

CHAPTER 21

AT DINNER ONE NIGHT, Malia asked me what I was going to do about tigers.

“What do you mean, sweetie?”

“Well, you know they’re my favorite animal, right?”

Years earlier, during our annual Christmas visit to Hawaii, my sister Maya had taken a then-four-year-old Malia to the Honolulu Zoo. It was a small but charming place, tucked into the corner of Kapi‘olani Park near Diamond Head. As a kid I’d spent hours there, climbing the banyan trees, feeding the pigeons that waddled through the grass, howling at the long-limbed gibbons high up in the bamboo rafters. Malia had been captivated by one of the tigers during the visit, and her auntie had bought her a small, stuffed version of the great cat at the gift shop. “Tiger” had fat paws, a round belly, and an inscrutable Mona Lisa smile, and he and Malia became inseparable—though by the time we got to the White House, his fur was a little worse for wear, having survived food spills, several near losses during sleepovers, multiple washings, and a brief kidnapping at the hands of a mischievous cousin.

I had a soft spot for Tiger.

“Well,” Malia continued, “I did a report about tigers for school, and they’re losing their habitat because people are cutting down the forests. And it’s getting worse, ’cause the planet’s getting warmer from pollution. Plus, people kill them and sell their fur and bones and stuff. So tigers are going extinct, which would be terrible. And since you’re the president, you should try to save them.”

Sasha chimed in, “You should do something, Daddy.”

I looked at Michelle, who shrugged. “You *are* the president,” she said.

THE TRUTH IS, I was grateful that my young daughters weren't shy about pointing out the responsibility of the adults around them to help preserve a healthy planet. Although I've lived all my life in cities, many of my best memories involve the outdoors. Some of this is just the product of my Hawaiian upbringing, where hikes through lush mountain forests or afternoons slicing through turquoise waves are a birthright, as easy as stepping out your front door—pleasures that cost nothing, belonged to no one, and were accessible to all. My time in Indonesia, running along terraced paddy fields as water buffalo glanced up with mud-covered snouts, had reinforced a love of open space; so did my travels in my twenties, a time when—thanks to a lack of attachments and a tolerance for cheap lodgings—I'd had the chance to trek through Appalachian trails, paddle a canoe down the Mississippi, and watch the sun rise over the Serengeti.

My mother reinforced this affinity for the natural world. In the grandeur of its design—the skeleton of a leaf, the labors of an ant colony, the glow of a bleach-white moon—she experienced the wonder and humility that others reserved for religious worship, and in our youth, she'd lectured Maya and me about the damage humans could inflict when they were careless in building cities or drilling oil or throwing away garbage. (“Pick up that candy wrapper, Bar!”) She'd pointed out, as well, how the burdens of such damage most often fell on the poor, who had no choice about where to live and couldn't shield themselves from poisoned air and contaminated water.

But if my mother was an environmentalist at heart, I don't remember her ever applying the label to herself. I think it's because she'd spent most of her career working in Indonesia, where the dangers of pollution paled in comparison to more immediate risks—like hunger. For millions of struggling villagers who lived in developing countries, the addition of a coal-fired electrical generator or a new, smoke-belching factory often represented their best chance for more income and relief from backbreaking toil. To them, worrying about maintaining pristine landscapes and exotic wildlife was a luxury only Westerners could afford.

“You can't save trees by ignoring people,” my mother would say.

This notion—that for most of humankind, concern about the environment came only after their basic material needs were met—stuck with me. Years later, as a community organizer, I helped mobilize public

housing residents to press for the cleanup of asbestos in their neighborhood; in the state legislature, I was a reliable enough “green” vote that the League of Conservation Voters endorsed me when I ran for the U.S. Senate. Once on Capitol Hill, I criticized the Bush administration’s efforts to weaken various anti-pollution laws and championed efforts to preserve the Great Lakes. But at no stage in my political career had I made environmental issues my calling card. Not because I didn’t consider them important but because for my constituents, many of whom were working-class, poor air quality or industrial runoff took a backseat to the need for better housing, education, healthcare, and jobs. I figured somebody else could worry about the trees.

The ominous realities of climate change forced a shift in my perspective.

Each year, it seemed, the prognosis worsened, as an ever-increasing cloud of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases—from power plants, factories, cars, trucks, planes, industrial-scale livestock operations, deforestation, and all the other hallmarks of growth and modernization—contributed to record temperatures. By the time I was running for president, the clear consensus among scientists was that in the absence of bold, coordinated international action to reduce emissions, global temperatures were destined to climb another two degrees Celsius within a few decades. Past that point, the planet could experience an acceleration of melting ice caps, rising oceans, and extreme weather from which there was no return.

The human toll of a rapid climate shift was hard to predict. But the best estimates involved a hellish combination of severe coastal flooding, drought, wildfires, and hurricanes that stood to displace millions of people and overwhelm the capacities of most governments. This in turn would increase the risk of global conflict and insect-borne disease. Reading the literature, I pictured caravans of lost souls wandering a cracked earth in search of arable land, regular Katrina-sized catastrophes across every continent, island nations swallowed up by the sea. I wondered what would happen to Hawaii, or the great glaciers of Alaska, or the city of New Orleans. I imagined Malia, Sasha, and my grandchildren living in a harsher, more dangerous world, stripped of many of the wondrous sights I’d taken for granted growing up.

If I aspired to lead the free world, I decided, I’d have to make climate change a priority of my campaign and my presidency.

But how? Climate change is one of those issues governments are notoriously bad at dealing with, requiring politicians to put in place disruptive, expensive, and unpopular policies *now* in order to prevent a slow-rolling crisis in the future. Thanks to the work of a few farsighted leaders, like former vice president Al Gore, whose efforts to educate the public on global warming had garnered a Nobel Peace Prize and who remained active in the fight to mitigate climate change, awareness was slowly growing. Younger, more progressive voters were especially receptive to calls for action. Still, key Democratic interest groups—especially the big industrial unions—resisted any environmental measures that might threaten jobs for their members; and in polls we conducted at the start of my campaign, the average Democratic voter ranked climate change near the bottom of their list of concerns.

Republican voters were even more skeptical. There'd been a time when the federal government's role in protecting the environment enjoyed the support of both parties. Richard Nixon had worked with a Democratic Congress to create the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in 1970. George H. W. Bush championed a strengthening of the Clean Air Act in 1990. But those times had passed. As the GOP's electoral base had shifted to the South and the West, where conservation efforts had long rankled oil drillers, mining interests, developers, and ranchers, the party had turned environmental protection into another front in the partisan culture war. Conservative media outlets portrayed climate change as a job-killing hoax hatched by tree-hugging extremists. Big Oil funneled millions of dollars into a web of think tanks and public relations firms committed to obscuring the facts about climate change.

In contrast to his father, George W. Bush and members of his administration actively downplayed evidence of a warming planet and refused to engage in international efforts to curb greenhouse gases, despite the fact that for the first half of his presidency the United States ranked as the world's largest emitter of carbon dioxide. As for congressional Republicans, just acknowledging the reality of human-made climate change invited suspicion from party activists; suggesting shifts in policy to deal with it might get you a primary opponent.

“We’re like pro-life Democrats,” a former Republican Senate colleague with a nominally pro-environmental voting record told me ruefully one day. “We’ll soon be extinct.”

Faced with these realities, my team and I had done our best to highlight climate change during the campaign without costing ourselves too many votes. I came out early in favor of an ambitious “cap-and-trade” system to reduce greenhouse gases but avoided getting into details that might give future opponents a juicy target for attack. In speeches, I minimized the conflict between action on climate change and economic growth and made a point of emphasizing the nonenvironmental benefits of improving energy efficiency, including its potential to reduce our dependence on foreign oil. And in a nod to the political center, I promised an “all of the above” energy policy that would allow for continued development of domestic oil and gas production as America transitioned to clean energy, as well as funding for ethanol, clean coal technologies, and nuclear power—positions that were unpopular with environmentalists but mattered deeply to swing-state constituencies.

