

Bill Richardson for President

[subscribe](#)

## Speeches

### Facing Down the Threats of the 21st Century

10/18/2007

#### Recent Speeches

- [A New Partnership With Latin America 10/24/2007](#)
- [Facing Down the Threats of the 21st Century 10/18/2007](#)
- [Making America's Schools Work 10/11/2007](#)
- [Hard Choices: The Responsible Way Forward for Iraq and our Military 10/04/2007](#)
- [Speech to The Obesity Society 09/19/2007](#)

[More Speeches »](#)

Thank you for that kind introduction. It's always good to be back here in the heartland.

I want to speak with you about urgent threats that America and the community of nations face. Global challenges that pose serious dangers to the future welfare of the human race.

For decades, we believed that the only Apocalyptic threat to human civilization was the possibility of nuclear war.

Now we know better.

We know that poverty and overpopulation affect us all.

Refugee crises. Pandemic diseases. Climate change. Environmental degradation. Resource Depletion. Ethnic and political instability. These are not just the problems of individual nations. They are the problems of an interdependent world.

These threats are insidious. They may take decades to develop. And they respect no borders. Problems that span time and continents can only be solved through coordinated and cooperative global efforts.

From the deserts of Mesopotamia to the jungles of Central America, civilizations of the past, great and small, have been overcome despite the invincibility of their armies. Famine has wiped out entire peoples. Disease has crippled whole nations. Overpopulation has sunk full continents.

In the past, resource shortages destroyed civilizations. Today, they could destroy civilization itself.

We are the most powerful nation in the history of the world. Yet, we are not immune from such threats. It will take vigilance and bold action **now**, to preserve our safety for the **future**.

If we wait ten or twenty or fifty years to address these problems, it will already be too late.

Environmental degradation takes many forms, but the most urgent is global climate change. There is an overwhelming scientific consensus that the planet is getting hotter. This is a fact, not a forecast.

The ice caps and glaciers are melting.

Sea levels are rising.

300 million human beings live less than fifteen feet above sea level. Unless we act now, homes, villages, cities, and entire nations will be submerged.

Those not displaced by rising waters may go hungry as our unrestrained addiction to fossil fuels threatens both regional and global food shortages. Already severe drought has cut the world's maize crops by as much as 15%, and wheat supplies will soon be at their lowest level in 26 years.

In a world where hundreds of millions go to bed hungry, major losses in staple crops foretell a time when we wake up to billions starving.

In America ... in a nation that has long fed the world...catastrophically rising temperatures threaten to decimate our farmland.

Here in Iowa, the foundation for an entire way of life could melt away.

Meanwhile, the destruction of forest continues at an alarming rate. Forests absorb carbon from the atmosphere, slowing the pollution that causes global warming. They are critical to the air we breathe and the soil that sustains us. But unsustainable development pollutes that air and erode that soil. Slashing and burning threatens the mesh of life itself. Every species is entangled with the lives of others. As we slash away individual strings, it is increasingly likely that the entire web will collapse.

Our unsustainable habits extend across the land and into the ocean -- from sea to dying sea. If we continue on the present course of exploitation, world fisheries will be virtually depleted by the middle of the century. Many once-productive fisheries have already been destroyed. Only 23% of world fish stocks are in good condition.

More than one billion people depend on fish as their main source of protein. We are wiping out not only food for hundreds of millions of people, but also threatening the awe-inspiring diversity of ocean life. Our oceans are a precious, but not an infinite resource.

Neither are fresh water supplies. Today, one out of every five human beings on the planet does not have access to safe drinking water. Studies conclude that droughts caused by climate change could leave up to one and a half billion people without enough water to survive. Changes in the global distribution of fresh water will cause long-term droughts in some of the world's most fertile food-producing regions. India and China could be devastated.

In some poverty-stricken parts of the world, like Somalia, governments have been replaced by warlord gangs. Stability has given way to chaos and even famine.

The West African nation of Ghana was long one of the region's most promising economies. The water that once roared through the nation's Volta Dam has been reduced to a trickle. Drought is crippling that nation's economy.

In the face of these cascading global threats, Congress and the President have been largely paralyzed. Rather than rallying the nation and the world to face up to the dangers of climate change, the Bush administration claimed for years -- against the overwhelming scientific consensus -- that the "science was unproven." Dick Cheney wrote our energy policy with oil companies, behind closed doors. The congress has gone along for the ride. The power of lobbyists, rather than the power of science, has determined our environmental policies. Washington is broken.

Time has run out. It is now urgent that Congress stand up to this President now, and that the next President provide energetic leadership to address these crises. We must be determined, courageous, far-sighted and bold.

At stake, is our national survival and our survival as a species. Al Gore's tireless and inspiring work to rally the world to confront these grave dangers has now been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize and I congratulate him.

Earlier this year, a report issued by eleven retired U.S. generals and admirals confirmed his warnings and described the climate crisis a "serious threat to America's national security."

Our national safety is more than enough reason to act. But it is not the only reason that we **must**. At stake, is the health and welfare of the human race.

