

What is political tipping point with climate policy?

By Todd Wilkinson

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Seventeen years ago, when Secretary of State James Baker and Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze met in a rustic building near the shore of Jackson Lake in Grand Teton National Park, the diplomatic session, by itself, did not trigger the end of the Cold War.

The stage for a meltdown of tensions between the U.S. and U.S.S.R. had been set by several earlier events.

But the timing and place were credited afterward with inspiring these representatives of two global superpowers to dramatically alter the dangerous paradigm in which both nations approached a nuclear-armed world.

If, as writer Malcolm Gladwell suggests in his book *The Tipping Point* that it's often the intervention of certain people at critical moments in history that make a difference in changing public consciousnesses, small deeds can add up to a cascade of unexpected consequences.

Along those lines, the recent "unofficial" talks over energy and climate change, brokered by the Jackson Hole Center for Global Affairs, could be inching society, the energy industry, the Chinese government, and American leaders, closer toward another such tipping point.

Word on the street these days in Washington D.C. is that the Bush Administration is about to dramatically reverse course from its obstinate position on climate change and soon will unveil a strategy to address U.S. carbon dioxide emissions into Earth's atmosphere.

It would be welcomed internationally as a quantum leap forward. After all, should it be true, humanity 50 years from today will not look back and deride this Administration for dragging its feet on climate if in fact President Bush and Vice President Cheney dedicate the United States to taking bold action.

One of the biggest areas where an immediate difference can be made with CO₂ is in changing how electricity is generated in two of the largest economies on the planet—the U.S. and China.

The Jackson Hole Center for Global Affairs, under the direction of president David Wendt, recently went to China and promoted a process of turning coal into electricity called "integrated gasification combined cycle" or IGCC for short. In Malcolm Gladwell's lexicon, Wendt would be called a "connector" who operates like a bee cross pollinating ideas and bringing people of different perspectives but shared interests together.

You're going to be hearing a lot more about IGCC technology for it represents a radical improvement—indeed a paradigm shift—in power generation and it could re-position coal-rich

Wyoming, Montana, and the Shanxi Province of China at the forefront of a lucrative revolution in clean energy.

As China itself opens to more foreign investment and state-run industry shifts to privately owned companies and a market economy, government leaders in the People's Republic have demonstrated, time and again, that they do not make decisions impetuously.

The Chinese have shown themselves to be savvy and methodical when dealing with foreign entities, Wendt says. "Their relationships are cultivated through mutual trust that can only be established over time," he adds, referring to the ongoing discussions between Shanxi officials and Wyoming leaders. "They can take years to mature. We're finally seeing the fruits of that process. One thing about the Chinese is that when they decide to act, because decisions effecting the country are centrally controlled, it can have huge immediate repercussions."

This week NASA announced that the last three decades were among the warmest known to exist on Earth in the last million years—the result of human-caused emissions creating a greenhouse effect in the atmosphere.

Any hope of curbing CO₂ emissions and thus staving off the most drastic impacts of climate change globally cannot exist without addressing coal-fired power plants in China where 500 are scheduled to come on line and an urgent need exists to replace other facilities that are functionally obsolete.

At the same time, there is no better incentive more convincing for the Chinese than first seeing the Americans mandate state-of-the-art coal plants on U.S. soil, which could lead to a partnership in new technology.

The local Jackson Hole group, comprised of Wendt; former U.S. assistant secretary of state John F. Turner (who served under Colin Powell and who grew up on the Triangle X Ranch) and current Wyoming State Senate President Grant Larson of Jackson Hole, carried this message to meetings with Chinese officials in Taiyuan and Beijing.

Taiyuan is a Chicago-sized city in the Shanxi Province—as Rob Wallace of General Electric described it, "the Gillette of China"—but it is a sooty example of how poorly planned energy development, using old dirty technology, can have disastrous results.

The day we arrived, a few coal miners died in another accident and pollution, which is visible from satellites in space, cast a thick, gloomy presence in the sky. Every year, millions of people in China are treated for respiratory distress caused by bad air quality.

The Chinese are not callous, and as Turner and Larson said, they demonstrated a sincerity in working with the U.S. to find better ways of generating power that can propel the economy along and not harm its 1.3 billion inhabitants or the atmosphere.

Among those who attended the Clean Coal Forum sponsored by the Jackson Hole Center were top government officials in China, staffers with the Natural Resources Defense Council's China

office, which is recognized as a respected conservation organization by the Chinese government, and by industry, including General Electric-China. In the U.S., GE operates a prototype IGCC facility in Tampa, Fla.

It may be hard to believe, but the efforts of the Jackson Hole Center have caught the attention of the Bush-Cheney State Department.

Another indication of Jackson Hole's role in nearing a cultural tipping point is the interest from U.S. Sen. Craig Thomas of Wyoming, a believer that Wyoming's vast coal resources should be developed but in an environmentally sensitive way.

Thomas sees economic opportunities following in the wake of California, through the insistence of Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, enacting regulations that aim to reduce the state's carbon emissions and establish a carbon trading system.

A day after Wendt, Turner and Larson returned from China, Thomas joined Senator Dianne Feinstein in pushing for a study on how a 200 megawatt IGCC power plant could be erected in Wyoming "that can also sequester carbon dioxide emissions" and sell power to California, Thomas's own press release said. Has the world gone mad? Imagine: Craig Thomas the Republican joining Dianne Feinstein the Democrat in a green power project that involves carbon sequestration? The Jackson Hole Center influencing the U.S. State Department? Cowboy diplomats from Wyoming building a greener energy bridge to China?

What's next? Could the Bush Administration, influenced mightily by Vice President Cheney who owns a home in Jackson Hole's gated community of Teton Pines, possibly be readying to move the U.S. into the global discussion about climate change front and center?

Believe it.

The scenario gets better than that. Building IGCC plants are not cheap but the dividends they bring, experts say, are worth the investment. They cost between \$500 and \$600 million apiece but experts say the costs of construction will come down as more are ordered.

One earthshaking idea that grew out of the Chinese talks with the Jackson Hole delegation is creating twin, leading-edge IGCC power plants—one located in the Powder River Basin and the other in Shanxi Province that would be fully operational and used as learning laboratories by the Department of Energy intended to produce cleaner air, increase power capacity with less coal, reduce CO₂ and generate international goodwill.

An added benefit is that these prototypes could be licensed by private companies like GE, become the model for new plants, and transform the way that power is generated from coal, yielding huge opportunities for actually reducing CO₂.

As Gladwell notes in *The Tipping Point*, once great ideas go viral and become adopted in an epidemiological sense, there is no stopping them. All that Wyoming and IGCC needs is a champion in Washington.

Once upon a time, George H.W. Bush, the current president's father, used the Tetons as a backdrop to re-double the nation's commitment to improve air quality in America. Will his son return to the Tetons for an encore performance this autumn but with an issue global in scale that will affect human life for generations to come?

President Bush and Vice President Cheney: Are you listening?

NEXT WEEK: What is carbon sequestration and how can Wyoming's clean coal become part of the solution for addressing climate change instead of part of the problem?