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Leadership on ecology and equality

The world awaits America's resolution

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TODAY, there are those who believe that it is obvious that humans are hell-bent on making this beautiful planet far less hospitable to our species. I am one of them. Those who share such beliefs see that the actions of people are changing the planet with a speed and a power that formerly were wrought by such catastrophic natural events as massive volcanic eruptions or the collision with the large meteor that wiped out the dinosaurs.

The ice cores that contain a continuous historical record of the climate, tell us that the planet is changing in a way that is off the scale of the repeating cycles that have marked the past 100,000 years.

We see that the current spike in the world's temperature is one symptom of change in what has been a remarkably stable ecosystem, and that the change is caused primarily by burning fossil fuels. But others feel that these realities are not their concern and seldom ponder the implications of the increasing numbers of people with whom we share this planet and its resources.

Yet there were 3 billion people in 1960, 4 billion by 1974, 5 billion by 1987 and 6 billion by 2001. We have a problem when 20 percent of earth's people consume 70 percent of its resources, and produce a comparable share of the accompanying wastes — not least, the greenhouse gases that are so quickly warming the planet.

How many of us Americans know that in 1999, more than 80 countries had lower per-capita income than they

had a decade before, or that in half that same period, the 200 richest people doubled their net worth to the equivalent of the combined annual income of 41 percent of the world's people?

Most Americans believe that we contribute a sizable percentage of our national income to help others better their condition and confront the challenges they face.

But the truth is that we share a fraction of 1 percent of our gross domestic product — a smaller proportion than most of the other rich nations — and that the lion's share of what we contribute goes to two countries — Israel and Egypt.

I find myself thinking of other times in the history of America when an issue that filled a segment of our American society with passion was passed over with a shrug by the rest. There were similar divisions in our society at other great junctures, including the years of debate and strife over the morality of slavery that preceded the Civil War, and when we debated whether the United States should concern itself with the horrors in Europe in the early days of World War II.

We forget that these long periods of equivocation and denial came before we, as a society, decided that we must act. It is convenient to forget these periods because they tarnish the pride we now feel in what were among our finest defining moments.

Today, we have not yet reached, as a society, the tipping point at which we decide collectively that we must act as Americans to confront the changes to our planet and its people as one interconnected whole.

This is the topic of the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) under way until Wednesday in Johannesburg. The summit has drawn together representatives from every nation and scores of heads of state. The debate swirls around how we can do better in making progress on goals for conservation and development such as those that were set a decade ago at a similar meeting in Rio de Janeiro.

The participants are struggling to define how we can reduce the poverty within which so many billions live without further degrading our life-support systems.

President Bush decided not to join the hundreds of other heads of state in Johannesburg. As a nation, we Americans are saying that the problems being discussed may be real but there are other matters that are more important to us than inequity in the distribution of wealth and the changes we are making to the ecology of the planet.

I suspect that our children and our grandchildren will look back and wonder why so many worked so hard to look the other way.

Here, within our national borders, we have in the past chosen to act in response to threats and inequalities of similar magnitude to those that confronts the planet today. Will we see as Americans that what threatens our planet today is as important as what threatened our nation at the great junctures in our history? Will we act this time?

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