My happy talk about a painless shift to a carbon-free future prompted grumbling from some climate change activists. They hoped to hear me issue a call for bigger sacrifice and harder choices—including a moratorium or outright ban on oil and gas drilling—in order to confront an existential threat. In a perfectly rational world, that might have made sense. In the actual and highly irrational world of American politics, my staff and I were pretty sure that having me paint doomsday scenarios was a bad electoral strategy.

“We won’t be doing anything to protect the environment,” Plouffe had barked when questioned by a group of advocates, “if we lose Ohio and Pennsylvania!”

—

WITH THE ECONOMY in a tailspin, the politics around climate change actually worsened after the election (“Nobody gives a shit about solar panels when their home’s in foreclosure,” Axe said bluntly), and there was speculation in the press that we might quietly put the issue on the back

burner. I suppose it's a measure of both my cockiness at the time and the importance of the issue that the thought never crossed my mind. Instead, I told Rahm to put climate change on the same priority footing as healthcare, and to start assembling a team capable of moving our agenda forward.

We got off to a good start when we convinced Carol Browner—who'd headed the EPA during the Clinton administration—to serve in the newly created position of White House “climate czar,” coordinating our efforts across key agencies. Tall and willowy, with an endearing mix of nervous energy and can-do enthusiasm, Carol possessed intimate knowledge of the issue, contacts across Capitol Hill, and credibility with all the major environmental groups. To lead the EPA, I appointed Lisa Jackson, an African American chemical engineer who'd spent fifteen years at the agency and later became New Jersey's commissioner of environmental protection. She was a savvy political operator, with the charm and easy humor of her native New Orleans. To fully understand the scientific frontiers involved in transforming America's energy sector, we relied on my secretary of energy, Steven Chu—a Nobel Prize-winning physicist from Stanford and the previous director of California's renowned Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory. Steve looked the part of an academic, with wire-rimmed glasses and an earnest but slightly distracted air, and more than once staffers would have to search the White House grounds because he'd lost track of his schedule and wandered off just as we were about to start a meeting. But he was as smart as his résumé indicated, with a gift for explaining highly technical issues in terms that smaller-brained humans like me could actually understand.

With Carol playing point, our climate change brain trust proposed a comprehensive policy agenda that included, among other measures, setting a hard cap on carbon emissions, which—if successful—could cut U.S. greenhouse gas emissions by 80 percent by 2050. It wouldn't be enough to keep the planet's temperature from rising more than two degrees Celsius, but it would at least get the ball rolling and provide a framework for more aggressive cuts down the road. Just as important, establishing an ambitious but realistic target would give America the standing to push the world's other major emitters—especially China—to follow our example. The goal was to negotiate and sign a major international climate agreement before the end of

my presidency. We began with the Recovery Act, understanding that we had an opportunity to use stimulus dollars to transform the energy sector, making investments in clean energy research and development that would lead to steep declines in the cost of wind and solar power. Our calculus was simple: To hit our greenhouse gas reduction targets, we would have to wean the U.S. economy off fossil fuels—and we couldn't do that without effective alternatives.

Keep in mind that in 2009, electric cars were still a novelty. Solar panel manufacturers catered only to a niche market. And solar- and wind-generated power accounted for only a small fraction of America's total electricity output—both because it still cost more than power from coal- and gas-fueled generators and because there were legitimate questions about its reliability when the sun didn't shine or the wind didn't blow. Experts were confident that costs would keep dropping as more clean power generators came online, and that the development of more efficient battery storage technologies could solve the reliability problem. But building new power plants took lots of money, as did energy R&D, and neither private sector investors nor major utility companies had shown much of an appetite for making what felt like risky bets. Certainly not now, when even the most successful clean power companies were scrambling to keep their doors open.

In fact, just about every renewable energy company, from advanced vehicle manufacturers to biofuel producers, faced the same dilemma: No matter how good their technology was, they still had to operate in an economy that for more than a century had been constructed almost entirely around oil, gas, and coal. This structural disadvantage wasn't simply the result of free-market forces. Federal, state, and local governments had invested trillions of dollars—whether through direct subsidies and tax breaks or through the construction of infrastructure like pipelines, highways, and port terminals—to help maintain both the steady supply of and the constant demand for cheap fossil fuels. U.S. oil companies were among the world's most profitable corporations and yet still received millions in federal tax breaks each year. To have a fair chance to compete, the clean energy sector needed a serious boost.

That's what we hoped the Recovery Act could deliver.

Of the roughly \$800 billion in available stimulus, we directed more than \$90 billion toward clean energy initiatives across the country. Within a year, an Iowa Maytag plant I'd visited during the campaign that had been shuttered because of the recession was humming again, with workers producing state-of-the-art wind turbines. We funded construction of one of the world's largest wind farms. We underwrote the development of new battery storage systems and primed the market for electric and hybrid trucks, buses, and cars. We financed programs to make buildings and businesses more energy efficient, and collaborated with Treasury to temporarily convert the existing federal clean energy tax credit into a direct-payments program. Within the Department of Energy, we used Recovery Act money to launch the Advanced Research Projects Agency–Energy (ARPA-E), a high-risk, high-reward research program modeled after DARPA, the famous Defense Department effort launched after *Sputnik* that helped develop not only advanced weapons systems like stealth technology but also an early iteration of the internet, automated voice activation, and GPS.

It was exciting stuff—although our pursuit of game-changing energy breakthroughs almost guaranteed that some Recovery Act investments wouldn't pan out. The most conspicuous flop involved a decision to expand an Energy Department loan program started during the Bush administration that offered long-term working capital to promising clean energy companies. On the whole, the Energy Department's Loan Guarantee Program would yield an impressive track record, helping innovative companies like the carmaker Tesla take their businesses to the next level. The default rate on its loans was a measly 3 percent, and the idea was that the fund's successes would more than make up for its handful of failures.

Unfortunately one of the larger defaults would occur on my watch: a whopping \$535 million loan to a solar panel company named Solyndra. The company had patented what was then considered revolutionary technology, but of course the investment carried risk. As the Chinese flooded the markets with cheap, heavily subsidized solar panels of their own, Solyndra began to teeter and in 2011 would go belly-up. Given the size of the default—not to mention the fact that my team had arranged for me to visit the company's California facility just as the first financial warning bells were

beginning to ring—Solyndra became a PR nightmare. The press would spend weeks highlighting the story. Republicans reveled.

I tried to take it in stride. I reminded myself that it was part and parcel of the presidency for nothing to ever work exactly as planned. Even successful initiatives—well executed and with the purest of intentions—usually harbored some hidden flaw or unanticipated consequence. Getting things done meant subjecting yourself to criticism, and the alternative—playing it safe, avoiding controversy, following the polls—was not only a recipe for mediocrity but a betrayal of the hopes of those citizens who’d put you in office.

Still, as time went by, I couldn’t help but fume (sometimes I’d actually picture myself with steam puffing out of my ears, as in a cartoon) at how Solyndra’s failure stood to overshadow the Recovery Act’s remarkable success in galvanizing the renewable energy sector. Even in its first year, our “clean energy moonshot” had begun to invigorate the economy, generate jobs, trigger a surge in solar- and wind-power generation, as well as a leap in energy efficiency, and mobilize an arsenal of new technologies to help combat climate change. I delivered speeches across the country, explaining the significance of all this. “It’s working!” I wanted to shout. But environmental activists and clean energy companies aside, no one seemed to care. It was nice to know, as one executive assured us, that without the Recovery Act “the entire solar and wind industry in the U.S. would’ve probably been wiped out.” That didn’t stop me from wondering how long we could keep championing policies that paid long-term dividends but still somehow resulted in us getting clobbered over the head.

