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Al Gore on the Climate Emergency
By Elizabeth Wyman
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"I am Al Gore, and I used to be the next president of the United States." The audience burst into laughter. Thus the former vice president and 2000 presidential contender introduced himself to an audience of 1,100 students, faculty, and community members last week at Yale University.

Gore came to Yale to discuss "The Climate Emergency" as part of a Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies lecture series. His talk focused on the environmental threats posed by global warming, including the melting of polar ice caps, rising sea level, and changing global climatic patterns.

Gore presented a slide show that juxtaposed delicate images of the Earth from space with charts and graphs. illustrating the exponential growth of human population, global carbon-dioxide concentrations, and global temperatures. "The same pattern shows up wherever you look," he said as he clicked to display yet another. upward-sloping· curve. Standing in front of a graph of global temperatures changes over time, Gore pointed out a small dip in the chart that corresponded with the last Ice Age: "This much on the graph is the different between: a nice spring day in New Haven and having a mile of ice over your head"

He then turned to point out the sharp upward trend in temperatures over the past century, which many scientists believe is caused by increasing atmospheric levels of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases associated with the combustion of fossil fuels. "" So what does _this_ mean?" he asked. "Is it sane and rational and reasonable to do this? Or is it _crazy?_ It's crazy."

Gore proposed a transition away from polluting energy sources such as oil and coal toward renewable energy including wind and solar power in order to stem the threat of global climate change. He also called for the development of more fuel-efficient vehicles, like Toyota's gasoline electric hybrid Prius, which at 55 miles to the gallon produces· half the emissions of the average car. "We can create more jobs, we can create higher incomes, we can create a better quality of life in solving this problem," he said.

In Congress and later in the White House, Gore gained a reputation as an outspoken environmentalist. His best-selling 1993 book, "Earth in the Balance," outlined the threat of global warming and other environmental issues. In the introduction, Gore lamented the difficulty of putting the environment on the political agenda. Reflecting on his own failure to champion environmental causes in. Congress as well as during his failed 1987 presidential bid, Gore vowed that "the time has long since come to take more political risks - and endure much more political criticism - by proposing tougher, more effective solutions and fighting hard for their enactment."

Looking back at the Clinton administration policies as well as Gore's 2000 run for the White House, some students questioned whether Gore maintained his commitment to environmental issues in the face of political opposition. He famously failed to participate in the 1997 United Nations climate talks in Kyoto, Japan, until intense pressure from environmental groups prompted him to fly in for the final day of negotiations. The environment was also notably absent from his 2000 election campaign. In a private meeting with the former vice president, students probed Gore on his seemingly contradictory rhetoric and ·actions.

One asked why candidate Gore seemed to evade the issue of the environment during his 2000 presidential bid against George W. Bush. Gore replied that it wasn't he but the media who failed to address the issue.

He contended that he did talk about the environment, but his words never made it through the "media filter" to be covered by the newspapers and television networks. Gore attributed this lack of media coverage to a popular perception that there was no disagreement between himself and Bush on the issue.

"The Bush campaign lied about their basic posture on the environment," Gore argued--including Bush's campaign pledge to regulate carbon dioxide; the primary culprit of global warming, a promise Bush abandoned shortly after taking office. "Our system used to have antibodies in it that would eat up big lies," Gore lamented. He argued that today the American political system is dominated by money and power more than any other society since the Middle Ages. He concluded, "I'm certainly hoping we're in for a big change" on Jan. 20, alluding to a victory by·U.S. Sen. John Kerry in the 2004 presidential election. Gore pointed out that Kerry was one of his "most reliable allies· in the Senate on the issue of the environment: "He has really· been a standout where environmental protection is concerned."

The question that remains is this: Will Kerry manage to get . the environmental message through to the public, where AI *Gore* failed? As president, Will Kerry follow through on his campaign pledge to fight the special interests and protect our nation's environment? One thing is clear: we cannot stand for four more years of the Bush ad.m4llstration's false environmental rhetoric and regulatory rollbacks. Our nation cannot make progress toward clean "air, clean water and the protection of public lands without the support of *out* leaders in Washington. In 2000 and again in 2004 the nation has been offered the choice of strong environmental leadership. Will we get it right this time?

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