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## Save the Economy, and the Planet

Environment ministers preparing for next week's talks on global warming in Poznan, Poland, have been sounding decidedly downbeat. From Paris to Beijing, the refrain is the same: This is no time to pursue ambitious plans to stop global warming. We can't deal with a financial crisis and reduce emissions at the same time.

There is a very different message coming from this country. President-elect Barack Obama is arguing that there is no better time than the present to invest heavily in clean energy technologies. Such investment, he says, would confront the threat of unchecked warming, reduce the country's dependence on foreign oil and help revive the American economy.

Call it what you will: a climate policy wrapped inside an energy policy wrapped inside an economic policy. By any name, it is a radical shift from the defeatism and denial that marked President Bush's eight years in office. If Mr. Obama follows through on his commitments, this country will at last provide the global leadership that is essential for addressing the dangers of climate change.

In his first six months in office, Mr. Bush reneged on a campaign promise to regulate carbon dioxide and walked away from the Kyoto Protocol, a modest first effort to control global greenhouse gas emissions.

Still two months from the White House, Mr. Obama has convincingly reaffirmed his main climate related promises.

One is to impose (Congress willing) a mandatory cap on emissions aimed at reducing America's output of greenhouses gas by 80 percent by midcentury. According to mainstream scientists, that is the minimum necessary to stabilize atmospheric concentrations of carbon dioxide and avoid the worst consequences of global

warming. Mr. Obama's second pledge is to invest \$15 billion a year to build a clean economy that cuts fuel costs and creates thousands of green jobs. That includes investments in solar power, wind power, clean coal (plants capable of capturing and storing carbon emissions) and, as part of any bailout, helping Detroit retool assembly lines to build a new generation of more fuel-efficient vehicles.

Mr. Obama has surrounded himself with like-minded people who have spent years immersed in the complexities of energy policy.

His transition chief, John Podesta, was an early advocate of assisting the automakers and of finding low-carbon alternatives to gasoline. Peter Orszag, his choice to run the Office of Management and Budget (where environmental initiatives went to die during the Bush years) is an expert on cap-and-trade programs to limit industrial emissions of greenhouse gases.

Success is not guaranteed. Last year, a far more modest climate-change bill fell well short of a simple majority in the Senate. At least on the surface, it seems counterintuitive to impose new regulations (and, in the short term anyway, higher energy costs) on a struggling economy. Mr. Obama will need all his oratorical power to make the opposite case.

The historical landscape from Richard Nixon onward is littered with bold and unfulfilled promises to wean the nation from fossil fuels, especially imported oil. What is different now is the need to deal with the clear and present threat of global warming. What is also different is that the country has elected a president who believes that meeting the challenge of climate change is essential to the health of the planet and to America's economic future.

## Beijing's Blind Spot

Despite rising calls for Tibetan independence, nearly 600 Tibetan exiles from Buddhist monasteries and the diaspora in India, Europe and America have wisely reaffirmed the Dalai Lama's "middle way" of nonviolence toward China and autonomy for Tibet. China's leaders are unwisely refusing to seriously pursue a compromise.

Tibetans, especially younger Tibetans, are increasingly frustrated. Eight rounds of talks since 2002 between the Dalai Lama's representatives and Chinese officials have yielded no progress. Beijing has invested heavily to improve the quality of life in Tibet. But it continues to restrict Tibetans' rights, while seeking to dilute their power by encouraging Han Chinese to migrate to the region.

During the latest round of talks, the Tibetans offered a memorandum that proposes to protect Tibet's culture, religious and educational traditions within the autonomy provisions of China's Constitution.

Beijing spurned the memorandum, and it continues to claim that the Dalai Lama's real plan is to break Tibet away from China. The Dalai Lama has repeatedly endorsed autonomy. And the memorandum could not have been plainer: "We remain firmly committed not to seek separation or independence."

In an interview this summer with Nicholas D. Kris-

tof, a Times columnist, the Dalai Lama made clear his acquiescence to another of Beijing's demands — that Tibet accept the socialist system under Communist Party rule. If China's leaders doubt his sincerity, they should test him with good-faith negotiations.

Time is running out. Anti-Chinese riots in the Tibetan capital of Lhasa in March showed that many Tibetans already have lost all patience. According to official Chinese reports, 18 civilians and one policeman died in a rampage that burned 120 houses and looted nearly 1,400 shops. Exile groups say Chinese security forces killed scores of Tibetans in the crackdown that followed. Governments and organizations around the world protested Beijing's brutality and obstinacy.

