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The New York Times
Monday, December 10, 2007

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DECEMBER 7, 2007, 11:14 AM

Real Action on Climate Change

By ANNE-MARIE SLAUGHTER

Anne-Marie Slaughter, an international lawyer and the dean of the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton University. She is the author "*The Idea that is America*," and she is spending this academic year in Shanghai.



I caught a snippet of a speech at the United Nations Conference on Climate Change in Bali, long enough to hear the speaker say: "We need real action." Real action. Not promises, not hopes for new technologies, not high-minded rhetoric, but action.

When I was in Japan last month, I saw real action in action. After a day of meetings at the Foreign Ministry, a young diplomat escorted me to the entrance just after 5:00. We walked through a darkened hallway; I assumed that we were in a part of the building under renovation. Not so – my guide explained to me that all non-essential lights were turned off "to save energy and the environment." We came to the elevator bank, where 5-6 people were waiting in front of an elevator even though the elevator next to it was there and empty. I gestured toward it, and my guide again explained that after 5:00 only one elevator ran – the others were blocked.

The next day in the train station I commented on the waste-bins with three or four different compartments for different kinds of waste. Our Japanese escort, Eiko-san, explained that at home Tokyo residents are required to separate out 7 different kinds of products for recycling, and that in some other cities in Japan the categories go as high as 19. These distinctions make it possible to readily recycle different materials; indeed, Eiko-san mentioned that the governor of Tokyo was doing everything possible to avoid creating another major landfill.

Small potatoes, perhaps – certainly in the face of the enormity of climate change. Indeed, every time we read of the massive natural forces that carbon concentrations are unleashing – melting glaciers, warming ocean waters, hurricanes and floods – it is natural to think that only similarly massive solutions – the invention of brand-new energy sources, the ability to block heat from the atmosphere via enormous cloud-shields – can save us. In fact, however, as any climate scientist will tell you, it's going to take a wide array of solutions, big and small, to begin reversing the damage we have already done, much less avoiding even greater catastrophe.

I am old enough to remember Jimmy Carter giving a speech in his cardigan, telling all Americans to turn their thermostats down to 68 in the winter to save energy after the energy crisis in the 1970s. He was widely ridiculed for such an old-fashioned, unimaginative approach. But his leadership was far better than the complete absence of leadership on this issue we face today. Every individual who thinks about turning down a thermostat, driving less, saving water or any other conservation measures naturally thinks: "But why should I, when it's just a drop in the bucket and my neighbor isn't doing it?"

This is where good old-fashioned exhortation comes in – the power of a president to marshal a nation in a common purpose. If nothing else, give us guidelines – thermostat settings, recommended MPG standards, recycling recommendations. And set an example from the top. I have been in the State Department after 5:00, and I never noticed dimmed lights or stopped elevators. For all the grand speeches in Bali, real action starts at home.

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Guest Bloggers

Nick Kristof has lined up a roster of guest bloggers to stand in for him while he's on his book leave.

Kurt Campbell is an expert on Asia and security issues who is now chief executive of the Center for a New American Security.

Will Okun is a Chicago school teacher who traveled with Nick Kristof in June to central Africa, on his win-a-trip contest.

Josh Ruxin is a Columbia University expert on public health who has spent the last couple of years living in Rwanda. He's an unusual mix of academic expert and mud-between-the-toes aid worker.

Steve Radelet is a development expert who has lived for many years in Africa and Asia, taught at Harvard, and worked at the U.S. Treasury. He is currently a Senior Fellow at the [Center for Global Development](#) in Washington and economic advisor for President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia.

Anne-Marie Slaughter is an international lawyer and the dean of the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton University. Anne-Marie is the author of "The Idea that is America," and she is spending this academic year in Shanghai.

Joseph Stiglitz is a Nobel-winning economist who has written incisively about the costs of our involvement in Iraq.

Naka Nathaniel is a NYTimes.com multimedia journalist and he frequently travels with Nick Kristof.