—

OUR INVESTMENT IN clean energy was only the first step in meeting our greenhouse gas emissions targets. We also had to change America’s day-to-day energy habits, whether that meant companies rethinking how they heated and cooled their buildings or families deciding to go green on the next car they bought. We hoped to bring about some of this through a climate change bill designed to tilt incentives toward clean energy across the economy. But according to Lisa and Carol, we didn’t need to wait for

congressional action to alter at least some business and consumer behavior. We just had to take full advantage of our regulatory powers under existing law.

The most important of those laws was the Clean Air Act, the 1963 landmark legislation that authorized the federal government to monitor air pollution, leading to the establishment of enforceable clean air standards in the 1970s. The law, which had been reaffirmed with support from both parties in Congress as recently as 1990, stated that the EPA “shall by regulation” set standards to curb auto emissions that “in [its] judgment cause, or contribute to, air pollution which may reasonably be anticipated to endanger public health or welfare.”

If you believed in climate science, then the carbon dioxide pouring out of automobile tailpipes clearly qualified as air pollution. Apparently, President Bush’s EPA administrator didn’t (believe in science, that is). In 2003, he determined that the Clean Air Act wasn’t meant to give the agency authority to regulate greenhouse gases—and that even if it did, he *still* wouldn’t use it to change emission standards. Several states and environmental organizations sued, and in the 2007 ruling *Massachusetts v. EPA*, a narrow majority of the U.S. Supreme Court held that President Bush’s EPA had failed to apply “reasoned judgment” based on science in making its determination and ordered the agency to go back and redo its homework.

For the next two years the Bush administration did nothing, but we were now in a position to take the Supreme Court’s decision out for a spin. Lisa and Carol recommended that we gather up the scientific evidence, issue a finding that greenhouse gases were subject to EPA regulation, and immediately use that authority to raise fuel-efficiency standards for all cars and trucks built or sold in the United States. Circumstances couldn’t have been more favorable for that sort of rulemaking: Although U.S. carmakers and the United Auto Workers (UAW) generally opposed higher fuel-efficiency standards, my decision to continue devoting billions in TARP money to keep their industry afloat had made them “more open-minded,” as Carol so delicately put it. If we acted fast enough, Lisa thought, we could have regulations in place before the automakers’ next model year. The resulting drop in U.S. gasoline consumption could save roughly 1.8 billion

barrels of oil and reduce our annual greenhouse gas emissions by 20 percent; we'd also establish a useful precedent for having the EPA regulate other greenhouse gas sources in future years.

To me, the plan was a no-brainer, though Rahm and I agreed that even with the automakers on board, having the EPA issue new mileage standards would generate plenty of political static. After all, GOP leaders considered the rollback of federal regulations a tier-one priority, right up there with lowering taxes on the rich. Business groups and big conservative donors like the Koch brothers had invested heavily in a decades-long campaign to make "regulation" a dirty word; you couldn't open the editorial pages of *The Wall Street Journal* without finding some attack on an out-of-control "regulatory state." To the anti-regulation crowd, the pros and cons of higher mileage standards mattered less than what a new rule symbolized: yet another example of unelected Washington bureaucrats trying to micromanage people's lives, sap America's economic vitality, violate private property rights, and undermine the Founding Fathers' vision of representative government.

I didn't put a lot of stock in such arguments. As far back as the Progressive Era, oil trusts and railroad monopolies had used similar language to attack government efforts to loosen their stranglehold on the U.S. economy. So had opponents of FDR's New Deal. And yet throughout the twentieth century, in law after law and in cooperation with presidents of both parties, Congress had kept delegating regulatory and enforcement authority to a host of specialized agencies, from the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) to the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). The reason was simple: As society grew more complex, corporations grew more powerful, and citizens demanded more from the government, elected officials simply did not have time to regulate so many diverse industries. Nor did they have the specialized knowledge required to set rules for fair dealing across financial markets, evaluate the safety of the latest medical device, make sense of new pollution data, or anticipate all the ways employers might discriminate against their employees on account of race or gender.

In other words, if you wanted good government, then expertise mattered. You needed public institutions stocked with people whose job it was to pay attention to important stuff so the rest of us citizens didn't have

to. And it was thanks to those experts that Americans could worry less about the quality of the air we breathed or the water we drank, that we had recourse when employers failed to pay us the overtime we were due, that we could count on over-the-counter drugs not killing us, and that driving a car or flying on a commercial airplane was exponentially safer today than it had been just twenty or thirty or fifty years ago. The “regulatory state” conservatives complained so bitterly about had made American life a hell of a lot better.

That’s not to say that every criticism of federal regulation was bogus. There were times when bureaucratic red tape burdened businesses unnecessarily or delayed innovative products from getting to market. Some regulations really did cost more than they were worth. Environmental groups, in particular, hated a 1980 law that required an obscure executive branch subagency called the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs (OIRA) to perform a cost-benefit analysis on every new federal regulation. They were convinced that the process favored corporate interests, and they had a point: It was a lot easier to measure a business’s profits and losses than it was to put a price on preserving an endangered bird or reducing the probability that a kid got asthma.

Still, for both policy and political reasons, I felt that progressives couldn’t afford to ignore economics. Those of us who believed in the government’s ability to solve big problems had an obligation to pay attention to the real-world impact of our decisions and not just trust in the goodness of our intentions. If a proposed agency rule to preserve wetlands was going to lop acreage off a family farm, that agency should have to take the farmer’s losses into account before moving forward.

It was precisely because I cared about getting this stuff right that I appointed Cass Sunstein, a former colleague at the University of Chicago Law School, to head up OIRA and serve as our resident cost-benefit expert. An eminent constitutional scholar who’d written a dozen books and was often mentioned as a future Supreme Court justice, Cass actually lobbied me for the OIRA post, an indication of his passion for service, his indifference to prestige, and a high nerd quotient that made him ideally suited for the job. (He was also sweet as can be, a world-class squash player, and the individual with the single most slovenly desk I ever set eyes on.) Over the

next three years, Cass and his small team would grind away in the nondescript OIRA office across the street from the White House, ensuring that the regulations we proposed actually helped enough people to justify their costs. I also asked him to lead a thorough review of all existing federal regulations so that we could get rid of those that were unnecessary or obsolete.

Cass unearthed some doozies: old requirements that forced hospitals, doctors, and nurses to spend more than \$1 billion annually on paperwork requirements and administrative burdens; a bizarre environmental regulation that classified milk as “oil,” subjecting dairy farmers to annual costs in excess of \$100 million; and a pointless mandate imposed on truckers to spend \$1.7 billion in wasted time filling out forms after each run. But the vast majority of regulations Cass reviewed stood up to scrutiny—and by the end of my presidency, even Republican analysts would find that the benefits of our regulations outweighed their costs by a six-to-one margin.

Lisa and Carol’s proposal to raise mileage standards ended up being one of those regulations. As soon as I gave them the go-ahead, they got to work. They had a good partner in my secretary of transportation, Ray LaHood, a former congressman from Peoria and a gentlemanly old-school Republican whose gregarious nature and earnest commitment to bipartisanship made him popular on both sides of the aisle. On a sunny day in May, I found myself standing in the Rose Garden, flanked by a group of auto-industry leaders, as well as the president of the UAW, to announce an agreement that would boost fuel efficiency on all new cars and light trucks from 27.5 miles per gallon to 35.5 by 2016. The plan stood to cut greenhouse gas emissions by more than 900 million metric tons over the lifetime of the new vehicles, the equivalent of taking 177 million cars off the road or shutting down 194 coal-fired power plants.

