

## **A Man for All Seasons**

### **■Al Gore Follows Through With The Counterculture Ethos Of The 1960s In A Way That Reflects His Age And Experience**

June 22, 2006

By Brianne Goodspeed

Towards the end of *An Inconvenient Truth*, Al Gore calls global warming a moral issue. Americans, he says, bear a higher level of responsibility because we emit the most greenhouse gases through our gluttonous energy and oil consumption.

I'd like to take Al Gore's moral obligation one step further and insist that the generation that flooded the streets in the 1960s to demand civil rights and an end to the Vietnam War now constitutes the demographic group with the economic and political power to reverse the trend of global warming.

I am in my 20s and I often ask myself what happened to the baby boomers. It seems like they had their springtime fun—cheap drugs, free love, good protests, great music—and then retreated to the suburbs to get rich. Now, instead of the mantra to never trust anyone over 30, it's suddenly cool to be old, and retirement is the new spring break. So when will it be about us and our kids, and our kids' kids?

Let's hope it's soon. The evidence about global warming is in, and it has been in for a while. Atmospheric carbon dioxide has increased from 280 to 370 parts per million in the last 100 years, and is projected to reach 560 by the end of the century. The Arctic ice cap has diminished 40 percent in the last 40 years, and the 10 hottest years on record have been since 1992. Spring is arriving earlier, fall is coming later, and the oceans are getting warmer. (See sidebar, "Feeling the Heat.")

Global warming skeptics point out that the Earth's climate is always in flux and that before we were worried about global warming, the fear was global cooling. We are actually living in the warm window of an ice age right now. However, as Gore emphasizes in the film, the rate of climate change is unprecedented, and it is directly attributable to human behavior. Global warming doesn't necessarily mean that we'll all cook to death, although heat waves are a part of it. It means that weather patterns grow increasingly unstable. Droughts, floods and devastating storms increase. The evidence that there is a relationship between higher ocean temperatures and storms like Hurricane Katrina is now beyond circumstantial.

One of the accomplishments of *An Inconvenient Truth* is that Gore succeeds in explaining the science behind climate change with fluency and clarity. Public understanding of environmental issues often gets lost in translation because of the communication breakdown between scientific research and the popular press. It is not only the efforts of the oil and gas lobbies that obscure the truth about climate change; the science of global warming is complicated—researchers across the globe have devoted their careers to investigating it—and most journalists simply do not understand it well enough to communicate it well. Gore is a rarity, because he has been committed to environmental issues throughout his career, he's smart, and he knows how to communicate effectively to the public.

Still, I had to watch *An Inconvenient Truth* twice before I allowed myself to like it. My memory of Gore from the 2000 election is of an uncharismatic political insider—just another rich old white guy making promises he wouldn't follow through with. Like most politicians, Gore seemed completely out of touch with my generation, and with the majority of Americans.

After I saw *An Inconvenient Truth* a second time, I changed my mind about Al Gore. He is following through. Gore certainly isn't the only person who is fighting climate change, but he does carry a

torch for the '60s counterculture, and he does it in a way that reflects his age and experience. Gore isn't wearing bell-bottoms and tie-dyed T-shirts, and—let's be honest—nobody wants to see that anyway. He's not singing protest songs or pretending to be young. It's actually good that he's mainstream, because it helps him get the message out to more people.

What is countercultural about Gore is that he is acting on a belief that we can make the world better, and that we should make the world better for everyone. Fighting climate change isn't about saving the Earth. It is about saving an Earth that is fit for human life. It is a question of social justice and social stability because, as happened with Katrina and as happens regularly in the developing world, the devastating consequences of environmental catastrophes take place along class lines. Poor and disenfranchised people are the first to die.

In his review of *An Inconvenient Truth*, Roger Ebert writes, "You owe it to yourself to see this film. If you do not, and you have grandchildren, you should explain to them why you decided not to." At the end of the review, Ebert writes, "I did a funny thing when I came home after seeing *An Inconvenient Truth*. I went around the house turning off the lights." That's a good start. I hope Roger Ebert—rich and influential as he is—takes it further than that.