Beijing remains obstinate. China has now called off a summit with the European Union, scheduled for Monday, after the French president, Nicolas Sarkozy, made clear that he planned to meet with the Dalai Lama later in the week.

It is in Beijing's clear interest to pursue serious negotiations while the revered, 73-year-old Dalai Lama is still able to persuade his followers to accept a peaceful compromise. Instead, China's leaders seem to be betting that the problem will go away when the Dalai Lama dies. That is a cynical and dangerous gamble.

## Sewing Up the Safety Net

Largely missing from the discussion about the faltering economy is the recession's impact on the 37 million Americans who are already living at or below the poverty line — and the millions more who will inevitably join their ranks as the downturn worsens.

Poverty and joblessness go hand in hand. If unemployment rises in the coming year from today's 6.5 percent to 9 percent, as some analysts predict, another 7.5 million to 10.3 million people could become poor, according to a new study by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

The prospect of nearly 50 million Americans in poverty is even more daunting when one considers the holes that have been punched in the safety net over the last quarter-century. Since the Reagan administration, the federal government has steadily reduced its role in curbing poverty, or even in coordinating state and local efforts to help alleviate it.

Meanwhile, most states reduced or eliminated cash assistance for single poor adults and limited access to food stamps. Stricter eligibility requirements keep thousands of people from collecting jobless benefits. Facing budget deficits, cash-strapped states will be tempted to cut social programs even more. The experience of being poor in America, never easy, will soon become even

more difficult for more people — unless Congress boosts food stamps, modernizes the unemployment compensation system and takes other steps to strengthen the ability of the federal and state governments to help the millions who will need assistance.

This is all the more important since the current poverty statistics significantly understate reality. The federal yardstick used to gauge poverty is severely outdated, giving too much weight to some factors in a typical family budget, like the cost of food, and not counting others, like the cost of child care and out-of-pocket medical costs. It also doesn't consider regional differences in the cost of living and doesn't include the cost of child care, taxes or the value of noncash benefits such as food stamps or tax credits.

The National Academy of Sciences years ago recommended a new measure of poverty that takes such variables into account. But the revised framework has never been adopted because, among other reasons, it would add several million more people to the ranks of the poor.

If there was ever a time for more precise measurements, it is now. Better numbers will produce a better understanding of poverty, and will enhance Washington's ability to respond in the difficult days ahead.

## This Thanksgiving

In recent years, many Americans have celebrated Thanksgiving by helping out at the local soup kitchen or serving meals at a homeless shelter. It is a gesture of service and selflessness, a personal acknowledgment of the abundance so many of us enjoy. But it also is a way of recalibrating gratitude, a reminder of the stark edges of American prosperity and the suddenness with which life can veer off course.

Feelings are mixed at the end of a day like that — the well-being of good service, the relief of re-entering your own life, but perhaps above all a sense of humility. We are all feeling some of that this Thanksgiving, here in a world of very different expectations.

Tempering our prosperity does not need to mean tempering our thanks. If anything, the thanks we give today may feel a little sharpened. These times should bind

us together in celebration and in service — not to lament what so many of us have lost, and are at risk of losing, but to acknowledge how much we have and to accept the responsibility of sharing it.

In this Thanksgiving, there is also a real joy in looking ahead to a franker but more hopeful account of who we are and what we expect of ourselves as a nation. We can be forgiven for feeling as if we've just woken up like Dorothy at the end of "The Wizard of Oz" — back in hard times, but with a restored sense of reality and affection and self-recognition.

Hard times will not bring us together in and of themselves. But our response to them may. This is a nation eager to be called to service and selflessness and humility; to be able to give thanks again for who we really are, for our better nature, as well as for the riches we enjoy.

## A Bailout for Some. And the Rest?

To the Editor:

"All Fall Down," by Thomas L. Friedman (column, Nov. 26), was exceptional.

The general thesis of the column was that a near-total breakdown of responsibility at every link in our financial chain got us here. Mr. Friedman also stated that we either bail out the people who brought us here or risk a total systemic crash.

Recently, I lost my job in health care because of a reduction in work force. I found a job at less than half my previous salary. I am in a systemic crash at my house. Who will bail out people like me who have been responsible and hard-working?

