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Warming to A Candidacy?

By George F. Will
Sunday, June 11, 2006; B07

A few years ago a Los Angeles television anchor said: "Dodgers and Angels highlights at 11. Please watch anyway." Some viewers probably thought ABC should have said something like that when announcing Al Gore's extended interview on "This Week" last Sunday. But the interview signaled an important alteration of the competition for the Democrats' 2008 presidential nomination -- that is, if Gore means what he is saying, and he seems painfully sincere.

"Less than 10 years." That, Gore warns, is all the time that "leading scientists" say we may have "before we cross a point of no return" -- unless we make a "really good start toward dramatic changes" to combat global warming. Ten years from now will be the last year of the second term of the next president, if he or she is reelected. Surely Gore should strive to be that president, if he means these four things he says or implies:

First, so grave is the "planetary emergency" that decisions made in the next few years will determine the fate of civilization.

Second, he understands this better than any other national leader. When the Kyoto Protocol, which distributes nations' obligations regarding reduction of global warming, was created in 1997, Gore could find only "one senator out of all 100 who was willing to say that he or she would definitely" vote to ratify it.

Third, he aims "to move our country" and "change the minds of the American people" and instill "the sense of urgency that is appropriate," because "the political environment has to be changed" before solutions are possible.

Fourth, "I'm under no illusions that there's any position in the world with as much influence" as the presidency.

So much for his silly dichotomy -- his assertion that global warming "is not a political issue. It is a moral issue." *Any* large policy issue is a political issue, and it is large because it is morally significant. So, having come within 537 Florida votes, or perhaps a 5 to 4 Supreme Court decision, of becoming president, why not try again, particularly with, he says, "Earth in the balance"?

If he does, he will have to tweak his Cassandra persona. For example, when he said on "This Week" that the Kyoto Protocol "has become the binding law in most of the world," he adopted a, shall we say, broad understanding of "binding": Rapidly developing China and India, with more than a third of the planet's population, are exempt from emission limits, and of the 15 European Union countries committed to hitting certain Kyoto targets, only two are on a path to do so.

Minutes after Gore said that "the debate in the science community is over," he said "there is a debate between the American ice science community and ice scientists elsewhere" about whether the less-than-extremely-remote danger is a rise in sea level of a few inches *or 20 feet* . And he said scientists "don't know what is happening" in west Antarctica or Greenland. So when Gore says the scientific debate is "over," he must mean merely that there is consensus that we are in a period of warming.

This is not where debate ends but where it begins, given that at any moment in its 4.5 billion years, the planet has been cooling or warming. The serious debate is about two other matters: the contribution of human activity to the current episode of warming and the degree to which this or that remedial measure (e.g., the Kyoto Protocol) would make a difference commensurate with its costs.

Nevertheless, the likelihood that Gore will seek the presidency is suggested not only by the logic of what he

says but also by what he does not say. Given how clear and present he says the danger is, he should be more specific and radical regarding the economic, indeed civilizational, changes he considers necessary. He should be -- unless he is trimming his sails and biding his time in the hope that he can acquire the presidential pulpit from which to move the nation.

There is *nothing* wrong with that. The nobility of politics, when it is noble, often consists in prudent maneuvering and persuading until an issue is, in terms of public opinion, ripe. A luminous example of the nobility of indirection is Lincoln's protracted and incremental progress toward abolishing slavery. Dismayed by the Kansas-Nebraska Act and then the Dred Scott decision, Lincoln did not exclaim: "That does it! Instead of running for president, I am going to prepare a PowerPoint presentation."

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