

al gore

by jann s. wenner

On a Sunday afternoon, two days after Al Gore received the news that he had been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, I sat o down with him in the leafy, wooded back yard of his Nashville home. Following a lunch of steak he barbecued with Tipper, his wife of thirty-seven years, he spoke with passion and confidence about the future. Gore these days is unleashed. He is fully comfortable with his decision to not run for president – which he discusses in detail here – now that an even more important mission is at hand.

What are the most profound changes the country is going to face in the next twenty years, and how would you define the key issues?

It's a mistake to think of the climate crisis as one in a list of issues that will define our future. It's the issue. Everything else has to be viewed through that lens. Many other challenges are important, some of them are critical, and there's more than one issue we have to get right in order to survive in a way that honors the idea of America. Our democracy has been weakened. The core ideas of our founders have been disrespected and violated. HIV/AIDS and other pandemics threaten to ravage tens, even hundreds of millions. The global ecological system has been utterly devastated. Millions of children die every year for lack of clean water and penicillin and basic preventive-health measures. In too many parts of the world, the levels of persecution and suffering are far beyond what the conscience of humankind should tolerate. Sexual slavery, the oppression of minority groups, the struggles of people to overcome the yoke of dictatorship – all of these challenges and others as well cry out for attention. But none of them can be solved unless we solve the climate crisis.

The climate crisis must be seen as pre-eminent, because it is necessary for us to safeguard the ecological basis for human civilization. And in solving it, we will gain the moral authority and capacity for longer-term vision that will help us solve these other

crises. The newest evidence shows that unless we act boldly and urgently, the entire north polar ice cap could be completely gone in one generation – less than twenty-two years. That’s shocking to those who, like me, have spent three decades trying to understand the dimensions of this crisis. Every time you immerse yourself in the core research data, you come back up with the conclusion “Oh, my God, it’s even worse than I thought.”

How bad is it?

We’ve quadrupled the human population in a hundred years, we have magnified a thousandfold the power of the common technologies that we use. That combination has made us the bull in the china shop, and the china shop is the only home we have – Earth. And we’re now dumping more than 70 million tons of global-warming pollution into the thin shell of atmosphere every twenty-four hours. That is trapping more and more heat from the sun, melting the ice, making the storms stronger, parching the land and threatening to destroy the climate equilibrium that has been friendly to human civilization. The north polar ice cap is melting, the fires are burning, the sea level is rising, living species are going extinct. These and many other manifestations, including half the U.S. being in drought last year, are visible to the naked eye. We have got to recognize that even though it’s never happened before, it is happening right now.

Do you ever worry that it might be too late?

No. It’s a fair question, and I’ll admit that part of my defiant answer, no, is rooted in hope. But I’m comforted by the fact that the handful of scientists who have mastered the multiple disciplines needed to answer that question all say, “No, it is not yet too late, we have time. We don’t have much time, but we do have time.”

Even if we crossed the negative tipping point beyond which it becomes irretrievable – and I don’t think we will – we would still have the moral obligation to act quickly, because then we’d be dealing with degrees of irretrievability. Take the north polar ice cap: Even if it disappeared in the summertime, we could, over the course of a few centuries, shift back into a positive balance and begin to grow the amount of ice that

refreezes each winter. We'd have a chance, some centuries from now, to grow back multiyear ice.

So how do we engineer the sweeping social and political and industrial change that we need in a short period of time, from top to bottom?

Einstein once said, "The problems that face us cannot be solved at the same level of consciousness that created them. What we need is a shift in consciousness."

How do we get there?

Forty-five years ago, Thomas Kuhn wrote a book called *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Twenty years before that, Joseph Schumpeter wrote about the way changes in consciousness take place in business. Both Kuhn and Schumpeter described a process whereby our current way of thinking about the world – who we are, how we live – is challenged by new facts that don't seem to fit the old explanations. When enough unexplainable new phenomena pile up, there is sometimes a shift in consciousness that moves us quickly and suddenly to recognize a new pattern that explains all of these things that have been mysterious in the context of the old way of thinking. That's what we're on the cusp of right now.

Still, you need laws enacted, you need to confront extraordinarily powerful interests that are entrenched with billions of dollars of profits and hundreds of thousands of jobs. How do you get there? It can't be just consciousness – there's more to it than that.

Of course there is, and bills are introduced all the time in the U.S. Congress that embody the specifics of many of the changes that are needed. The reason they go nowhere is that public opinion has not yet changed, because the shift in consciousness has not yet occurred. But the new way of thinking will soon reach a critical mass – and when it does, you're going to see a flip.