Of course, the onus to reduce America's contribution to greenhouse gases doesn't rest only on older, wealthier people. Anyone over 18 can vote and hector our elected officials. We can all reduce our oil consumption and electricity use. Everyone, in fact, can do something. People with money and influence, however, can do the most.

Money-strapped college students don't buy hybrid cars or install solar panels on homes they don't own. Sub-Saharan Africans who live on less than a dollar a day are not going to invest 50 cents of it in green technology, and neither are Americans who live below the poverty line. But wealthy people are in a position to invest responsibly, to drive up the market demand for alternative fuel vehicles, and to make the homes they own and the businesses they run more energy efficient. Environmentalism is a class privilege, and those who have that privilege—whether they are baby boomers or not—also have the responsibility to do what others cannot.

Critics have complained that *An Inconvenient Truth* comes across as The Al Gore Show, and they have a point. People all over the world and in every community are fighting climate change. While the Bush administration refuses to address global warming in any meaningful way, some important things are happening at the state and local levels. Last year, Seattle Mayor Greg Nickels authored the Mayors Climate Protection Agreement, calling for a real commitment to greenhouse gas reductions. So far, 243 mayors, representing 45.6 million people, have signed the agreement. Among the Connecticut mayors who have penned their names are New Haven's John DeStefano, Hartford's Eddie Perez and Stamford's Dannel Malloy. Connecticut residents should pressure them to live up to their promises and follow the examples of progressive cities across the country. San Francisco currently has a fleet of 600 alternative fuel vehicles, Portland gets 10 percent of its electricity from renewable sources, and Mayor Richard Daley is intent on making Chicago the greenest city in America by awarding quicker permits to green builders, improving existing buildings for energy efficiency, and promising to secure 20 percent of the city's electricity from renewable sources in coming years.

Global warming isn't only a moral issue, it is an economic opportunity, and people are waking up to the possibility of a green frontier. Gore says in the film, "If we do the right thing, then we're going to create a lot of wealth and we're going to create a lot of jobs." A greener economy, however, won't come without investment, and it is time for boomers to put their money where their mouths once were.

In an Op-Ed for *The New York Times* last year, Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist and green energy proponent Tom Friedman wrote, "We need a grassroots movement. Where are college kids these

days?" Friedman might not know where college kids are, but I do. They are bunkered down in business schools, not English departments. They're spending their summers at resume-buttressing jobs and internships, not picketing outside the White House. Students are terrified for their futures, and many of them are aware, at least vaguely, that Friedman's generation will have sucked every last penny out of Social Security and every last drop of oil out of the ground by the time it's their turn. Can he blame them for putting self-interest ahead of social responsibility?

The younger generations need more from baby boomers than an investment in a greener economy, however. We need that incredible countercultural ethos—the one that isn't afraid to challenge the status quo. My generation didn't have the Beatles or Bob Dylan. We grew up on standardized tests and formulaic Hollywood movies, not sit-ins and student center takeovers. Boomers don't have to grow their hair long and wear beads and flowers, but they do need to prove that the belief in a better world wasn't just a fashion show that went out of style when autumn rolled around and there was a profit to be made. It can start with something as easy as seeing Gore's movie.

Back in 2000, Ralph Nader's bid for the presidency was a part of my political awakening. I had just reached voting age, and I liked Nader because he was refreshing and real, and I fell for the line that there was not much difference between Al Gore and George Bush. Six years and two wars later, I wish I had my ballot back. Maybe Al Gore is stodgy and boring, and maybe *An Inconvenient Truth* is a little self-congratulatory, but Al Gore is no George Bush. Gore has earned my respect. He's powerful and he's using that power to do something positive. At least he cares about the world he's handing off, and in these days of McMansions and Hummers, that makes straight-laced Al Gore and his traveling slideshow seem downright revolutionary. •