In their remarks that day, the automakers stayed on message, expressing confidence in their ability to meet the new targets and the benefits to their business of having a single national standard rather than a patchwork of different state laws. The speed and lack of contentiousness with which we’d arrived at a deal took reporters by surprise, and several of them asked Carol what role the auto bailout might have played in sparking this newfound kumbaya spirit. “Not once did we ever mention bailouts during

negotiations,” she insisted. Later, in the Oval, I asked her if what she’d said was true.

“Absolutely,” she answered. “Of course, I can’t say the bailouts never crossed their minds...”

Meanwhile, I set Steve Chu on a mission to update every efficiency standard he could find, using the power of a little-enforced 1987 law that gave the Department of Energy authority to set energy-efficiency standards on everything from lightbulbs to commercial air conditioners. The man was like a kid in a candy store, regaling me with detailed explanations of his latest standard-setting exploits. (“You’d be amazed at the environmental impact of just a five percent improvement on refrigerator efficiency!”) And although it was hard to match his excitement over washers and dryers, the results really were pretty amazing: By the time I left office, those new appliance standards were on track to remove another 210 million metric tons of greenhouse gases from the atmosphere annually.

Over the next several years, carmakers and appliance manufacturers hit the higher efficiency goals we’d set without much fuss and ahead of schedule, confirming Steve’s assertion that when done properly, ambitious regulatory standards actually spurred businesses to innovate. If consumers noticed that the energy-efficient models of cars or appliances were sometimes more expensive, they didn’t complain; they were likely to make up the difference in lower electricity bills or fuel costs, and prices typically settled back down once the new technologies became the norm.

To our surprise, even McConnell and Boehner didn’t get particularly worked up about our energy regulations—perhaps because they didn’t think it was a winning issue for them and didn’t want to divert attention from their efforts to defeat Obamacare. Not all Republicans showed such restraint. One day, Pete Rouse wandered into the Oval to show me media clips containing various remarks from Congresswoman Michele Bachmann of Minnesota, founder of the House Tea Party Caucus and an eventual Republican candidate for president. Bachmann had been decrying newfangled energy-efficient lightbulbs as an un-American “Big Brother intrusion” and a threat to public health; they also signaled what she declared to be a larger plot by Democrats to impose a radical “sustainability” agenda, in which all U.S.

citizens would eventually be forced to “move to the urban core, live in tenements, [and] take light rail to their government jobs.”

“Looks like our secret is out, Mr. President,” Pete said.

I nodded gravely. “Better hide the recycling bins.”

—

WHILE ENERGY-SAVING cars and dishwashers were a step forward, the ultimate pathway to lasting change, we knew, lay in getting comprehensive climate legislation through Congress. A bill had the potential to reach every sector of the economy that contributed to greenhouse gas emissions, not just vehicles and appliances. On top of that, the news stories and public dialogue sparked by the legislative process would help drive home the perils of rising global temperatures, and—if all went well—Congress would feel a sense of ownership of the final product. Perhaps most important, federal legislation would have genuine staying power, unlike regulations, which could be reversed unilaterally by a future Republican administration.

Of course, legislation depended on our ability to overcome a Senate filibuster. And unlike the situation with the Recovery Act, where when push came to shove we’d been able to marshal every Democratic vote we needed, Harry Reid warned me that we were certain to lose at least a couple of Senate Dems from oil- and coal-producing states who were looking at tough reelections. To get sixty votes, we were going to need to convince at least two or three Republicans to support a bill that a majority of their voters firmly opposed, and that Mitch McConnell had sworn to defeat.

Initially, at least, we thought our best bet was the guy I’d beat in the race for president.

John McCain had downplayed his support for climate change legislation during his campaign, especially after he selected a running mate whose energy policy—“Drill, baby, drill!”—proved to be a Republican crowd favorite. But to his credit, McCain had never fully abandoned the position he’d staked out earlier in his Senate career, and in the (very) brief halo of good feeling right after the election, he and I had discussed working together to get a climate bill passed. Around the time I was sworn into office, McCain had reportedly joined forces with his best buddy in the

Senate, Joe Lieberman, to put together a bipartisan alternative to more liberal legislation being proposed by Barbara Boxer, the California Democrat who chaired the Environment and Public Works Committee.

Unfortunately, inside GOP circles, McCain's brand of bipartisan compromise was badly out of fashion. Right-wingers despised him more than ever, blaming his lack of conservative conviction for Republican losses in the House and Senate. In late January 2009, a former congressman and right-wing radio host named J. D. Hayworth floated the possibility of running against McCain in the Arizona primary the next year—the first serious challenge McCain had faced since joining the Senate twenty-two years earlier. I imagine the sheer indignity of the situation must have made McCain's blood boil, but the politician in him dictated that he quickly shore up his right flank—and joining forces with me on major environmental legislation certainly wasn't going to do that. We soon got word through Lieberman's office that McCain was off the bill.

At the same time, not a single House Republican would even consider cosponsoring climate legislation. That left the two senior Democrats on the relevant committee, Henry Waxman of California and Ed Markey of Massachusetts, content to draft a bill on their own and pass it solely with Democratic votes. In the short term, this made our lives easier: Waxman and Markey broadly aligned with us on policy, their staffs knew what they were doing, and they welcomed our suggestions. But it also meant that the two congressmen felt little need to consider views less liberal than existed inside their own caucus, raising the prospect that the bill they produced could end up reading like an environmental group's wish list and send a number of fence-sitting Senate Democrats into cardiac arrest.

Hoping to head off a House/Senate impasse, Rahm gave Phil Schiliro the unenviable task of urging Waxman to start a dialogue with the likely sponsors of a Senate bill, including Lieberman, so that we could get a jump on narrowing the differences between the two sides. A week or so later, I called Phil into the Oval and asked how the conversation with Waxman had gone. Phil dropped his gangly frame onto the couch, grabbed an apple from the bowl I kept on the coffee table, and shrugged.

“Not great,” he said, his voice landing somewhere between a chuckle and a sigh. Before joining my team, Phil had spent years working in

Waxman's office, most recently as chief of staff, so the two knew each other well. Waxman had given him an earful, he said, channeling the frustration that House Dems already felt toward the Senate Dems (and us) for what they considered to be a litany of previous sins: scaling back the Recovery Act, failing to even bring various House bills up for a vote for fear of putting moderate or conservative senators in a bind, and generally being spineless tools.

"He said the Senate is 'the place where good ideas go to die,'" Phil said.

"Can't argue with him there," I said.

"We'll just have to sort it all out in a conference committee, after each chamber's passed its own bill," Phil said, trying his best to project an upbeat tone.

In our effort to keep the House and Senate bills at least within shouting distance of each other, we did have one thing working in our favor: Lieberman and Boxer, as well as the House Dems and most environmental groups, had embraced a cap-and-trade system similar to what I'd endorsed during the campaign as the preferred mechanism to achieve big cuts in greenhouse gases. Here's how it worked: The federal government would cap the amount of greenhouse gas companies could emit, leaving it up to each company to figure out how to hit those targets. Companies exceeding their limit would pay a penalty. Companies that stayed below their limit could sell their unused pollution "credits" to less-efficient businesses. By setting a price on pollution and creating a market for environmentally friendly behavior, a cap-and-trade approach gave corporations an incentive to develop and adopt the latest green technologies; and with each technological advance, the government could lower the caps even further, encouraging a steady and virtuous cycle of innovation.

