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After Paris

By Michelle DePass June 1, 2017

In December 2009, I was a member of the United States' official delegation at the Copenhagen Climate Change Conference. This was the meeting when President Obama brought the U.S. in from the cold; when, for the first time since Kyoto, the United States — the world's second-largest carbon emitter— joined the international community and the United Nations in seeking solutions to the problems of anthropogenic climate change, rather than being the promoter of obfuscation and obstruction. The U.S. quickly morphed from climate villain to climate champion; and the groundwork for Paris, with unprecedented and forward-looking cooperation between the United States, China, Europe, and India - and every other nation in the world but Syria (mired in civil war) and

Nicaragua (which objected because they believed the resulting accords did not go far enough) - was firmly laid.

To say that the negotiations around the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change were among the most monumental international negotiations in human history would not be an understatement. Nor would it be an exaggeration to say that the result - the Paris Accords - was potentially the most important international agreement in modern times. It was a treaty that was literally decades in the making, one that incorporated tens of thousands of hours of work and negotiations among thousands of diplomats, representatives of the private sector, and civil society.

What a moment it was. A moment of pride in our leaders - not just our own, but those of all nations - who were willing to put their children's and grandchildren's futures ahead of short-term political, economic, or short-sighted national interests. And it would not have happened without the United States.

Many of us certainly had our doubts that it would ever come to pass. But it did. And not a moment too soon; as has been widely reported, the sixteen warmest years on record have occurred since the year 2000. Arctic sea ice extent is reaching new

lows, and entire Antarctic ice sheets are collapsing. Greenland is melting, and the glaciers worldwide are disappearing. These are not statistical flukes; these events are real. And they are the consequences of a reliance on the burning of coal and oil as the fuels for economic development and growth. In Paris in 2015, the leaders of 195 countries recognized this as a fact. And they committed themselves to saving the planet.

How times have changed. Today, Donald Trump unilaterally decided to withdraw the United States from the Paris Accords. The reductions in carbon emissions to which the United States has previously pledged - a 26 percent reduction from 2005 levels by 2025 - no longer form part of official government policy. This, combined with the administration's rejection of President Obama's Clean Power Plan, methane standards, and vehicle fuel economy and emissions standards, could result in an additional 1.8 gigatonnes of CO₂ being pumped into the atmosphere by 2030, according to a recent report by Climate Analytics. This is not only short-sighted, but potentially suicidal. And the effects of these decisions will be borne overwhelmingly by the poor and communities of color within this country, and by poor and developing nations across the world. It is now up

to both civil society and the private sector in this country to ensure that this doesn't happen.

Like many others who have spent years in the trenches fighting for climate justice, I digested the news this afternoon with a mixture of deep sadness and profound rage. But if there is a bright side to this story, it is that Donald Trump is on the wrong side of history. A low-carbon future is inevitable. US emissions are already down significantly from its 2005 levels, partly as a result of government policy but largely as a result of the rapid growth and adoption of renewable energy sources that can now compete head-to-head with fossil fuels - even with the shameless promotion of dirty energy espoused by the current occupants of the White House and the EPA. Meanwhile, China and the European Union are eager to take up the mantle of climate leadership that the United States has so absurdly dropped. Cities and states throughout the U.S., including New York City and California, are more than happy to partner with them in setting their own targets for reduced emissions. Donald Trump says that the Paris Accord comes at the expense of American jobs. He is wrong.

The future of job growth in the U.S. energy sector is already in the hands

of the so-called “green economy.” Coal jobs are not coming back, not because of international climate agreements, but because our economy has changed and the commitments of the private sector have changed. The vast majority of the business community has already committed to a low-carbon future; this is partly as a result of steady and relentless public pressure, and partly because it simply makes good economic sense for the long run.

Today, the fight for climate justice has suffered an undeniable setback. But we will live to fight another day. And we will win.

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