Look at Texas, where TXU wanted to build eleven new coal plants. Mayors all across that state, Republican and Democratic alike, were spurred by their grassroots supporters to rise up and say, "No, you don't. We will not allow you to build all of these dirty coal plants here." The entire deal collapsed, until it was reworked by an environment-minded group that said, "Wait a minute, let's rejigger this whole thing and apply green standards." All across the world, you're seeing developments like that. You're also going to see people practicing civil disobedience, lying in front of the bulldozers and the dump trucks to physically prevent the building of any new coal-fired plants.

Where does nuclear energy fit in the solution?

I'm not a reflexive and automatic opponent of nuclear power. I used to represent Oak Ridge in Tennessee, where we're immune to the effects of radiation [laughs]. But I've become skeptical that it will play more than a limited role in solving the climate crisis. I've been to Chernobyl, and I've been to Three Mile Island. Moreover, even if the risk of accidents and the problem of storing long-term waste can be solved, that still leaves two other problems. Number one, Iran and North Korea developed their nuclear weapons programs through their reactor programs. If we put tens of thousands of these reactors worldwide in places like Cambodia and Burma and Sudan, the world would be a much more dangerous place.

The second problem is economics. There have been no nuclear power plants ordered in the United States since 1973, mainly because they take the most money to build, they take the longest time to build, and they only come in one size, extra large. And when you have a lot of uncertainty over the future price of energy, utility executives don't want to bet all their chips on something that won't be ready for another fifteen years.

If you were a historian, how would you describe the Bush administration from that point of view?

They have done so much damage to the spirit of America, to the worldwide reputation of America, to the morale of our people, to the core belief that we're capable of managing our fears without sacrificing our freedom. But nobody's going to be surprised to hear me give a thumbs-down rating to Bush and Cheney.

What is the worst damage they've done, other than the climate crisis?

They have promoted the idea that freedom and security are mutually exclusive, that you can have one only to the extent that you've sacrificed the other. That is an un-American idea. When our founders framed our Constitution, they understood the reality of war. When the Declaration of Independence was written, it was written by Americans who were in danger of being hung. They had reason to fear for their very lives, every single one of them, but they insisted on the protection of habeas corpus and freedom of speech and freedom of the press and freedom of assembly and freedom of religion, and the separation of self-government from the establishment of a religious dogma as an official set of beliefs. They had real courage that bridged their devotion to freedom and their need for security.

But instead of courage, this administration has used fear to undermine that system of checks and balances and the carefully balanced relationship between separate branches of government and the principle that all of the operations of our self-government should be accountable to the people. The arrogance and unaccountability of absolute power is corrupting, and our founders knew that so well. They embodied in our nation a universal principle derived from a millennium and a half of history, from Athens to Rome through the Enlightenment to the American Revolution. But all of that has been blithely ignored by this administration because of their lust for power.

It's not just the excesses of Bush and Cheney – it's the failure of our Congress, our courts, our free press, and all of us, to speak up and prevent this degradation of the American idea.

Let's talk about the failure of the Congress. Even with the current leadership, we have failed to deal with Iraq, we are on the edge of passing another wiretapping law, we can't seem to increase the taxes on billionaires. What's going on with the Congress, what's wrong in there? Where's the failure?

It is way premature to say the Democrats in the Congress have proven to be failures in bringing about what so many of us want to see. I will grant you that there is a distressingly large group within the Democratic majority that too frequently gives their votes to the special interests that finance their campaigns, the same way they finance the Republicans' campaigns. As a result, many of those who we have sweated blood to elect end up joining with Republicans too much of the time. But that's the way our system works, and it's up to we the people, forgive the cliché, to redouble our passion for the kind of change that's needed.

Nancy Pelosi and Harry Reid are doing heroic work and should be cut some slack for the fact that they can't get instant results. They've made significant progress, even though our Founding Fathers gave us a system that is designed to make change by means of passing laws quite a difficult thing. Those of us who want change have to give them sixty reliable votes in the Senate – and the way this election is trending, we have an excellent chance of getting those sixty votes. We've had Republican incumbent after Republican incumbent announcing retirement in the face of what is clearly shaping up as a tidal wave of disgust and rejection of the unprecedented arrogance and failures of the ideology that has created such destruction for the American landscape.

The wind is at our backs – make no mistake about that. If we keep our wits about us, we have a chance in this election to really bring about historic change.

What do you think the Democratic Party ought to be standing for right now?

