

United States & Peoples Climate Mobilization: On April 29, We March for the Future

Sunday 23 April 2017, by [McKIBBEN Bill](#) (Date first published: 19 April 2017).

We'll either save or doom the planet during the Trump administration. Don't sit the Peoples Climate Mobilization out.

It is hard to avoid hyperbole when you talk about global warming. It is, after all, the biggest thing humans have ever done, and by a very large margin. In the past year, we've decimated the Great Barrier Reef, which is the largest living structure on Earth. In the drought-stricken territories around the Sahara, we've helped kick off what The New York Times called "one of the biggest humanitarian disasters since World War II." We've melted ice at the poles at a record pace, because our emissions trap extra heat from the sun that's equivalent to 400,000 Hiroshima-size explosions a day. Which is why, just maybe, you should come to Washington, DC, on April 29 for a series of big climate protests that will mark the 100th day of Trumptime. Maybe the biggest thing ever is worth a day.

Here's the truth about these protests: People started planning them more than a year ago, when the pollsters confidently predicted that Hillary Clinton would occupy the White House. Trump still seemed an outlier. Men like Scott Pruitt and Rex Tillerson were still safely back in Oklahoma and Texas instead of heading the Environmental Protection Agency and the State Department. The Interior Department hadn't yet changed its home-page picture from a photo of a family camping to an 80-foot seam of coal. No one was talking about shutting down our climate satellites.

And yet we still knew we would need to march. Because global warming isn't really Trump's fault. Yes, he's a uniquely disgusting person, and yes, he was elected at the worst possible moment, just as humanity was starting to build a tiny bit of momentum in the fight against climate change. And yes, he's mounting an all-out defense of the archaic fossil-fuel industry. There's no question he's the enemy right now.

But the carbon that melted the ice caps? That's from the Eisenhower years and the Carter administration and the Reagan era—not to mention the Deng Xiaoping regime and the Brezhnev Politburo. The Great Barrier Reef would have died in a Bernie Sanders administration. Barack Obama was president during the three hottest years in history, and during his administration, the United States passed Russia and Saudi Arabia to become the largest producer of hydrocarbons on earth. So these marches and protests—though fully a part of the emerging resistance—aren't just about Trump.

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They're also about the machine that has been driving the planet in a dangerous direction for decades, a machine that spans parties, ideologies, and continents. And they're about the hope for what could come next, a vision that's emerging piece by piece around the world. This week of rallying is the logical extension of the climate-justice movement that emerged in the last decade, led by frontline communities and climate scientists, by indigenous people and farmers and ranchers. All the battles currently under way will be on full display as we march: against the Dakota Access and Keystone pipelines and now a dozen others; against fracking wells and mountaintop-removal coal mines; for solar panels, solar panels, and more solar panels. (Not to mention bikes, buses, and electric cars.) This march embraces, finally, large segments of the labor movement. Workers and citizens dying in the heat and floods will march next to scientists pale from too many hours in front of the computer. It is a march for the future.

But reaching the future depends on dealing with the present, and the present is uniquely bleak. Governments have been oblivious before, but it's hard to remember one as actively, determinedly stupid. It was revelatory to watch, earlier this month, as even Fox's Chris Wallace filleted Scott Pruitt, the head of Trump's EPA. "What if you're wrong?" he finally asked the flustered Pruitt, who couldn't quite recall even climate denialism's standard talking points. Pruitt, of course, is wrong, since his entire job is to represent the industry that has spent a quarter-century lying through its teeth about climate change. But he's aggressively wrong—he hadn't even started his new job before the transition team was leaking news that the administration was ready to defund the satellites we use to keep track of the climate. Think about that for a moment. We're not just going to ignore the mounting evidence; we're going to stop collecting it.

Which helps explain, I think, the mounting anger of the scientific community. They'll march first, on April 22, to the National Mall, and in hundreds of satellite marches around the world. Expect lines of people in lab coats, pushing equation-laden blackboards down the streets of Washington. Scientists have been, for the most part, resolutely apolitical: Their job has been to provide the data, offer the analysis, and then stand back and let "policy-makers" take over. In a rational world, that would make sense. There's no particular reason why someone who knows the best way to compute the melt rate of Greenland's glaciers (no easy task, by the way) would also know the best way to move us off fossil fuel.

But as scientists have finally begun to realize, there's nothing rational about the world we currently inhabit. We're not having an argument about climate change, to be swayed by more studies and journal articles and symposia. That argument is long since won, but the fight is mostly lost—the fight about the money and power that's kept us from taking action and that is now being used to shut down large parts of the scientific enterprise. As Trump budget chief Mick Mulvaney said in March, "We're not spending money on that anymore. We consider that to be a waste of your money to go out and do that." In a case this extreme, scientists have little choice but to be citizens as well. And given their credibility, it will matter: 76 percent of Americans trust scientists to act in the public interest, compared with 27 percent who think the same thing about elected officials.

