



THE WOODS HOLE RESEARCH CENTER

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Earth: Too Small for War

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Our warriors in the Pentagon are complaining that environmental laws inhibit their capacities in training for war and in developing new weapons, according to a recent report in *The New York Times* (March 30, p. A 11). They are especially concerned about "the Clean Water Act, the Clean Air Act, the Marine Mammal Protection Act; the Noise Control Act, the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, and the Endangered Species Act." A special exemption from the Congress is deemed appropriate. They did not mention the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, having long since had the Congress set them both aside in the interest of effective control of any who might be defined as "against us." That's pretty much all there is to government aside from the tax structure, which one assumes they consider essential to the continued existence of the Pentagon and the conduct of wars.

One can develop considerable sympathy for those in the Pentagon charged with practicing for the ruination of the earth in finite segments. Practicing war is awkward around people, and people are more and more common. There was a time when we could test nuclear weapons in the atmosphere with near impunity. We did so at Alamogordo, New Mexico, in the Great Basin Desert in Nevada, and at Bikini and Enewetak in the South Pacific. The Russians did it at Novaya Zemlya in the high Siberian Arctic. The Chinese did it in central Asia. We learned that these weapons contaminated the whole earth with radioactivity that was rained out of the atmosphere for months after a test. The streets of New England towns had measurable radioactivity in puddles after the tests in Nevada and we could measure the radioactivity from all these tests on successive circuits around the world. The tests were driven underground in 1962 under a treaty led by the United States. The world was too small for such tests. That was forty years ago when there were less than 3 billion people in the world. There are now more than 6 billion.

Twenty-two years later the Reagan administration's adventures in war led to flexing of the nuclear muscles to the point where the scientific community felt it necessary to review the issue once again. In a major symposium in Washington, scientists from East and West pointed out that a nuclear exchange between the U.S. and Russia engaging only a small fraction of the weapons available would raise enough smoke and dust into the atmosphere to darken and cool the earth for days to several weeks. Effects on agriculture globally would be devastating quite independently of the effects of heat and blast and residual ionizing radiation. The weapons were clearly proved not only untestable in the atmosphere but also unusable. The earth was too small.

Meanwhile, the human undertaking expanded globally and a world that seemed large in 1950 suddenly became full by the year 2000 when we passed the 6 billion mark and the earth as a whole was beset by a series of major human-caused biophysical problems. Climatic disruption, long anticipated by the scientific community, had become reality as the earth warmed. The rate varies with latitude and locale, but a global rate of 0.1-0.2 degree C/decade depending on latitude is approximately what has been experienced over the last half century. Continued warming into the indefinite future seems assured unless we can stop the further accumulation of heat-trapping gases in the atmosphere.



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The consequences of an accelerating global climatic disruption coincident with both a continuing surge in the human population and a parallel surge in industrialization are such that scientists think there is a global emergency and were pleased to be able to advance the Framework Convention on Climate Change, which has been universally ratified. It takes the bold step of putting all the nations on record as intending to stabilize the heat-trapping gas content of the atmosphere at levels that will protect human interests and nature, a point long passed.

At the same moment we are watching the final destruction of fisheries, the cumulative poisoning of the land and water with industrial wastes, and the progressive biotic impoverishment of the earth as a whole, even as it becomes clear that the continuity of a habitable environment depends on the continuity of the life-processes that maintain that environment.

Suddenly, a new administration in the U.S., obsessed with war as the only antidote to global terrorism, is willing, even anxious, to abrogate environmental laws and elementary protection of civil rights such as clean air and clean water in favor of license for the military to expand the devastation through practice for a major further expansion. This latest assault on common sense comes as a small addition to a torrent of assaults on environment at the request of industrial and other commercial interests, which have the undivided attention of this administration to the detriment of virtually all aspects of the public welfare around the globe.

The fact is that the earth is beset on all sides. There is not space for the currently "normal" activities of six billion people in pursuit of the essential requirements for life. The biosphere is running down, losing capacity for support of humans and all life without the intrusions of war, or training for war.

The message is for Mr. Bush and Mr. Blair and Mr. Sharon and Mr. Arafat and for all other national leaders. We do not have space or place or time or wealth to squander on war. It is time to get back to the important job of re-adjusting the human undertaking to fit on a small earth before that earth, the only human habitat, and all of civilization cascade into irreparable impoverishment and chaos. War can only speed the process and guarantee the product.