First and foremost, a definitive solution to the climate crisis. I say with disappointment, they're nowhere close to that right now, but I think they will get there. I know it sounds

unrealistic right now, but there's going to be a grass-roots uprising that results in the climate crisis rising to the top of the agenda.

We have to restore the American idea to its preeminent place. We need to protect the dignity and freedom of individuals, we need to respect our ability as free citizens to use the instruments of government to lift up those who have been left behind. In this globalized, outsourcing world, we need to redouble our commitment to education and training and infrastructure, and, most importantly, to the aggressive development of an entirely new generation of clean energy technologies and sustainable communities that will position us to lead the world in the dramatic transition we have to make in this decade.

What should the next president's agenda be? Climate change is at the top of it, but what should we be expecting out of new leadership in concrete terms?

The next American president should see the position of the United States in the world community in terms that are very similar to those seen by Harry Truman, who saw us as the only nation capable of leading the world and establishing a set of conditions that can promote the general advance of prosperity and justice everywhere on this planet. With the United States leading the entire world community toward a new era of sharply reduced global-warming pollution, we will see a transformation of our civilization in a way that makes it possible for us, like the World War II generation, to see the other moral imperatives we have to undertake: ending the genocide in Darfur, ending the devastation of the ocean fisheries and the destruction of the tropical forests, ending the hunger and reducing the grinding poverty that now prevails in so much of the world. Those challenges are currently seen as political problems, but they're actually moral imperatives in disguise, and we have to focus on enhancing our capacity for dealing with them.

What advice would you give to someone who wanted to go into politics now?

Go into it, and use the Internet. Focus on authentic, passionate communication of exactly what you believe, and wait for people to come to it.

What does it take to get good leadership?

A change in consciousness.

Is that possible in the current political climate?

Yeah. As I argue in *The Assault on Reason*, we are in between eras. The age of print, which lasted for 500 years, gave way sixty years ago to the dominance of television. The Internet age and the digital world is clearly the world of the future, but we are in this time warp where the most powerful medium, by far, is still TV. In the last election, candidates in both major parties spent eighty percent of their campaign budgets not on the Internet, not on newspaper ads, but on thirty-second television commercials.

The most urgent task right now in terms of communications law is to make absolutely certain that the Internet remains free – Net neutrality is seen as kind of an arcane issue. But we should be promoting and defending Net neutrality and the freedom of the Internet with just as much passion as our founders brought to the challenge of securing the freedom of the printing press. It is just that important. The survival of democracy depends upon it.

How has your perspective on politics changed since you left office?

Let me count the ways. I respect the profession, and I honor those who are engaged in pursuing elective office, and I encourage young people to get involved. But what politics has become requires a tolerance for triviality and artifice and nonsense that I personally find I have in short supply. That's not to say that at some point in the future I might not see a situation that convinced me it was worthwhile to get involved in politics

again. But that's extremely unlikely. I keep that caveat in place, by the way, not to be coy, and not to signal to anybody that I'm thinking about doing it. I'm just being honest. I'm only fifty-nine years old – and fifty-nine is the new fifty-eight.

There is a feeling abroad right now, especially with the Nobel Prize, that the presidency could be yours for the asking. Do you feel sad or guilty about saying no to that?

No, not at all.

There are obviously people asking you all the time. You don't feel an obligation to the historical moment?

Well, I understand that point of view. But I personally don't feel as if I have to apologize for devoting so much of my life to a different kind of campaign to bring about a change in consciousness and an elevated sense of urgency about solving the climate crisis. It's a global challenge, and I'm working around the world to try to bring about this change in thinking.

At the same time, I fully understand and appreciate the point of view that there really is no position in the world with as much potential impact and influence as that of the president of the United States, and I totally respect that. But I'm not sure that the highest and best use of whatever talents and experiences I've gained isn't best focused on solving the climate crisis, instead of doing all of the many things that a candidate for president has to do. I think it's conceivable that a president of the United States could redefine every challenge as something that needs to be seen through the prism of solving the climate crisis and, in that way, rally the nation and the world to rise to solve this existential crisis. But I don't think our country or the world are at that point right now. Some countries are farther along than we are, and I think we'll get there, but we're not there yet.

So you don't think that if you stepped into it and crusaded on that subject, that it would be enough to elect you?

Well, I don't even get to the point where I analyze the political instrumentality of it.

That being your passion, that being what you want to accomplish, that moment is not at hand?

That's different from what I said. I just don't think I can say that's the best use of the talents I have right now.