I have no debts other than a mortgage on devalued property and student loans for my daughter's college education. Yet there are millions like me who do not have lobbyists or political action committees to bail us out or represent our interests.

J. MICHAEL GATCH  
Birmingham, Ala., Nov. 26, 2008

buy a home (didn't hear about the giveaways, I guess), and I was just about to make an offer on an adorable, modest home north of the city (half the price of Mr. Lewis's egregious example), when four weeks ago I was laid off because of this financial downturn.

In other words, I was doing everything right, and now, if only I were working harder for less, I'd be a lot better off than I am! Needless to say, there are not a lot of opportunities for architects these days.

ROY PERTCHIK  
New York, Nov. 26, 2008

To the Editor:

The more I read about the financial crisis, the more I hear about Robert E. Rubin and his major role.

It's really frustrating to see President-elect Barack Obama, whom I voted for, taking advice from him. It seems to me like a continuation of the old habit of working with well-connected people because they are well connected.

Mr. Rubin and Alan Greenspan worked hard for many of the same ends, and somehow Mr. Rubin is still influencing our soon-to-be president.

ANDREW SHANTZ  
Paterson, N.J., Nov. 26, 2008

To the Editor:

Thomas L. Friedman blames bankers ("overrated dopes" or "greedy cynics") and a breakdown in personal responsibility and government regulation for the current crisis.

In my almost 90 years I have lived through a number of depressions, recessions and recoveries, which seem to come with regularity whether caused by the aforementioned or other reasons. We have not yet figured out how to avoid the business cycle, defined as a recurring succession of business conditions, loosely divisible into periods of prosperity, crisis, liquidation, depression and recovery.

Knowing this, those known as financial experts still lack the foresight to see when the crisis is coming.

SAUL RICKLIN  
Bristol, R.I., Nov. 26, 2008

## The Day of the Bird



## Bicoastal Plea: Rebuild the Roads, Rails and Runways

To the Editor:

Re "Piling Up Monuments of Waste" (Economic Scene, Nov. 19):

David Leonhardt hit the nail on the head: our nation's infrastructure is crumbling because the federal government bases its spending decisions on politics rather than on economics. To remain competitive in the global economy, we must build and repair the roads, rails and runways America needs.

It is imperative that the new president and Congress fix this longstanding mess. Mr. Leonhardt mentions one of the most promising solutions: distributing money based on merit. The first step is to define "merit" by adopting criteria — like enhancing economic competitiveness, reducing our dependence on foreign oil and cutting greenhouse gas emissions — that will guide spending decisions.

With an economic stimulus package that includes infrastructure investments currently being debated in Washington, that work should begin immediately. States and localities are now paying for three of every four dollars spent on infrastructure. But we face budget deficits that make it extraordinarily difficult to sustain that share of investment; the federal government must do its part.

If Washington starts spending more money more wisely, we can build the strong foundation necessary to remain the world's pre-eminent economic power.

MICHAEL R. BLOOMBERG  
EDWARD G. RENDELL  
ARNOLD SCHWARZENEGGER  
New York, Nov. 21, 2008

*The writers are co-chairmen of Building America's Future, a bipartisan coalition of elected officials dedicated to bringing about a new era of investment in infrastructure that enhances the nation's prosperity and quality of life. Mr. Bloomberg is mayor of New York; Mr. Rendell and Mr. Schwarzenegger are the governors of, respectively, Pennsylvania and California.*

## Michelle Obama's Career

To the Editor:

Re "From Home and Away, Advice for a First Lady" (news article, Nov. 24):

Why all the fuss about Michelle Obama's "giving up her career"?

Being first lady is a career — a splendid one! (See Eleanor Roosevelt.)

It's an exceptional, powerful, privileged position in which "the job" can be whatever she makes of it.

From out here, it looks to me as if Michelle Obama — warm, capable, supremely intelligent — will savor the opportunity and will not only come into her own in the job, but will also contribute in many ways to the country she serves (along with her husband) as well.

RUTH WOLFF  
New York, Nov. 24, 2008  
*The writer, a playwright, is the author of "The Second Mrs. Wilson," about the much-criticized Edith Wilson, Woodrow Wilson's second wife.*

## ONLINE: MORE LETTERS

Responses to an editorial, "Hard Times and the Right to Counsel."

Also: *The plight of gay veterans.*

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