There were other ways to put a price on greenhouse gas pollution. Some economists thought it was simpler, for example, to impose a "carbon tax" on all fossil fuels, discouraging their use by making them more expensive. But one of the reasons everyone had converged on a cap-and-trade proposal was that it had already been successfully tried—and *by a Republican president*, no less. Back in 1990, George H. W. Bush's administration had put a cap-and-trade system in place to curb the sulfur dioxide coming out of factory smokestacks and contributing to acid rain, which was destroying lakes and

forests across the East Coast. Despite dire predictions that the measure would lead to factory closures and mass layoffs, the offending companies had quickly figured out cost-efficient ways to retrofit their factories, and within a few years, the problem of acid rain had all but disappeared.

Setting up a cap-and-trade system for greenhouse gas emissions involved a whole new level of scale and complexity. The fights over each detail promised to be fierce, with lobbyists swarming and every member of Congress whose vote we needed angling for this or that concession. And as the struggle to pass healthcare legislation was also teaching me, the mere fact that Republicans had once supported a policy idea championed by one of their own did not mean they'd support *the exact same idea* coming from a Democratic president.

Still, I had to believe that having a successful precedent gave us a real shot at getting a deal done. Carol, Phil, and the rest of the White House legislative staff spent much of spring 2009 shuttling back and forth between chambers, prodding the action along, smoothing over problems, and providing the main players and their staffs with whatever technical support or policy guidance they needed. All this was happening while we were still trying to mend the economy, pull the healthcare bill into shape, put an immigration package together, get judicial nominees confirmed, and move a dozen other smaller initiatives through Congress—a testament to how hard the team drove itself. It also lent Rahm's office—sparsely decorated, the big conference table at its center usually littered with coffee cups, cans of Diet Coke, and the occasional half-eaten snack—the overcaffeinated atmosphere of an air traffic control center.

Then, on a muggy day in late June, our labors started to pay off. The White House Social Office had arranged for a staff picnic on the South Lawn, and I had just begun circulating through the crowd, holding babies and posing for pictures with the proud parents of staff members, when Rahm came bounding across the grass, a sheet of paper rolled up in his hand.

“The House just passed a climate bill, Mr. President,” he said.

“That's great!” I said, giving him a high five. “How close was the vote?”

Rahm showed me his tally: 219–212. “We actually got eight moderate Republicans. We lost a couple of Dems we were counting on, but I'll deal

with them. In the meantime, you should call Nancy, Waxman, and Markey to thank them. They had to work the members pretty hard.”

Rahm lived for days like this, when we scored a clear win. But as we walked back to the Oval, stopping to greet others along the way, I noticed that my usually irrepressible chief of staff seemed a little subdued. Rahm went on to explain what was nagging at him: So far, the Senate had failed to even release its version of a climate bill, much less start moving it through the relevant committees. McConnell, meanwhile, was displaying a singular talent for grinding Senate votes to a halt. Given the already slow process, the window for us getting a climate bill done before Congress adjourned in December was rapidly closing. And after that, we’d likely have even more trouble making it to the finish line, since Democrats in both the House and the Senate would be reluctant to vote on yet another big, controversial bill just as they started campaigning for the midterms.

“Gotta have faith, brother,” I said, clapping him on the back.

Rahm nodded, but his eyes, even darker than usual, betrayed doubt.

“I just don’t know if we’ve got enough runway to land all these planes,” he said.

The implication being that one or more might crash.

—

THE SKITTISH MOOD in Congress was not the only reason I hoped to have cap-and-trade legislation in hand by December: There was a U.N. global summit on climate change due to happen in Copenhagen that same month. After eight years of the United States absenting itself from international climate negotiations under George W. Bush, expectations abroad were soaring. And I could hardly urge other governments to act aggressively on climate change if the United States didn’t lead by example. I knew that having a domestic bill would improve our bargaining position with other nations and help spur the kind of collective action needed to protect the planet. Greenhouse gases, after all, don’t respect borders. A law reducing emissions in one country might make its citizens feel morally superior, but if other nations didn’t follow suit, temperatures would just keep rising. So as Rahm and my legislative team were busy in the halls of Congress, my

foreign policy team and I looked for a way to restore America's stature as a leader in international climate efforts.

Our leadership on this front had once been all but presumed. In 1992, when the world convened in Rio de Janeiro for what became known as the "Earth Summit," President George H. W. Bush joined representatives from 153 other nations in signing the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change—the first global agreement to try to stabilize greenhouse gas concentrations before they reached catastrophic levels. The Clinton administration soon took up the baton, working with other nations to translate the broad goals announced at Rio into a binding treaty. The final result, called the Kyoto Protocol, laid out detailed plans for coordinated international action, including specific greenhouse gas reduction targets, a global carbon-trading system similar to cap-and-trade, and financing mechanisms to help poor countries adopt clean energy and preserve carbon-neutralizing forests like the Amazon.

Environmentalists hailed Kyoto as a turning point in the fight against global warming. Around the world, participating countries got their governments to ratify the treaty. But in the United States, where treaty ratification requires an affirmative vote from two-thirds of the Senate, Kyoto hit a brick wall. It was 1997, Republicans controlled the Senate, and few considered climate change to be a real problem. Indeed, the then chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, archconservative Jesse Helms, proudly despised environmentalists, the U.N., and multilateral treaties in equal measure. Powerful Democrats like West Virginia senator Robert Byrd were also quick to oppose any measures that might hurt fossil fuel industries vital to their state.

Seeing the writing on the wall, President Clinton decided not to send Kyoto to the Senate for a vote, preferring delay to defeat. Though Clinton's political fortunes would recover after he'd survived impeachment, Kyoto remained mothballed for the remainder of his presidency. Any glimmer of hope for the treaty's eventual ratification was snuffed out entirely once George W. Bush beat Al Gore in the 2000 election. Which is how it came to pass that in 2009, a year after the Kyoto Protocol finally went into full effect, the United States was one of only five nations not party to the agreement. The other four, in no particular order: Andorra and Vatican City

(both of which were so tiny, with a combined population of about eighty thousand, that they were granted “observer” status rather than asked to join); Taiwan (which would have been happy to participate but couldn’t because its status as an independent nation was still contested by the Chinese); and Afghanistan (which had the reasonable excuse of having been shattered by thirty years of occupation and a bloody civil war).

“You know things have hit a low point when our closest allies think we’re worse on an issue than North Korea,” Ben said, shaking his head.

Reviewing this history, I sometimes imagined a parallel universe in which the United States, without rival immediately following the end of the Cold War, had put its immense power and authority behind the climate change fight. I imagined the transformation of the world’s energy grid and the reduction in greenhouse gases that might have been achieved; the geopolitical benefits that would have flowed from weakening the grip of petrodollars and the autocracies supported by those dollars; the culture of sustainability that could have taken root in developed and developing countries alike. But as I huddled with my team to chart a strategy for *this* universe, I had to acknowledge a glaring truth: Even with the Democrats now in charge of the Senate, there was still no way for me to secure sixty-seven votes to ratify the existing Kyoto framework.

We were having enough trouble getting the Senate to come up with a workable domestic climate bill. Barbara Boxer and Massachusetts Democrat John Kerry had spent months drafting potential legislation, but they’d been unable to find a Republican colleague willing to cosponsor it, signaling that the bill was unlikely to pass and that a new, more centrist approach might be in order.