The world is looking to America for leadership. **We cannot fail.**

Americans are a generous people, and a courageous people. We rescued Europe from fascism, and generations from despair. Our farms have been the breadbasket to the world, and our scientists have saved millions of lives through such discoveries as antibiotics and the polio vaccine. And we are the nation that lit the fire of human freedom.

But the Bush Administration has failed to live up to our unmatched record of human achievement. Many of the fights that America used to lead are now being lost.

Consider the health of humankind. Over the past 35 years we've seen the emergence of more than thirty new incurable and infectious diseases, such as AIDS and Ebola. At the same time, older pathogens -- malaria, cholera, tuberculosis and many others -- have become more resistant to treatment. They are spreading with a vengeance.

Malaria alone takes a human life every thirty seconds -- most of them children.

And disease disproportionately strikes those with the least resources to fight back. More than a billion people survive on less than a dollar a day, and nearly half of the world's 2 billion children live in poverty.

But we cannot comprehend the crushing burden of global poverty through statistics alone. Even in America, I have walked in communities with no access to clean water. We have all seen shamefully inadequate housing, and we know that even in our own country there are children that go to bed hungry every night.

In my travels abroad, I have seen human desperation -- first hand. In the Sudan, I have been to camps filled with families who have lost every worldly possession.

I was on the ground in Turkey during a terrible earthquake, where I saw impoverished mothers on their knees, digging through rubble for their lost children.

I've spent time in Darfur which today is the best-known example of environmental pressures cascading into instability and violence. A prolonged drought decimated the region's grazing lands and nomadic herders moved south in search of water and food. They encroached upon farming land that belonged to other tribes, igniting the conflict that now has turned into a genocide.

We urgently need to find the courage and the will to address such crises. Not only because we are a decent and compassionate people, but also because of this inescapable reality: America will never be safe in a world riddled by poverty, desperation, hatred and violence.

A hungry world will also hunger for scapegoats. A thirsty world will thirst for revenge. A world in crisis will be a world of anger and violence and terrorism.

And unless and until we have the wisdom and the skill to secure all the nuclear weapons and fissile material in the world, that terrorism could result in unthinkable death and destruction.

The global community needs leadership that will take the bold steps necessary to address wide-scale poverty, environmental degradation, and societal unrest. I have travelled the world again and again, on many international delegations and personal missions. And it has been me -- the American -- from which the most has been asked.

And so it should be. The world expects much from America. And we must expect even more from ourselves.

I believe that the United States alone can rise to the challenge of leading a worldwide effort to avert these global threats.

### **Today I lay out a new path ... and I ask Americans to join me.**

We will craft a new foreign policy adapted to a world of complex challenges. Challenges which will require thoughtful and global solutions. No nation can defend its own interests without blending them with the interests of others ... and seeking common solutions to common problems. This "New Realism" will at once require us to anchor our diplomacy with time-tested, reality-based principles ... and it will unleash our potential to achieve dramatic change.

The first momentous step will be to partner with developed nations, the UN, non-profit organizations, and private sector companies, to create a Marshall Plan for the 21st Century. We need a massive, multilateral effort to assist the developing world in eliminating poverty, protecting the environment, combating pandemics, conserving water supplies, and stimulating economic opportunity.

This 21st Century Marshall Plan will be composed of several initiatives to face down global threats.

**First**, I will make the U.S. the world leader in the fight against global poverty. We must have the resolve to honor our UN Millennium goal commitments. And we must have the audacity to demand that others meet theirs. A Commission on the Implementation of Sustainable Development Goals, composed of world leaders and prominent experts, should be created to help all countries realize their Millennium commitments.

When I am President, the United States will again lead on debt relief, and shifting aid from loans to grants. We will focus on primary health care and affordable vaccines.

I also believe that the World Bank is the not the place for politics. Its only ideology must be the relief of suffering, with a single-minded focus on poverty reduction. The IMF must recognize that social safety nets are no barrier -- indeed they are essential -- to promoting economic growth around the world.

The United States must increase its financial contribution to these international protection and development initiatives. We must ask other wealthy nations to do the same.

Stimulating small-scale business in poor countries is essential. And we know what works. Clearly, we should focus more resources on micro-lending. The Nobel Prize winner Muhammad Yunus, has shown us the way. **A 50 dollar loan can sometimes do more good than a million dollars when you make sure it gets to the right place.**

We need to focus also on education in developing nations. 115 million of the world's children -- 60% of them girls -- do not receive **any** schooling. In too many countries, a virtual apartheid exists, where women are frozen out of the workforce and civic life. Unleashing the economic power of women through education can be the silver bullet that makes every problem easier to fight.

I commend the efforts of the ONE Campaign, which is increasing awareness of the effects of AIDS and extreme poverty on developing nations. The ONE Campaign is asking the United States to double our development assistance to 2% of our federal budget. I wholeheartedly support this goal, and as President I will work to make it a

reality.

Our aid efforts must be guided by the principles of good governance and protection of human rights. As hard as we fight to fulfill the expectations that we have for ourselves ... we have the obligation to expect beneficiary nations to live up to these enduring values.

The second part of our global initiative, will be to take immediate, bold steps toward clean energy.

