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Gore Warns Congress of ‘Planetary Emergency’

By [FELICITY BARRINGER](#) and [ANDREW C. REVKIN](#)

WASHINGTON, March 21 — It was part science class, part policy wonk heaven, part politics and all theater as former Vice President [Al Gore](#) came to Congress today to insist that [global warming](#) constitutes a “planetary emergency” requiring an aggressive federal response.

Mr. Gore, accompanied by his wife, Tipper, delivered the same blunt message to a joint meeting of two House subcommittees this morning and a Senate hearing this afternoon: Humans are artificially warming the world, the risks of inaction are great, and meaningful cuts in emissions linked to warming will only happen if the United States takes the lead.

In the House of Representatives, there was relatively little debate on the underlying science; the atmosphere was more that of a college lecture hall.

Evoking the hit movie “300,” about the ancient Spartans’ stand at Thermopylae, Mr. Gore called on Congress to put aside partisan differences, accept the scientific consensus on global warming as unambiguous and become “the 535,” a reference to the number of seats in the House and Senate.

In the Senate, it was a different matter. Senator James Inhofe of Oklahoma, the ranking Republican member of the Environment and Public Works Committee, adopted a pugilistic stance, challenging the vice president’s analysis of climate change’s dangers from [hurricanes](#) and melting ice in Antarctica.

“It is my perspective that your global warming alarmist pronouncements are now and have always been filled with inaccuracies and misleading statements,” Mr. Inhofe said. He then estimated the cost of proposals to reduce emission of heat-trapping gases at \$300 billion and said: “The poor pay for it and the science isn’t there. We just can’t do that to America,” Mr. Vice President. And we’re not going to.”

Later, Senator Christopher Bond, Republican of Missouri, raised the question of whether sunspots are the cause of global warming. He also argued that the carbon-controlling legislation favored by many Democrats would send his poor constituents’ heating bills up 80

percent.

Mr. Gore responded that scientists have discarded the sunspot theory.

With his command of the science of climate change, Mr. Gore took on a professorial air in both sets of hearings, but it was touched with a preacher's fire as he urged action.

Waving his finger at some 40 House members, he said, "A day will come when our children and grandchildren will look back and they'll ask one of two questions."

Either, he said, "they will ask: what in God's name were they doing?" or "they may look back and say: how did they find the uncommon moral courage to rise above politics and redeem the promise of American democracy?"

Democrats and [Republicans](#), Mr. Gore said, should emulate their British counterparts and compete to see how best to curb emissions of smokestack and tailpipe "greenhouse" gases that scientists have now firmly linked to a global warming trend.

Mr. Gore, who arrived this morning at the Rayburn House Office Building in his new black Mercury Mariner hybrid sports utility vehicle, also proposed a 10-point legislative program to conserve energy. His proposals ranged from a tax on carbon emissions to a ban on incandescent light bulbs and a new national mortgage program to promote the use of energy-saving technologies in homes.

As the vice president was speaking, first in the House and then in the Senate, the Internet erupted with organized criticism and praise for his remarks.

Hitting a note that some of the vice president's critics have sounded in recent weeks — the size and energy-consuming properties of his new home in Tennessee, Senator Inhofe sought to exact a pledge from Mr. Gore to cut electricity use so that his mansion outside Nashville used no more than the average American home within a year.

This set off a verbal jousting match with both Mr. Gore and Senator [Barbara Boxer](#), the committee chairwoman.

The chairman turned to Mr. Inhofe and said, "I want to talk to you a minute." She went on, "Will you agree to let the vice president answer your questions?" As the Oklahoma senator argued back, she made a tart reference to the change in power in the Senate, saying: "You're not making the rules. You used to when you did this" — here she waved her gavel — "but you don't do this any more."

Mr. Inhofe told Mr. Gore that there were “peer-reviewed scientists” who are “radically at odds with your claims.”

Mr. Gore stood by his conclusion that the warming trend and consequences were caused by human activity and constituted a planetary emergency.

“I’m fully aware that that phrase sounds shrill to many peoples’ ears, but it is accurate,” he said.

The House hearing in the morning was in part a reunion — Mr. Gore had served on the House Energy and Commerce Committee as a young congressman in the 1980s — and in part an opportunity for the vice president’s Republican detractors to question the science of climate change and argue about the cost of Mr. Gore’s proposed solutions.

There were no references to the 2000 election, which Mr. Gore conceded to President Bush after a monthlong battle, except perhaps for the small slip by Representative [John D. Dingell](#), the Michigan Democrat who is chairman of the Energy and Commerce Committee, who referred to Mr. Gore as “Mr. President.”

But there were plenty of references to Mr. Gore’s Academy Award-winning documentary, “An Inconvenient Truth.” Representative Bob Inglis, Republican of South Carolina, said he had paid to see it, while Republicans like Representative Joe Barton of Texas, the ranking member of the Energy and Commerce Committee, challenged its conclusions.

Mr. Gore, facing a litany of criticisms of his portrayal of the science from Mr. Barton, threw out his hands and smiled in exasperation. Mr. Barton, however, appeared out of step with some of his Republican colleagues, including Representative [J. Dennis Hastert](#) of Illinois, the former House speaker, who accepted the scientific consensus that humans are warming the climate.

A few minutes later, Mr. Gore said, “The planet has a fever. If your baby has a fever, you go to the doctor.” He added, “If the doctor says you need to intervene here, you don’t say ‘I read a science fiction novel that says it’s not a problem.’ You take action.”

He credited hundreds of mayors and many states for moving ahead with pledges or laws limiting carbon emissions, but said regional actions were insufficient.

Mr. Gore also conceded that without meaningful shifts in energy use in countries with the world’s fastest-growing economies, global warming would not be curtailed, but he asserted that the United States, the main source of the gases so far, still had to act first.

“The best way — and the only way — to get China and India on board is for the U.S. to demonstrate real leadership,” he said in written testimony prepared for both hearings. “As the world’s largest economy and greatest superpower, we are uniquely situated to tackle a problem of this magnitude.”

Representative Ralph Hall, Republican of Texas, said that calls for cuts in emissions of greenhouse gases amounted to an “all-out assault on all forms of fossil fuels” that could eliminate jobs and hurt the economy.

In written testimony for the House Energy and Commerce Committee, Bjorn Lomborg, a Danish statistician and author critical of people who present environmental problems as a crisis, asserted that Mr. Gore’s portrayal of global warming as a problem and his prescription for solving it were both deeply flawed.

Mr. Lomborg said that “global warming is real and man-made,” but that a focus on intensified energy research would be more effective and far cheaper than caps or taxes on greenhouse gas emissions or energy sources that produce them.

“Statements about the strong, ominous and immediate consequences of global warming are often wildly exaggerated,” he said. “We need a stronger focus on smart solutions rather than excessive if well-intentioned efforts.”

Felicity Barringer reported from Washington, and Andrew C. Revkin from New York. An earlier version of this article misstated where Bjorn Lomborg, a Danish statistician, presented his testimony. It was before a House committee, not a Senate committee.

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