

Preface

At the beginning of April 2015, two Dutch polar researchers and explorers, Marc Cornelissen and Philip de Roo, set off on cross-country skis to investigate an area of thinning ice in northern Canada known as the Last Ice Area. Toward the end of the day on April 27, Cornelissen left a cheerful voicemail back home saying that he and his companion were having to ski in their underwear because of unexpectedly warm conditions. He also said that they might have to take a detour to get to their ultimate destination, Bathurst Island, because of unexpectedly thin ice. That would be the last such message. The next day the Royal Canadian Mounted Police received an emergency message from the two-man team, and when a pilot surveyed the area, he spotted the pair's sled dog but not the explorers. One corpse subsequently was recovered.

That same month, coincidentally, *Harper's Magazine* published an article, "Rotting Ice," by the intrepid nature writer and naturalist Gretel Ehrlich, describing repeated visits she had paid to seal-hunting Inuit in Greenland's far north, people living in some of the world's most remote villages. Because of ever widening open waters and ever scarcer ice floes capable of supporting seals, the native men and women were

finding it impossible to go on with their traditional lives, in which the center from time immemorial had been the annual seal hunt. Their children, instead of being initiated into the fine arts of the hunt, were having to head south to get vocational educations to become auto mechanics, electricians, or plumbers. Surveying the big picture, a veteran of Ohio State University's Byrd Polar and Climate Research Center told Ehrlich: "The ice sheet is melting at an accelerated pace. It's not just surface melt but the deformation of the inner ice. The fabric of the ice sheet is coming apart because of increasing meltwater infiltration. Two to three hundred billion tons of ice are being lost each year. The last time atmospheric CO₂ was this high, the [global average] sea level was seventy feet higher."

Wherever on earth the effects of global warming are at their most acute—whether it is in the high-latitude regions of the Arctic and Antarctic or the topographically highest regions of the Andes and Himalayas—it is the same story: The ill effects of climate change are becoming dramatically worse dramatically faster than even the leading experts have expected. Scenarios that were considered almost outlandish just years ago, more fit for science fiction than for serious scientific consideration, now are matters of active concern. The total collapse of Antarctica's Ross Ice Shelf, an area the size of France, or the complete hiving off of Greenland's ice cover—these are developments, were they to occur abruptly, that could render virtually every major coastal city of the world uninhabitable from one decade to the next.

As scientists have started to think the unthinkable, there has been a subtle but distinct shift in attitude among members of the general educated public as well. Not so long ago, in the face of any uncommonly extreme weather event, it was the almost universal common wisdom to say that although the

event might be consistent with global warming predictions, it of course could not be blamed squarely on global warming. Now, faced with such events, the common wisdom increasingly is to attribute them to climate change unless the contrary can be scientifically proven and even if expert opinion is expressly suggesting the opposite. Scientists may say that the drought that's been ravaging California could be just a random hundred-year event, but politicians, big media, and the general public appear not to care much. And that seems to be because most of us are coming to feel, whether or not the drought is a direct result of global warming, that it might as well be—we feel that it is sending a message that we ignore at our peril.

With that different sense of threat has come, too, an awareness that we in any one country cannot head off climate catastrophe all by ourselves, a realization that averting a cataclysm will require the combined and coordinated efforts of the whole world. Of course, that view is not universally held among Americans or generally, but it has come to be quite distinctly the attitude among people who actively worry about climate change. This is why hundreds of thousands took to the streets of New York City in September 2014, when the UN secretary-general convened a one-day summit to galvanize support for a strong international climate agreement. The specific purpose of the summit had been to gather world leaders, get them to focus on the climate problem, and inspire them to stronger collective action. But the public demonstration that was organized independently of the United Nations ended up outclassing the official event. The secretary-general himself joined the crowd—estimated at about a quarter of a million—embracing its favored slogan of the day, “There is no planet B.”

A casual observer of the demonstration might have supposed that it really was aimed specifically at the United States and US policymakers, not the global community of climate diplomats. But that was not the case. In an informal but rather carefully randomized written survey I took during the demonstration, almost all respondents agreed that they wanted to bring pressure on the nations of the world to address climate change more aggressively. Though all of them said that the United States should take stronger action on climate change regardless of what anybody else did, 94 percent of them considered coordinated international action essential. What was more, high fractions of the demonstrators proved to be quite well informed about which leading countries had been playing a constructive role in climate talks and which had been more obstructive than helpful. Two thirds of them had formed specific opinions about the positions the United States had been taking in global climate negotiations (see appendix 1).

This short book is addressed to all students of climate policy, whether informal or formal, and proceeds from the premise that an informed public is the best single guarantor of sound public policy. The book's thesis is that climate negotiations, contrary to an opinion very widely held at present, can work and have worked. The shortcomings in the outcomes of negotiations are for the most part not the fault of the negotiating process, as such, but of the major participants in the process, who often have not played the diplomatic game to best possible effect.

The focus of the book is strictly on the effort to arrive at universally agreed-upon rules about how all the states of the world are to address global warming. Its purpose is to provide a short analytic history of global climate negotiations, from their beginnings in the early 1990s to the present day. It is an

exercise in contemporary history, not a work of general social science or a study of what goes by the name of “global climate governance,” a much broader topic. In describing the mechanics of how global climate policy has come to be formulated, it puts equal emphasis on fundamental social-economic forces and on the vagaries of chance event and exceptional personality—the essentially unpredictable elements that can make important things happen that otherwise might not have happened.

This being a book about ongoing developments, its method and philosophy are unabashedly journalistic. The book relies as much on direct observation and on conversations with knowledgeable people as on written documents, and it treats those interviewed not just as sources but as subjects of the story as well. Whether individuals are negotiators, scientists, policy intellectuals, or citizen activists, their actions and reactions make up the political chemistry of climate diplomacy.

As a historian and journalist writing about climate diplomacy, I take for granted that many important issues can be addressed only provisionally and sometimes speculatively, pending declassification of documents and publication of candid memoirs or letters. That is to say—and I apologize in advance for resorting to a cliché—the book is but that proverbial “first draft of history,” written for those who think that something of the sort might be helpful.

Like journalists generally, I try to take no sides. My only allegiance is to what the historian Peter Gay called the party of humanity, the community of those who believe knowledge can be brought to bear to improve the lot of humankind. My central concern here is how well or poorly that cause is being advanced in diplomatic negotiations—in how well or poorly the game is being played.

Though high history this most assuredly is not, it does presume that climate diplomacy deserves to be treated with the same respect that we traditionally accord matters of war and peace. We members of the general public may not be thinking today of climate negotiations the same way we have thought of the great triumphs and failures of diplomatic history in the past—the Congress of Vienna in 1815, say, or the Cold War’s end in 1989, the Versailles Treaty or the Oslo process—but we should. Whether catastrophic climate change is headed off will depend greatly on what happens in diplomatic negotiations. If those negotiations fail, it will be only a matter of time until states are at each other’s throats, as the circumstances we have depended on crumble all around.

Climate Diplomacy
from Rio to Paris

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