The foundation for our international action will be my comprehensive energy program, which the Sierra Club and the League of Conservation voters have called the most aggressive of any candidate for the Presidency.

We should start by instituting a nation-wide, market-based cap and trade system that reduces carbon emissions in the US by 80% by 2040.

We must lead the world in the development of clean, alternative energy, and we must work with other governments and private business to make sure that these technologies are adopted worldwide. Above all, we need to make sure that China and India develop using clean energy.

In my upcoming book, "Leading by Example," I outline a specific and comprehensive path domestically and internationally to drastically reduce greenhouse gas emissions and stop the devastation of climate change.

We need to accelerate research into cellulosic ethanol and other low-carbon input bio-fuels, and we need to construct distribution networks so that retailers can offer ethanol and bio-based fuels alongside traditional fuels.

As the mandatory national emission cap declines, the market will decide which fossil fuel uses are no longer efficient or should be converted to new technologies. I am already working on a regional cap and trade system in the West, along with Governor Schwarzenegger and other governors. This system will limit the amount of greenhouse gasses. George Bush doesn't follow the Kyoto Protocols, but my state is on track to.

Along the way to making New Mexico the Clean Energy State, I've learned some lessons. The most important is that Americans are ready to act. All they need is a President who is ready to lead. Once you lead, you find allies in corners that you never knew existed. Businesses. Non-profits. Activists. Former enemies and future friends. We can build the first true global coalition since America united the world to defeat the communism.

The third part of my plan is introducing Republicans to a basic reality. The United Nations is a necessary and important framework for building the international cooperation that will be necessary to confront problems like environmental degradation and poverty. We must reform and invigorate it. As a former UN ambassador, I more than anyone in this race understand the shortcomings of that institution. I've worked to solve them. And I also know the incredible power that the legitimacy of international cooperation can lend to peacekeeping. To humanitarian relief. To addressing climate change. And to economic development.

International cooperation will not always succeed, but cowboy diplomacy will almost always fail.

We need to work with others now, through existing UN mechanisms, to prepare for the possibility that millions of people could be displaced as a result of global-warming-related flooding of deltas and costal areas.

We also must prepare to shift infrastructure and food production to new regions.

We will develop crops that are more resistant to heat and drought, and distribute these new crop strains to vulnerable regions of the world.

We must develop cost-effective methods for harvesting fresh water and cleaning up polluted rivers and streams.

We need aggressive reforestation programs and protection of tropical rainforests.

And we need to develop new international treaties to prevent over-fishing and species loss.

Fourth, my 21st Century Marshall Plan will fight cross-border crime. Sophisticated criminal networks running black market trade in arms, drugs, endangered species, counterfeit goods, and human beings threaten the security of us all. We must end slavery forever. Financial assistance to developing nations should be tied to swift and solid progress toward the eradication of human trafficking.

And the United States needs to show the world that it can be done by ending slavery here in the US -- where an estimated 50,000 women and children are trafficked each year.

It is unacceptable and I will direct the necessary efforts to end it.

The US also must step up our efforts in the fight against global disease. I have proposed unprecedented increases in medical research. One of the great contributions the United States has made, should make, and will make again

when I am President ... is to discover new cures to humanity's great afflictions. Cancer, heart disease, malaria, AIDS, TB -- all can and must be defeated.

Religion today too often tears us apart. But poverty is a case where every single religion on the face of the planet should be able to unite. I refuse to believe that there is a person on this Earth that is not disgusted by the fact that a child born in Swaziland can only expect to live half as long as a child born in the United States.

If we cannot lead global action based on this universal agreement, then we are not worthy of the great traditions of human dignity upon which this nation was founded.

As we gather our strength for this effort, we must remember that preserving your popularity is no recipe for inspiring a nation, let alone the world.

I owe my success in bringing people together and solving problems to taking risks. Sometimes you have to lay things on the line to get results.

I recall when one of my constituents was taken hostage in Sudan. He was an American journalist from my own state and he was captured with two aides from the African nation of Chad. They were imprisoned on phony charges of espionage -- I had no reason to be optimistic about their release. But the journalist's wife asked me to go and try to get him out. So I went.

The dictator of that country -- al-Bashir -- he said: "You can have the American, but the other two from Chad -- they stay."

At this point I could have left with the American, but I said "No. I am bringing them all out."

It was not the easy choice but it was the right choice.

We went back into the negotiation and I left with all three men.

There was no time then for polls or consultants.

Nor is this a time for political calculation.

We cannot afford leadership that has not been tested. My colleagues in this race have my respect, but it is a simple fact that the next international deal negotiated by any one of them will be their first.

We also cannot afford another President who doesn't understand that stubbornness is not strength. Consultation with friends, coordination with allies -- and negotiation with enemies -- is not weakness. It is what you need to do to get things done. It is the basis for restoring America's international leadership.

I ask all Americans to join me in rebuilding our global leadership.

Together we need:

The compassion to commit the necessary resources.

The courage to stand fast in the face of inevitable setbacks.

And the faith to return to American principles ...

Equality.

Freedom.

Human dignity.

These are the values that every American has inherited.

Let us be worthy of them.

Thank you.



