



The Speech Obama Need(ed) to Give

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The Speech Obama Needs to Give

Note from the speech-writer: In one illuminating sense, the future is a probability distribution. Unfortunately, a host of not-so-nice futures are now more probable than others at this point. Every species we eliminate; every ton of fossil-carbon we release; every gallon we pull from fossil aquifers; every cubic meter of top soil washed to the sea lowers the probability of the more livable futures.

So trouble's a-comin' in what will likely be a many-act play headed downward over the next few decades -- it just remains to be seen what costume it'll be wearing in each scene. At some point the general public may be told the truth about our predicament -- but maybe not. I suspect the revealing of the truth would be a sort of last-resort for those in power to try to keep things together. This speech is my take on "telling the truth."

Setting for the speech: Several "bad" things have happened in the span of a year or two (ex: sharp economic downturns, petroleum shortages, extended blackouts, acts of terrorism, flare-ups of civil unrest, storms or other natural disasters, etc.). America is reeling, but the center is still holding -- for now. A slightly drawn Obama sits down at his desk in the Oval Office...microphones on...the cameras roll...

Our Predicament

As I'm sure all of you are painfully aware, the United States, along with the rest of the world, is in the midst of some of the most profound economic, environmental, and energy troubles ever experienced by modern civilization.

I understand the deep pain, anger, and confusion many of you are feeling at this moment, and I sympathize. My goal tonight is to try to clarify our situation a bit, and in doing so, perhaps channel some of those feelings towards more constructive ends.

The economic, environmental, and energy problems we are currently experiencing are not ultimately the fault of any one person, political group, ethnic group, religious group, country, or region. They go much deeper than that. They are, instead, manifestations of the ongoing conflict -- a war really -- between a finite planet and a human species with infinite aspirations.

In such a war -- a war we are waging against our very life-support systems -- we have no hope of winning. Our best hope is to, as quickly as possible, call off the war, regroup, and fundamentally restructure our society around the acceptance of our planet's finite nature -- around limits.

My words here are, no doubt, striking to you. These are not ideas commonly expressed in "polite" circles -- in the national print media, on television, in board rooms, in Congress, in addresses from the President. They are revolutionary. But they are true and they are necessary.

Let me use an analogy from my experience as a father. As children grow towards adulthood, one of the most painful experiences -- for both the child and the parent -- is the child's slow realization and eventual acceptance of limits. Such an embrace of limits is, in fact, one of the hallmarks of "growing up." My fellow Americans, we need to grow up.

Limits

We, as a species, are now bumping up against -- slamming into, really -- some very immutable biophysical limits on a global scale. These limits and the mounting consequences for their continued violation have been predicted and well documented by our best scientists for many decades -- complete with dire warnings for the consequences of failing to change our course.

We have not heeded these warnings and we are now suffering the predicted consequences. It is our own fault.

We have reached limits in two very real and dangerous senses. Firstly, our voracious material wants have outstripped the Earth's physical limits -- hard limits on how much and how rapidly the Earth can provide us with material and energy resources to run our industrial lifestyles. A partial list of these increasingly scarce resources includes fossil and nuclear energy sources, freshwater for drinking and irrigation, phosphate fertilizer, and various key metal ores. Even theoretically renewable resources such as our ocean fisheries, fertile soil, and forest products are being destroyed by persistent abuse.

In short, we cannot have infinite wants on a finite planet. These were childish wishes.

Secondly, the almost-unimaginable volumes of waste arising from our industrial activities have overwhelmed the Earth's waste-disposal systems. The list of accumulating toxins is long and growing: greenhouse gases, PCBs, mercury and other heavy metals, radioactive waste, various endocrine disruptors, silt from eroded forests and farmland, excessive fertilizer, pesticides, and antibiotics from industrial factory farms in our estuaries and drinking water, as well as many others I could list. Most notable among this shameful list are the greenhouse gases arising from our civilization's terminal addiction to fossil fuels. These have accumulated in our atmosphere to such an extent that a potentially disastrous suite of climatic changes has already been initiated -- changes that may ultimately endanger our very survival as a species.

We have fouled our nest. Again, we are guilty of childish behavior – mindless, reckless, and irresponsible.

The End of Growth

Having recognized these limits, we are immediately challenged to renounce one of our most cherished beliefs as a civilization -- the idea of continuous material growth.

Perpetual growth in the economy; in wealth; in consumption; in production, have been viewed for over a century as both desirable and possible. Continued growth in all things material has, in fact, been the very lifeblood of our Industrial Civilization. Socialist/Capitalist, First-world/Third-world, Democrat/Republican -- all have worshiped faithfully at the alter of material growth. Eminent economists and others in the social sciences, heads of state, and religious leaders have sung its praises. As recently as a year ago, I myself was guilty of promoting renewed economic growth as the solution to our current troubles.