Having lost John McCain as a Republican ally, our hopes shifted to one of his closest friends in the Senate, Lindsey Graham of South Carolina. Short in stature, with a puggish face and a gentle southern drawl that in an instant could flip from warm to menacing, Graham was known primarily as an ardent national security hawk—a member, along with McCain and Lieberman, of the so-called Three Amigos, who’d served as the biggest boosters of the Iraq War. Graham was also smart, charming, sarcastic, unscrupulous, media savvy, and—thanks partly to his genuine adoration of McCain—occasionally willing to stray from conservative orthodoxy, most

notably in his support for immigration reform. Having been reelected to another six-year term, Graham was in a position to take some risks, and although he'd never shown much interest in climate change in the past, he seemed intrigued by the possibility of filling McCain's shoes and brokering a meaningful bipartisan deal. Early in October, he offered to help deliver the handful of Republicans needed to get climate legislation through the Senate—but only if Lieberman helped steer the process and Kerry could convince environmentalists to offer up concessions on subsidies for the nuclear power industry and the opening up of additional U.S. coastlines to offshore oil drilling.

I wasn't wild about having to depend on Graham. I knew him from my time in the Senate as someone who liked to play the role of the sophisticated, self-aware conservative, disarming Democrats and reporters with blunt assessments of his party's blind spots, extolling the need for politicians to break out of their ideological straitjackets. More often than not, though, when it came time to actually cast a vote or take a position that might cost him politically, Graham seemed to find a reason to wriggle out of it. ("You know how in the spy thriller or the heist movie, you're introduced to the crew at the beginning?" I told Rahm. "Lindsey's the guy who double-crosses everyone to save his own skin.") Realistically, though, our options were limited ("Unless Lincoln and Teddy Roosevelt are walking through that door, buddy," Rahm replied, "he's all we got"); and mindful that any close association with the White House might spook him, we decided to give Graham and his fellow cosponsors a wide berth as they crafted their version of the bill, figuring we could fix any troublesome provisions later in the process.

Meanwhile, we prepared for what lay ahead in Copenhagen. With the Kyoto Protocol set to expire in 2012, U.N.-sponsored negotiations for a follow-up treaty had been under way for over a year already, with the goal of finalizing an agreement in time for the December summit. We weren't, however, inclined to sign a new treaty modeled too closely on the original. My advisors and I had concerns about Kyoto's policy design—in particular, its use of a concept called "common but differentiated responsibilities," which placed the burden of cutting greenhouse gas emissions almost exclusively on advanced, energy-intensive economies like those of the

United States, the European Union, and Japan. As a matter of fairness, asking rich countries to do more about climate change than poor countries made complete sense: Not only was the existing buildup of greenhouse gases largely the result of a hundred years of Western industrialization, but rich countries also had a much higher per capita carbon footprint than other places. And there were limits to how much you could expect poor countries like Mali, Haiti, or Cambodia—places where lots of people still lacked even basic electricity—to cut their already negligible emissions (and possibly slow their short-term growth). After all, Americans or Europeans could achieve far greater effects simply by adjusting their thermostats up or down a few degrees.

The trouble was, the Kyoto Protocol had interpreted “differentiated responsibilities” to mean that emerging powers like China, India, and Brazil had *no* binding obligations to curb their emissions. This might have made sense when the protocol was drawn up, twelve years earlier, before globalization had fully transformed the world economy. But in the middle of a brutal recession, with Americans already seething over the steady outsourcing of U.S. jobs, a treaty that placed environmental constraints on domestic factories without asking for parallel action from those operating in Shanghai or Bangalore just wasn’t going to fly. As it was, China had surpassed the United States in annual carbon dioxide emissions in 2005, with India’s numbers also on the rise. And while it remained true that the average Chinese or Indian citizen consumed a fraction of the energy used by the average American, experts projected a doubling of those countries’ carbon footprints in the coming decades, as more and more of their two billion-plus people aspired to the same modern conveniences that folks in rich countries enjoyed. If that happened, then the planet was going to be underwater regardless of what anybody else did—an argument that Republicans (at least those who didn’t deny climate change altogether) liked to use as an excuse for having the United States do nothing at all.

We needed a fresh approach. With critical guidance from Hillary Clinton and the State Department’s special envoy for climate change, Todd Stern, my team came up with a proposal for a scaled-back interim agreement, anchored around three shared commitments. First, the agreement would require *every* nation—including emerging powers like China and India—to

put forward a self-determined plan for greenhouse gas reduction. Each country's plan would differ based on its wealth, energy profile, and stage of development and would be revised at regular intervals as that country's economic and technological capacities increased. Second, while these national plans wouldn't be enforceable under international law the way treaty obligations were, each country would agree to measures allowing the other parties to independently verify that it was following through on its pledged reductions. Third, wealthy countries would provide poor countries with billions of dollars in aid for climate mitigation and adaptation, so long as those poor countries met their (far more modest) commitments.

Designed right, this new approach would force China and other emerging powers to start putting skin in the game, while also retaining the Kyoto concept of "common but differentiated responsibilities." By establishing a credible system to validate other countries' efforts to reduce emissions, we'd also strengthen our case with Congress for the need to pass our own domestic climate change legislation—and, we hoped, lay the groundwork for a more robust treaty in the near future. But Todd, an intense, detail-oriented lawyer who'd served as the Clinton administration's senior negotiator at Kyoto, warned that our proposal would be a tough sell internationally. The E.U. countries, all of which had ratified Kyoto and taken steps to reduce emissions, were anxious to come up with a pact that included legally binding reduction commitments from the United States and China. China, India, and South Africa, on the other hand, liked the status quo just fine and were fiercely resisting any changes to Kyoto. Activists and environmental groups from around the globe were scheduled to attend the summit. Many of them saw Copenhagen as a make-or-break moment and would consider anything short of a binding treaty with tough new limits as a failure.

More specifically, *my* failure.

"It's not fair," Carol said, "but they think that if you're serious about climate change, you should be able to get Congress and other countries to do whatever's necessary."

I couldn't blame environmentalists for setting a high bar. The science demanded it. But I also knew it was pointless to make promises I could not yet keep. I'd need more time and a better economy before I could persuade

the American public to support an ambitious climate treaty. I was also going to need to convince China to work with us—and I was probably going to need a bigger majority in the Senate. If the world was expecting the United States to sign a binding treaty at Copenhagen, then I needed to lower expectations—starting with those of the secretary-general of the United Nations, Ban Ki-moon.

Two years into his term as the world's most prominent diplomat, Ban Ki-moon had yet to make much of an impression on the global stage. Some of this was just the nature of the job: Although the U.N. secretary-general presides over a budget of many billions of dollars, a sprawling bureaucracy, and a host of international agencies, his or her power is largely derivative, dependent on an ability to herd 193 countries toward something resembling a common direction. Ban's relatively low profile was also the result of his understated, methodical style—a paint-by-numbers approach to diplomacy that had undoubtedly served him well during his thirty-seven-year career in his native South Korea's foreign service and diplomatic corps but that stood in sharp contrast to the urbane charisma of his predecessor at the U.N., Kofi Annan. You didn't go into a meeting with Ban expecting to hear captivating stories, witty asides, or dazzling insights. He didn't ask how your family was doing or share details of his own life outside the job. Instead, after a vigorous handshake and repeated thank-yous for seeing him, Ban would dive headlong into a stream of talking points and factoids, delivered in fluent but heavily accented English and the earnest, formulaic jargon of a U.N. communiqué.

Despite his lack of pizzazz, I would come to like and respect Ban. He was honest, straightforward, and irrepressibly positive, someone who on several occasions stood up to pressure from member states in pursuit of much-needed U.N. reforms and who instinctively came down on the right side of issues even if he didn't always have the capacity to move others to do the same. Ban was also persistent—especially on the topic of climate change, which he had designated as one of his top priorities. The first time we met in the Oval Office, less than two months after I'd taken office, he'd started pressing me for a commitment to attend the Copenhagen summit.

