the global agreements to reduce carbon emissions from the Kyoto Protocol in 1997 to the Paris Agreement in 2016, carbon emissions continue to increase. While the Kyoto Protocol demanded a 60-80% decrease within 50 years, there was a short-term goal of reducing emissions by only 5% within 15 years. Instead, by 2012 (15 years after the Kyoto Protocol) emissions grew by 58% and last year emissions went up another 3.7% to the highest level ever.

Going back to Friedman's "Hot, Flat and Crowded", even when he wrote it there were indicators that climate change was going to become very serious and destructive, and required a massive, urgent response commensurate with the scale of the expected problem and the time frame posed. Friedman said "Green is the new red, white, and blue" implying its importance to everyone in the U.S. The current Green New Deal is even more important because climate change is more critical than ever. Our state governments should follow the model of our most populous state. The State of California has worked independently to improve energy efficiency thus keeping per-capita electricity use constant for 30 years while the rest of the country has seen it increase by almost 50%. So its contribution to the increase in carbon emissions has been minimal.

About 14 years ago, I proposed an energy efficiency model for Chicago's Northerly Island. The model included wind turbines and solar panels for all electricity generation as well as using this renewable energy to hydrolyze water to produce hydrogen which would be the feedstock for fuel cells. All motors on the island, for lawn mowers and shuttle buses, would be powered by fuel cells thus making the island totally independent of the grid and carbon emission free. The intent was to demonstrate what life could be like 20 years later. Unfortunately, like Friedman's "Green New Deal" in 2007 this proposal also didn't take off.

However, times have changed and both of these would no doubt be accepted today. The current New Green Deal should be used as a wake-up call to our federal government, state governments, corporations, and all citizens. At a minimum we should follow some of the environmental models of the European countries that have taken climate change much more seriously.