If you got involved in a presidential campaign, it's too distracting, there's too much other stuff going on, and you're not able to make climate change the fundamental issue.

I've been through enough now and I've lived long enough to know that I wouldn't be distracted. I would do this regardless. But my job is to create the conditions to make that a strategy that succeeds. And I don't think we're at that point yet.

The current presidential candidates call me from time to time, and I talk to them. I'm not going to use any names here, because this could apply to three or four candidates who have said similar things, and I'm not going to use their exact words. Basically the question was, "Al, do you have any advice on how I could tweak my position on the climate crisis?" I always respond, "Look, we're way beyond tweaking – we have to have fundamental change. We ought to eliminate the payroll tax and replace it with a CO₂ tax. We ought to have a complete ban on any new coal-fired generating plants that don't completely capture and store the carbon. We ought to have a full investment tax credit for all advanced solar-thermal power plants, which could supply most of the electricity this country needs. We ought to change the utility laws so that every person and every business in the United States can install photovoltaic panels and small windmills and sell unlimited quantities of electricity into the grid."

And you don't think it's doable, really?

I think I have a pretty realistic view of how the American political system operates. I've been around it a long time, and I think I see it pretty clearly. The only way it will become doable is if I and others continue to plow and plant and cultivate the political environment to where it becomes possible. If that means that I see it over the horizon

and somebody else gets there and I don't, then I would still feel, under those circumstances, that I had lived a useful life.

Do I rule out the possibility that that set of conditions emerges before I'm too old to still be a leader capable of making hourly decisions in a crisp and effective way? No, I don't think it's impossible.

Look, I'm content. I'm not content with where the world is right now, I'm not content with where my country is right now, but I am content that I am doing what I ought to be doing. In terms of my career path, I'm doing what feels like the right thing to do right now.

So no twinges about not being in a Holiday Inn in Iowa right now?

[Laughs] No. Look, the fear of defeat holds no terrors for me whatsoever. The burden of staying in Holiday Inns and traveling all the time and making speeches all the time is not something that is a factor.

In fact, a couple of my friends have said recently, "Al, why don't you take a break and run for president?" This is not a life of luxury and ease that I'm leading. I have the opportunity now to be successful in the private sector, and I'm grateful for that, but I'm working my ass off damn near every day.

You remain the vessel of a lot of people's hopes. What do you say to those people?

Well, thank you for feeling that way about me. Please trust me to make good decisions about where I can do the most good, and don't automatically assume that running for president again is the right thing for me to do. If you feel that way and I decide for sure not to be a candidate again – well, sorry. If I do get back involved in the political system at some point in the future – well, keep that energy stored up and let's have a go at it then.

What would it take to make politics responsive to the people's will?

So long as the ability to buy thirty-second TV ads is the key to getting elected, special interests are going to find ways to put way too much money into politics. I would try to use the Internet to mobilize millions of people at the grass-roots level, and I think that's coming. As I said earlier, we have the wind at our backs. This is going to be an American century – we're going to come back strong.

In 1988, when you were running for president, you visited "Rolling Stone" for the first time and said that our generation faced two challenges – saving the environment and ending the nuclear-arms race – and that you wanted to lead it. How did you do?

[Laughs] I want to be careful not to take credit for anything – my role was small and limited. But I will claim credit to being a part of a group of six members of Congress who joined a half-dozen people or so in the Reagan administration in the Eighties to cocreate the intellectual capital that formed the basis of the INF Treaty in Europe and the START Treaty with the former Soviet Union. And those two agreements fundamentally changed the course of the nuclear-arms race.

On the climate crisis, I feel like I've failed so far. But I'm not done yet. Even though we've made progress, we have not yet seen the increased sense of urgency that is appropriate to this challenge. We'll get there, but only when we have a sea change in public opinion, because only then will politicians in both parties respond.

How do you think this time will be remembered forty years from now?

Future generations will look back at the beginning of the twenty-first century and they will ask themselves, "How did they" – meaning us – "how did they find the moral courage to change the pattern of history, to break through to a new way of thinking

about the place of human beings on this planet, and successfully solve a crisis on a planetary scale that so many people were telling them was impossible to solve? What happened? How did they break free of the political sclerosis and spiritual catatonia that paralyzed them for decades and quickly realize that the survival of human civilization was at stake? How did they then, with great imagination, creativity and spiritual courage, put in place the sweeping reforms that saved the ecological basis for human civilization, restored the balance essential for human survival and lay the foundation for the rewarding and beautiful civilization that we enjoy here in the future?"