

Secretary Kerry
Testimony Before House Oversight Committee
April 9, 2019

Mr. Chairman – thank you, not only for your leadership on climate change, but even more, for your stewardship of a Committee which, at its best, demands accountability of those in positions in power, on behalf of the American people.

Chairman Cummings, Ranking Member Jordan thank you for inviting me and Secretary Hagel to join you this morning, and for welcoming back to Congress not just one but two recovering United States Senators.

I think most on this Committee would agree that there's a long list of issues where, despite the advice and warning of experts, Washington remains gridlocked.

But at least on most of those issues, no one can credibly deny the magnitude of the challenge let alone the existence of the problem.

The same cannot be said about climate change.

Think about it: During World War II, America would never have tolerated leadership that denied Hitler's aggression. During the Cold War, no one in public life would have been taken seriously if they didn't offer a policy to counter the Soviets. And after 9/11, it would've been disqualifying to deny that al Qaeda knocked down the Twin Towers.

Facts are facts. But here we are in 2019 where too many in positions of responsibility still call climate change a hoax and advocate policies that will only make the reality of climate change even worse.

Enough. We have no time to waste debating alternative facts only to be forced to invest years more trying to reestablish trust in the real ones.

Just the other month, we learned that the White House is planning to convene a task force, apparently working behind closed doors, to "determine" whether climate change is a national security threat. We already know what the outcome will be: it's a council of doubters and deniers convened to undo a 26-year-old factual consensus that climate change is a national-security threat multiplier.

It's a scheme to pretend there are two sides to an issue already long since settled.

In examining the facts regarding this issue you don't have to just accept my or Secretary Hagel's word. The designation of climate change as a security issue wasn't settled by President Obama's NSC, my State Department, or Secretary Hagel's Pentagon.

No. It was settled 28 years ago by a Republican President and a team that included Jim Baker, Dick Cheney, Brent Scowcroft, Colin Powell, and Bob Gates. In 1991, the Bush administration

assessed in its National Security Strategy that threats like climate change, which “respect no international boundaries,” were “already contributing to political conflict.” Each of his successors included climate change in their National Security Strategies. Even after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, President George W. Bush’s administration made room in the 2002 National Security Strategy to warn of “dangerous human interference with the global climate.”

There is not a scintilla of accepted science or bipartisan military expert analysis that four consecutive administrations were wrong. There is no event and certainly no scientifically based event or suggestion that the proposition should be reexamined. No.

The factual basis of climate change’s threat originated not with politicians but with the national security community, including the intelligence community. Eleven retired military leaders constituting the military advisory board at CNA, a naval think tank in Arlington, described climate change in 2007 as “a threat multiplier for instability.” Seven years later, 16 retired flag officers representing all branches of the military implored Americans to understand the severity of “a salient national security concern” because “time and tide wait for no one.”

Instead of convening a kangaroo court, the president might want to talk with the educated adults he once trusted enough to fill his top national security positions.

Director of National Intelligence Daniel Coats has reported that climate change would increase “the risk of social unrest, migration, and interstate tension in countries such as Egypt, Ethiopia, Iraq, and Jordan.” Then-Defense Secretary Jim Mattis told the Armed Services Committee last year: “Climate change is impacting stability in areas of the world where our troops are operating today.”

These officials weren’t making back-of-the-envelope projections about a distant, dystopic future. Climate change is already impacting national security. The American Security Project (ASP) is an organization of security experts including retired admirals and generals, flag officers who spent their careers in service not to a president or a party but to country above all else. It also includes former United States Senators— both Democrat and Republican. The experts at ASP note that climate change “is what we call a ‘ring road’ issue; meaning that climate change affects all of these other threats....It will change disease vectors. It will drive migration. These changes, in turn, could affect state stability and harm global security.”

Lieutenant General Castellaw and Brigadier General Adams of the American Security Project know the ground truth. They write: “Even as our comrades on active duty in the U.S. military forces plan for the impact of the rise in sea levels in places like Bangladesh, the retreat of the ice in the Arctic and extreme storms in places like the Philippines, members of Congress and others continue to deny the obvious. The truth is that climate change is real and poses significant challenges for our nation’s security.”

As Secretary of State, I visited Naval Station Norfolk. It’s the biggest naval installation in the world, and the land that houses it is literally sinking. In fact, sea levels on the East Coast are rising twice as fast as the global average, thanks to uneven ocean temperatures and geology.

The admiral in charge of the fleet and the base commander made clear what further sea-level rise could mean for Norfolk or for the U.S. Navy fleet, 20 percent of which is home-ported nearby. Increased risk of wildfires can even prevent troops from training with live ammunition. Willful denial won't change the fact that our military readiness will be degraded when the permafrost our Alaskan bases are built on begins to thaw out.

And it doesn't end with military impacts. Climate change didn't lead to the rise of the terrorist group Boko Haram in Nigeria, but the country's severe drought and the government's inability to cope with it exacerbated the volatility that militants exploited to seize villages, butcher teachers and kidnap hundreds of innocent girls. And it is accepted fact that climate change—a prolonged, historic drought—killed off such a vast percentage of Syria's livestock that more than a million people were forced to migrate to Damascus and its environs, contributing greatly to the violence in that country.

The prospect of a more arid climate throughout the Middle East and parts of Asia will increasingly strain the most essential resource of all: fresh water. We've already seen tensions rise around the basins of the Nile, Central Asia's Indus River and the Mekong in Southeast Asia. Areas facing unrest, instability and weak governance are breeding grounds for violent extremism. Climate change will only exacerbate mass migration in places already enduring economic, political and social stress.

Mr. Chairman, the only people cheering the president's apparent attempt to erase climate change from U.S. national security considerations, live in Beijing and Moscow. China and Russia have for years been mapping the resource competition, military implications, and geostrategic challenges that climate change will present in an ever-changing, climate-impacted Arctic. What a gift to them if we stop making our own assessments because we have our heads buried in the sand while their eyes are on the tundra.

I know legislating on climate is not easy. I was charged with responsibility of leading the last serious bipartisan effort with Lindsey Graham and Joe Lieberman. I lived the difficulties. But I know we'll never get there at all if we don't listen to our generals and admirals and our scientists. We can spend the next two years debating whether two plus two equals five. But it would mean someday a young American in uniform will likely be put in harm's way because truth lost out to talking heads.

Let's debate how to address the climate national security threat, not whether it's real.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.