

# **Disobedience: Direct action on global warming**

by [Bill McKibben](#) in the [January 11, 2011](#) issue



If there was ever an issue about which civil disobedience should not be required, global warming is it.

It's not like the civil rights movement, in which protesters had to break through encrusted millennia of ugly habit, making the kind of dramatic and courageous stand that forced the rest of the nation to see them as real, vital, equal. Seeing black southerners set on by dogs, tossed sideways by fire hoses—somehow it managed finally to get across the notion that these were people. It made sense that preachers were at the head of the fight: this was a moral issue ultimately—*the* moral issue.

By contrast, global warming is, or should be, dry science, an entirely rational question that should be addressed by economists, engineers, scientists working on our behalf and with our thanks; a democratic process, difficult but not controversial. No one has a prejudice against chemistry, an animus about physics. A moral issue? Almost the opposite. Opinion isn't the issue; no one's heart should need changing.

But it's not happening. For 20 years now scientists and engineers and even many economists have spoken with rare unanimity: we need to use much less fossil fuel, and very quickly. They've coalesced around a fairly straightforward plan: make fossil fuel pay for the damage it's doing to the planet, so that we start quickly to shift toward renewable energy. We have to work speedily, because the damage from global warming is already under way; in fact, two years ago NASA scientists gave us the bad news that we were already past the threshold for real danger: above 350 parts per million CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere, they warned, we were in serious trouble from flood, fire, melt. We're at 390 ppm now and rising two parts per million per year, which is precisely why we're suffering through summers like 2010: 19 nations set new temperature records, drought devastated Russia and convinced the Kremlin to end all grain exports; record rainfalls put 7 million Pakistanis out of their homes. Global warming is under way, and unless we act very quickly the damage will get far worse; on its current path, our atmosphere will hold nearly 1,000 parts per million CO<sub>2</sub> by century's end. That is to say, it will be a strange and dangerous place.

So why are we doing nothing? There are many answers. We're used to our way of life, so inertia gets in the way. But that's not the whole picture. Part of it is that the financial power of the fossil fuel industry gets in the way of rational political action. It has spent hundreds of millions of dollars on lobbying and advertising—half a billion, by some accounts, just to convince the Senate not even to take a vote on the very mild global warming bill that was before it last summer. It's managed to obscure the science and drain the sense of urgency from the debate in this country; as a result, last year's Copenhagen conference on climate ended in failure, and the prospects for engaging the rest of the planet grow ever dimmer. (Happily, some nations are

making halting progress on their own—the Chinese, for instance, though building coal-fired power plants, are also by some counts investing \$700 billion in renewable energy programs; when 250 million Chinese take a shower now, the hot water comes from solar panels on their roofs.)

We've made the science of climate one more political football—just another issue we square off over, as if physics was simply one more interest group. As things stand, we are nowhere near taking the decisive action that might give us a chance of avoiding the most devastating kinds of warming; as coral bleaches, deserts grow and ice sheets melt across the planet, we're just marking time.

Which is why some of us have been thinking it may be necessary to mount a campaign of mass action, of civil protest, of dignified disobedience. Its goal would not be to shut down the fossil fuel system—that system is much too big and too pervasive to be shut down, since it powers every action we take from the moment we wake up. The campaign's aim, instead, would be much simpler: to demonstrate the sense of urgency that this issue requires. It would be in the nature of a witness.

Exactly where that witness makes most sense is an open question. Perhaps outside a few of the coal-fired power plants that spew the most carbon into the atmosphere—plants we no longer need, save to bolster the profits of the utilities that own them. Perhaps outside the headquarters of the fossil fuel billionaires that fund the cynical disinformation campaigns. (For instance, Charles and David Koch, brothers at the helm of an enormous energy empire, have become the bankroll for every organization fighting legislation on climate change, as Jane Mayer demonstrated in the *New Yorker* earlier this year.) Perhaps outside the offices of those congresspeople who have done the most to block progress.

The where is less important for the moment than the how. Civil disobedience is a tactic that's in decline, because we've forgotten certain truths about how to use it honestly and effectively. Maybe the most important of these is: it's a last resort, a step we use when other avenues are exhausted.

I've been writing and speaking about climate change for a quarter century; I've watched as endless panels of eminent scientists have gone before Congress to tell the truth about what's happening to the planet. At 350.org we've organized the most widespread days of political action in the planet's history. This past October we had 7,400 "work parties" in 188 nations, where people put up solar panels and laid out

bike paths—and implored their leaders to get to work too. A coalition of American environmental groups last year proposed a mild and tame climate bill—a baby step in the direction we need to travel. They lobbied for it ceaselessly, but in the tidal wave of fossil fuel money, a cowardly Senate refused even to take a vote on the bill. I think we're justified to press our cause in new ways.

But we're not justified in doing it carelessly. Advocates like Thomas Friedman and Al Gore have called for students to stage sit-ins outside power plants, and I appreciate their urgency. But I don't think college kids should be the cannon fodder this time around. For one thing, it's not really their fault, not yet: it's those of us who have spent decades pouring carbon into the atmosphere who really need a way to show our remorse. In an ever-tougher economy, it's not fair to impose an arrest record on someone who hasn't even landed his first job; those of us with a little more security need to lead the way.

So if I'm going to be involved in this kind of battle, I know who I want by my side, at least at first: those of us born in, say, the Eisenhower administration or before. Many of us participated or watched as the civil rights movement pioneered these tactics and understand that their power derives in no small measure from the dignity that marked those events. I don't wear a necktie very often, but if I'm going to get arrested, I'm going to have mine neatly knotted.

The lesson we need above all to communicate is this: people asking for action on climate change are not radicals. Just the opposite—they're in some sense deep conservatives. What's radical is to double the amount of carbon in the atmosphere and just see what happens—no one, not Marx or Mao, has ever proposed a change as radical as that. Those radicals backed by the fossil fuel industry flirt with destroying the planet's physical systems, and they do it so a few of us can keep our particular way of life a decade or two longer; that's not just radical, it's so deeply irresponsible that there's really no precedent.

Having been given this earth to keep and protect—dominion over a living planet—we're on the verge of wiping away much of creation. In the process we're already making life impossible for millions of our poorest brothers and sisters. This is not just radical, it's a kind of blasphemy. Global warming shouldn't be a moral question, but because of our inaction it's become the greatest moral challenge of our time.