“Your presence, Mr. President,” Ban said, “will send a very powerful signal about the urgent need for international cooperation on climate

change. Very powerful.”

I had explained all that we planned to do domestically to cut U.S. emissions, as well as the challenges of getting any Kyoto-style treaty through the Senate anytime soon. I described our idea of an interim agreement, and how we were forming a “major emitters group,” separate from U.N.-sponsored negotiations, to see if we could find common ground with China on the issue. As I spoke, Ban nodded politely, occasionally jotting down notes or adjusting his glasses. But nothing I said appeared to knock him off his principal mission.

“With your critical engagement, Mr. President,” he said, “I’m sure we can drive these negotiations to a successful agreement.”

And so it went for months to come. No matter how many times I repeated my concerns about the course the U.N.-sponsored negotiations were taking, no matter how blunt I was about the U.S. position on a binding, Kyoto-style treaty, Ban would return to underscoring the need for my presence at Copenhagen in December. He brought it up at G20 meetings. He raised it at G8 meetings. Finally, at the U.N. General Assembly plenary in New York in September, I relented, promising the secretary-general I’d do my best to attend so long as the conference appeared likely to produce an agreement we could live with. Afterward, I turned to Susan Rice and said I felt like a high schooler who’d been pressured to go to the prom with the nerdy kid who’s too nice to reject.

By the time the Copenhagen conference kicked off in December, it seemed that my worst fears were coming to pass. Domestically, we were still waiting for the Senate to schedule a vote on cap-and-trade legislation, and in Europe, the treaty dialogue had hit an early deadlock. We’d sent Hillary and Todd ahead of me to try to drum up support for our proposed interim agreement, and over the phone, they described a chaotic scene, with the Chinese and other BRICS leaders dug in on their position, the Europeans frustrated with both us and the Chinese, the poorer countries clamoring for more financial assistance, Danish and U.N. organizers feeling overwhelmed, and the environmental groups in attendance despairing over what increasingly looked like a dumpster fire. Given the strong odor of imminent failure, not to mention the fact that I was still busy trying to get other

critical legislation through Congress before the Christmas recess, Rahm and Axe questioned whether I should even make the trip.

Despite my misgivings, I decided that even a slight possibility of corralling other leaders into an international agreement overrode the fallout from a likely failure. To make the trip more palatable, Alyssa Mastromonaco came up with a skinnied-down schedule that had me flying to Copenhagen after a full day in the Oval and spending about ten hours on the ground—just enough time to deliver a speech and conduct a few bilateral meetings with heads of state—before turning around and heading home. Still, it's fair to say that as I boarded Air Force One for the red-eye across the Atlantic, I was less than enthusiastic. Settling into one of the plane's fat leather conference-room chairs, I ordered a tumbler of vodka in the hope that it would help me get a few hours' sleep and watched Marvin fiddle with the controls of the big-screen TV in search of a basketball game.

"Has anyone ever considered," I said, "the amount of carbon dioxide I'm releasing into the atmosphere as a result of these trips to Europe? I'm pretty sure that between the planes, the helicopters, and the motorcades, I've got the biggest carbon footprint of any single person on the whole goddamn planet."

"Huh," Marvin said. "That's probably right." He found the game we were looking for, turned up the sound, then added, "You might not want to mention that in your speech tomorrow."

—

IT WAS A GLOOMY, arctic morning when we arrived in Copenhagen, the roads into the city shrouded in mist. The conference site itself looked like a converted mall. We found ourselves wandering through a maze of elevators and corridors, one of them inexplicably lined with mannequins, before meeting up with Hillary and Todd to get the current state of play. As part of the proposed interim agreement, I'd authorized Hillary to commit the United States to making a 17 percent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2020, as well as a \$10 billion pledge toward the \$100 billion international Green Climate Fund to help poor countries with climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts. According to Hillary, delegates from a number of

nations had expressed interest in our alternative—but so far the Europeans were holding out for a fully binding treaty, while China, India, and South Africa appeared content to let the conference crash and burn and blame it on the Americans.

“If you can persuade the Europeans and the Chinese to support an interim agreement,” Hillary said, “then it’s possible, maybe even likely, that the rest of the world falls in line.”

Clear on my assignment, we paid a courtesy visit to the Danish prime minister, Lars Løkke Rasmussen, who was presiding over the final days of negotiating sessions. Like all the Nordic countries, Denmark outperformed in international affairs, and Rasmussen himself reflected many of the qualities that I’d come to associate with the Danes—he was thoughtful, well-informed, pragmatic, and humane. But the task he’d been given—trying to cobble together a global consensus on a complicated, contentious issue over which the world’s biggest powers were at odds—would have been tough for anyone. For the forty-five-year-old leader of a small country who’d been in office for only eight months, it had proven downright impossible. The press had had a field day with stories of how Rasmussen had lost control of the conference, with delegates repeatedly objecting to his proposals, questioning his rulings, and challenging his authority, like unruly teenagers with a substitute teacher. By the time we met, the poor man looked shell-shocked, his bright blue eyes strained with exhaustion, his blond hair matted against his head as if he’d just finished a wrestling match. He listened intently as I explained our strategy and asked a few technical questions about how an interim agreement might work. Mostly, though, he seemed relieved to watch me try my hand at salvaging a deal.

From there, we moved to a large makeshift auditorium, where I described to the plenary the three components of our proposed interim agreement, as well as the alternative: inaction and acrimony while the planet slowly burned. The crowd was muted but respectful, and Ban was there to congratulate me offstage, grabbing my hand in both of his, behaving as if it was entirely normal for him to now expect me to try to salvage the stalled negotiations and ad-lib my way to a last-minute agreement with other world leaders.

The rest of the day was unlike any other summit I attended as president. Apart from the pandemonium of the plenary session, we had a series of sideline meetings, moving from one to the next through corridors stuffed with people who craned their necks and took photos. Other than me, the most important player in attendance that day was the Chinese premier, Wen Jiabao. He'd brought a giant delegation with him, and the group of them had thus far been inflexible and imperious in meetings, refusing to agree that China should submit to any form of international review of their emissions, confident in the knowledge that through their alliance with Brazil, India, and South Africa, they had enough votes to kill any deal. Meeting one-on-one with Wen for a bilat, I pushed back, warning that even if China saw avoiding any obligation toward transparency as a short-term win, it would prove to be a long-term disaster for the planet. We agreed to keep talking through the day.

It was progress, but just barely. The afternoon evaporated as negotiating sessions continued. We managed to extract a draft agreement endorsed by E.U. members and a number of other delegates, but we got nowhere in follow-up sessions with the Chinese, as Wen declined to attend and instead dispatched junior members of his delegation who were predictably inflexible. Late in the day, I was led to yet another room, this one crowded with unhappy Europeans.

Most of the key leaders were there, including Merkel, Sarkozy, and Gordon Brown, all wearing the same bleary-eyed look of frustration. Now that Bush was gone and Democrats were in charge, they wanted to know, why couldn't the United States ratify a Kyoto-style treaty? In Europe, they said, even the far-right parties accept the reality of climate change—what is wrong with Americans? We know the Chinese are a problem, but why not wait until a future agreement to force their hand?

For what felt like an hour, I let them vent, answering questions, sympathizing with their concerns. Eventually the reality of the situation settled over the room, and it was left to Merkel to say it out loud.

"I think what Barack describes is not the option we had hoped for," she said calmly, "but it may be our only option today. So...we wait to see what the Chinese and the others say, and then we decide." She turned to me. "You'll go meet them now?"

“Yep.”

“Good luck, then,” Merkel said. She shrugged with a tilt of the head, a downward pull of the mouth, a slight raising of the eyebrows—the gesture of someone experienced with getting on with unpleasant necessities.

