Science & Technology

Global Warnings

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“It’s an appropriate day to talk about the challenges of climate change,” said Jason Bordoff, the former director for energy and climate change for President Obama’s National Security Council, on a ninety-eight-degree afternoon in July. “If I were still in government and we were trying to stagecraft a speech, we would have done this outside.”

Thankfully, Bordoff was not still in government: now director of Columbia's Center on Global Energy Policy, he addressed about thirty people in the Kellogg Center in the International Affairs Building. The occasion was the annual summer lecture series sponsored by Columbia's Hertog Global Strategy Initiative. This year's theme: "The History of Climate Change and the Future of Global Governance." Over the next thirty-eight air-conditioned minutes, Bordoff presented graphs, statistics, and geopolitical data that painted a troubling picture of the shifting global-energy landscape and its effect on Earth's climate.

First, the good news: thanks to a recent boom in oil and gas extraction in North America, the United States has reduced its dependence on coal and other carbon-heavy fuels. As a result, domestic carbon emissions are down to their lowest levels in twenty years. By 2016, Bordoff said, we will likely export more natural gas than we import, a shift with significant geopolitical repercussions, such as a change in Russia's leverage in Europe as its traditional monopoly supplier of natural gas.

"This is one of the really transformational moments in our energy history," Bordoff said.

So why wasn't he smiling?

"You hear some people say that we've solved our climate problem because we have a lot of cheap natural gas and it's displacing coal," he said. "I don't believe that's correct."

Gas may pollute less, but it still pollutes. And the fracking process has its own potential pitfalls. "We need to make sure drinking water is protected," said Bordoff, who believes that the "host of issues" associated with unconventional shale production "can be managed with the right regulation and enforcement."

But there's a bigger problem, and it's coming from the other side of the globe.

Over the past decade, emissions in the US have gone down, but China's have skyrocketed, and India's are climbing, too, as those countries increase their reliance on coal. "Greenhouse gas is a global pollutant with a global impact," said Bordoff. "Ultimately, it doesn't matter where it comes from."

And while the amount of our energy coming from renewable sources like wind is rising, it still accounts for a tiny percentage of our overall power — and will for a long

time. “Fossil fuels, even with serious climate policy, will still power our global economy for decades to come,” Bordoff said.

So what’s the answer? It is not, as one questioner suggested, a matter of making better individual choices.

“If you don’t use plastic bags, you use a reusable bag, and you don’t use paper cups, you use a reusable cup — does it matter?” Bordoff said. “We don’t want to discourage anyone from doing these things” — Bordoff does believe they can have meaningful environmental benefits — “but from a climate-change standpoint, they have a relatively small impact.”

No, to turn the tide on climate change, he said, we need smart, responsible policies with a global reach. “We need a cap on carbon, we need a price on carbon, we need some policy to help drive our emissions reduction.”

Bordoff, proving that you can take the man out of government but not necessarily vice versa, finished his talk with a slide projection showing a donkey and an elephant, both wearing T-shirts. “Drill, Baby, Drill!” read the elephant’s shirt.

The donkey’s shirt was a little more complex. “Increase domestic production, improve fuel efficiency, invest in clean energy alternatives, and reduce oil imports by 1/3, BABY,” it read.

“Which may not be the best slogan,” said Bordoff, “but it may be the right policy.”

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