While the scientists march, many of the rest of us will be catching up on the research. There will be teach-ins across the country—I've just finished helping film a video to use at those gatherings (available for free download), and it was a good reminder that even many progressives don't know the scientific depth and breadth of our understanding. As James Hansen explains in the video, at least since the great Swedish chemist Svante Arrhenius in the waning days of the 19th century, we've understood what was coming. And as Mustafa Ali, longtime head of the environmental-justice program at the pre-Pruitt EPA, explains, if you know poor and vulnerable communities around the world, then you can already see the effects of climate change every single day. (For many communities, from Port Arthur, Texas, to Delhi and Beijing, global warming is the least of the problems with fossil fuel—chronic asthma takes precedence.) None of this is too hard to understand.

It's satellite science, not rocket science. At least until Trump powers down the feed, we can watch in real time as our emissions wreck our home.

But the news isn't all grim. In fact, what makes the current Trumpish backsliding so absurd is that it comes just as we've figured out at least some of what we need to do about climate change. The price of a solar panel has dropped 80 percent in the last decade and continues to plummet. In much of the world, wind power is now the cheapest way to generate electricity. That means that if we wanted to, we could take giant steps—fast. A few nations have shown the way: Denmark produced nearly half its power from wind in 2015, and Costa Rica ran its electricity system almost exclusively off renewables. The price of batteries is dropping just as fast now, and their capacity grows with each new iteration. It's not just Elon Musk; the Chinese are starting to drive this revolution as they install vast quantities of renewable power.

Which is a good reminder that markets alone are not going to make this transition happen—at least, they're not going to make it happen fast enough to catch up with the physics of global warming. For that we'll need concerted government action, like the Senate bill that Bernie Sanders and Jeff Merkley will introduce in late April calling for 100 percent renewable energy by 2050. It won't pass, obviously—but it will serve as the new standard for sensible people to rally around. And it will be popular—every poll shows that Americans of every ideology love solar power (close to 90 percent in some surveys). Not only that, but they'd love the jobs that come with the transition to solar: by first estimate, about 4 million. That job growth should put Trump's endless posturing about coal miners in stark relief—thanks mostly to automation, there are barely 76,000 of them left; twice as many Americans work in car washes.

All these streams will converge on the National Mall on April 29, chosen because that weekend marks Trump's first 100 days in office. This Peoples Climate Mobilization ([#ClimateMarch](#)) [1] will be the big one, the sequel to the massive protest that filled the streets of New York in September of 2014. Expect—well, expect lots of people determined to show that they're fed up with Trump's nonsense and aware that there's another future available. We'll be marching from the Capitol, up Pennsylvania Avenue, and we'll completely surround the White House—a kind of citizens' arrest of the nincompoop inside. There will be a moment of silence and then tremendous noise, loud enough to shake the occupants of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue to their senses if they had them. We'll end with a closing event at the Washington Monument, where people will be able to gather in “circles of resistance” and talk about the road ahead. (There will also be candidate training the next day for climate activists who want to run for office.)

Everyone will have a grand time, and everyone will be asking themselves: Do these marches really matter?

In this case, at least, the answer is yes. Not ☐because they'll push Trump to change in any meaningful way—he holds all the levers of power right now, and there's no way the fossil-fuel industry will let him do anything significant, no matter how many meetings Ivanka takes with Al Gore.

But yes anyway. Marches matter because the fight is really over who defines what “normal” looks like going forward. I said earlier that global warming isn't really Trump's fault. But, helpfully, it is now tied around his neck. By making the all-in wager that physics is a hoax, by turning off the satellites, and by trying to power up the coal mines, he's become personally identified with climate change in a way all of his predecessors managed to avoid. He hasn't followed the script, which is to express alarm but take small steps, a script that has slow-walked us to the edge of hell (or at least a place with a similar temperature).

And in that way, Trump may end up doing the world a perverse favor: If he goes down politically, we need him to take that half-heartedness down with him. When we come together in Washington at the end of April, it won't be to demand slightly nicer rhetoric on climate change or some undefined "action." We no longer care that you "believe in" climate change, because we know that not believing in it means you're an idiot. Instead, we're going to demand action actually commensurate with the problem, which is to say the kinds of things in the Merkley-Sanders bill: an end to new fossil-fuel infrastructure. A World War II-scale mobilization for clean energy. Jobs by the millions so that we repair the social fabric even as we're patching up the planet. Justice for those communities hit first and hit hardest by global warming.

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We need enough people in the streets, now and in the months ahead, to make sure that every politician who's not a Trumpist understands where the center of gravity now lies. It's not with the straddling politics of the past, where you could be for both solar and fracking, for new pipelines and new panels. Trump has pissed people off, and pissed-off people don't ask for small and easy progress. They demand the shifts that reality requires. In this case, winning slowly is the same as losing, so we don't want to substitute one for the other. We want to win, so that we have a planet left to live on.

Trump is either the end of the fight for a working planet Earth—or the moment when that fight turns truly serious. That choice is not up to him. It's up to the rest of us. See you in DC.

Bill McKibben

P.S.

* THE NATION. APRIL 19, 2017:

<https://www.thenation.com/article/on-april-29-we-march-for-the-future/>

* Bill McKibben is the author of 15 books, most recently *Oil and Honey: The Education of an Unlikely Activist*. A scholar in residence at Middlebury College, he is the co-founder of 350.org, the largest global grassroots organizing campaign on climate change.

Footnotes

[1] <https://peoplesclimate.org>