Whatever momentum we felt coming out of the meeting with the Europeans quickly dissipated once Hillary and I got back to our holding room. Marvin reported that a ferocious snowstorm was rolling through the East Coast, so to get us back to D.C. safely, Air Force One needed to be wheels-up in two and a half hours.

I looked at my watch. “What time’s my follow-up meeting with Wen?”

“Well, boss, that’s the other problem,” Marvin said. “We can’t find him.” He explained that when staffers had reached out to their Chinese counterparts, they’d been told that Wen was already on his way to the airport. There were rumors that he was actually still in the building, in a meeting with the other leaders who’d been pushing back against having their emissions monitored, but we weren’t able to confirm it.

“So you’re saying he’s ducking me.”

“We got folks out looking.”

A few minutes later, Marvin came back in to tell us that Wen and the leaders of Brazil, India, and South Africa had been spotted in a conference room a few levels up.

“All right, then,” I said. I turned to Hillary. “When’s the last time you crashed a party?”

She laughed. “It’s been a while,” she said, looking like the straitlaced kid who’s decided to throw caution to the wind.

With a gaggle of staffers and Secret Service agents hustling behind us, we made our way upstairs. At the end of a long corridor, we found what we were looking for: a room with glass walls, just large enough to hold a conference table, around which sat Premier Wen, Prime Minister Singh, and Presidents Lula and Zuma, along with a few of their ministers. The Chinese security team began moving forward to intercept us, hands held up as if ordering us to stop, but realizing who we were, they hesitated. With a smile and a nod, Hillary and I strolled past and entered the room, leaving a fairly noisy tussle between security details and the staffers in our wake.

“You ready for me, Wen?” I called out, watching the Chinese leader’s face drop in surprise. I then walked around the table to shake each of their hands. “Gentlemen! I’ve been looking everywhere for you. How about we see if we can do a deal?”

Before anybody could object, I grabbed an empty chair and sat down. Across the table, Wen and Singh remained impassive, while Lula and Zuma looked sheepishly down at the papers in front of them. I explained that I had just met with the Europeans and that they were prepared to accept our proposed interim agreement if the group present would support language ensuring a credible mechanism to independently verify that countries were meeting their greenhouse gas reduction commitments. One by one, the other leaders explained why our proposal was unacceptable: Kyoto was working just fine; the West was responsible for global warming and now expected poorer countries to impede their development to solve the problem; our plan would violate the principle of “common but differentiated responsibilities”; the verification mechanism we were suggesting would violate their national sovereignty. After about a half hour of this, I leaned back in my chair and looked directly at Premier Wen.

“Mr. Premier, we’re running out of time,” I said, “so let me cut to the chase. Before I walked into this room, I assume, the plan was for all of you to leave here and announce that the U.S. was responsible for the failure to arrive at a new agreement. You think that if you hold out long enough, the Europeans will get desperate and sign another Kyoto-style treaty. The thing is, I’ve been very clear to them that I can’t get our Congress to ratify the treaty you want. And there is no guarantee Europe’s voters, or Canada’s voters, or Japan’s voters, are going to be willing to keep putting their industries at a competitive disadvantage and paying money to help poor countries deal with climate change when the world’s biggest emitters are sitting on the sidelines.

“Of course, I may be wrong,” I said. “Maybe you can convince everyone that we’re to blame. But that won’t stop the planet from getting warmer. And remember, I’ve got my own megaphone, and it’s pretty big. If I leave this room without an agreement, then my first stop is the hall downstairs where all the international press is waiting for news. And I’m going to tell them that I was prepared to commit to a big reduction in our greenhouse

gases, and billions of dollars in new assistance, and that each of you decided it was better to do nothing. I'm going to say the same thing to all the poor countries that stood to benefit from that new money. And to all the people in your own countries that stand to suffer the most from climate change. And we'll see who they believe."

Once the translators in the room caught up to me, the Chinese environmental minister, a burly, round-faced man in glasses, suddenly stood up and started speaking in Mandarin, his voice rising, his hands waving in my direction, his face reddening in agitation. He went on like this for a minute or two, the entire room not quite sure what was happening. Eventually, Premier Wen lifted a slender, vein-lined hand and the minister abruptly sat back down. I suppressed the urge to laugh and turned to the young Chinese woman who was translating for Wen.

"What did my friend there just say?" I asked. Before she could answer, Wen shook his head and whispered something. The translator nodded and turned back to me.

"Premier Wen says that what the environmental minister said is not important," she explained. "Premier Wen asks if you have the agreement you're proposing with you, so that everyone can look at the specific language again."

—

IT TOOK ANOTHER half hour of haggling, with the other leaders and their ministers hovering over me and Hillary as I used a ballpoint pen to mark up some of the language in the creased document I'd been carrying in my pocket, but by the time I left the room, the group had agreed to our proposal. Rushing back downstairs, I spent another thirty minutes getting the Europeans to sign off on the modest changes the developing-country leaders had requested. The language was quickly printed out and circulated. Hillary and Todd worked the delegates from other key countries to help broaden the consensus. I made a brief statement to the press announcing the interim agreement, after which we loaded up our motorcade and raced to the airport.

We made our window for takeoff with ten minutes to spare.

There was a cheerful buzz on the flight back as staffers recounted the day's adventures for the benefit of those who hadn't been present. Reggie, who'd been with me long enough not to be impressed by much of anything anymore, flashed a wide grin as he poked his head into my quarters, where I was reading through a stack of briefing memos.

"I gotta say, boss," he told me, "that was some real gangster shit back there."

I did feel pretty good. On the biggest of stages, on an issue that mattered and with the clock ticking, I'd pulled a rabbit out of a hat. Granted, the press gave the interim agreement mixed reviews, but given the chaos of the conference and the obstinacy of the Chinese, I still saw it as a win—a stepping-stone that could help us get our climate change bill through the Senate. Most important, we'd succeeded in getting China and India to accept—no matter how grudgingly or tentatively—the notion that every country, and not just those in the West, had a responsibility to do its part to slow climate change. Seven years later, that basic principle would prove essential to achieving the breakthrough Paris Agreement.

Still, as I sat at my desk and looked out the window, the darkness interrupted every few seconds by a flashing light at the tip of the plane's right wing, I was overtaken by more sobering thoughts. I thought about how much work we'd had to put in to land the deal—the countless hours of labor by a gifted and dedicated staff; the behind-the-scenes negotiations and calling in of chits; the promises of aid; and finally an eleventh-hour intervention that had relied as much on my seat-of-the-pants bluster as on any set of rational arguments. All that for an interim agreement that—even if it worked entirely as planned—would be at best a preliminary, halting step toward solving a possible planetary tragedy, a pail of water thrown on a raging fire. I realized that for all the power inherent in the seat I now occupied, there would always be a chasm between what I knew should be done to achieve a better world and what in a day, week, or year I found myself actually able to accomplish.

The forecasted storm had hit Washington by the time we landed, the low clouds sending down a steady mix of snow and freezing rain. In northern cities like Chicago, the trucks would already be out, plowing the streets and scattering salt, but even a hint of snow tended to paralyze the notoriously ill-

equipped D.C. area, closing schools and snarling traffic. With Marine One unable to transport us because of the weather, the drive back to the White House took extra time as our motorcade navigated the icy roads.

It was late when I walked into the residence. Michelle was in bed, reading. I told her about my trip and asked how the girls were doing.

“They’re very excited about the snow,” she said, “even if I’m not.” She looked at me with a sympathetic grin. “Malia’s probably going to ask you at breakfast whether you saved the tigers.”

I nodded, pulling off my tie.

“I’m working on it,” I said.