Taking stock of our current national and global situations, we can now see that the quest for material growth beyond some level is both dangerous and impossible -- our scientists and feedback from the Earth itself have clearly shown us that. We must now recognize this quest as a profoundly tragic mistake; a blunder of monumental ignorance and hubris; an infantile desire of our limited minds projected grotesquely and tragically onto the entire Earth.

Simply put, the ideology of perpetual growth is the ideology of the cancer cell. We were horribly wrong to use this as a foundation of our civilization. Horribly wrong.

So now what? Growth, in any sense beyond the spiritual, is simply no longer an option -- it's not even on the table anymore. In fact -- and these are words I never imagined I'd hear in my lifetime -- we have begun the decline phase of our Industrial Civilization. There will be no recovery in the sense promised in years past.

For the foreseeable future, contraction in all things material will be the rule of the day -- decreased economic activity, decreased production, decreased consumption, decreased material wealth. This contraction is unavoidable, as it simply follows the advancing depletion of all the material and energy resources that made growth possible in the first place. All the advanced technology in the world cannot and will not revoke the Laws of Thermodynamics and the finite material limits of the Earth.

For all our accomplishments and pride as a civilization, the Industrial Age will turn out to have been a brief, intensely bright, historical aberration made possible only by the one-shot burning of irreplaceable fossil fuels and the destruction of a good part of the pre-existing biosphere – our very life support system.

It pains me beyond words to admit this, but these words are true and we must move on as best we can.

The Way Forward

So where are we? We have admitted to some serious fundamental problems with our Industrial Civilization, we have recognized our earthly material and energetic limits, and we have renounced the quest for perpetual material growth as both dangerous and ludicrous. If your head is spinning, I understand. Change is never easy, and this one's a doozy.

But now what? I suppose if we are proposing to do away with some of the major ideological foundations of Industrial Civilization, we should also outline an alternate path. I think we can do this.

So here are our main questions: If material growth beyond a certain level is neither desirable nor possible, what is the level we should aim for? Is that level even possible? How do we get there? And how do we stay there without tragically replaying our recent past on a smaller scale? We need to begin this conversation now. In truth, we needed to begin this conversation forty years ago.

This conversation should perhaps start with the principles of Ecology. This branch of the natural sciences investigates the web of relationships between organisms and the material world. The idea of material and energetic limits is pervasive in this discipline, which is why it may suit our newly-limit-conscious-selves just fine as a starting point.

The Laws of Thermodynamics, with their inviolable limits and penalties associated with matter and energy changes will also be appropriate as a starting point. The application of both Ecology and the Laws of Thermodynamics to human affairs has already been investigated in the fields of Steady-State Economics and Permaculture. I suggest we review that literature for some guidance.

We will perhaps need also to look to the world's religions and moral thinkers to afford us some guidance along the treacherous road down from our civilization's peak. Authors Wendell Berry, Aldo Leopold, and E.F. Schumacher come to mind, among others. Our physical needs during this contraction will have to be balanced by moral guidelines if we are to avoid the unspeakable atrocities that have characterized declines of past civilizations.

In short, we will need to find a path that sustainably nourishes both our bodies and our spirits in the trying times ahead.

Some First Steps

So how do we start down this necessary path? First, let's start with a few things we cannot do -- some doors that are now closed to us due to our decades of profligate resource destruction.

Firstly, anything requiring significant amounts of energy is out of the question. The era of cheap, abundant fossil energy is behind us -- forever. Despite repeated warnings from our best scientists, we failed to make the transition to renewables in time. Now it's too late. Every year from now on will afford us less and less energy -- possibly significantly less in the coming years.

Secondly, anything requiring significant amounts of money in the form of credit is out of the question. In a future of a continually-declining resource base, there is simply no such thing as economic growth, and thus no credit. Basically, we play with what material resources we have at this point -- which is a lot less than we used to.

But enough with the negatives -- let's start with some concrete positive steps that we can accomplish. I can think of three that deserve our immediate attention:

1. I see no more crucial place to start than with **food** and our country's food-security. We will change both the way we grow food and the food we eat. We will create more small local farms, more small farmers, more ecologically-sane fertilization methods, more seed saving and exchanging, more farmers markets and CSAs. We will grow food on our city's rooftops,

windowsills, and front stoops. We will grow food in our suburban lawns, parking lots, and golf courses. We will become self-sufficient in food-production with a smarter kind of agriculture that does not waste soil, pollute water, and poison our children. This, my fellow Americans, is true “homeland security.”

2. Next up is **transportation**. We will need to move ourselves and our products around largely without the aid of fossil fuels, as these will become only more expensive and unavailable in the years ahead. Is transportation with minimal fossil fuels even possible? Of course it is! We did it for centuries before the Industrial Age, and we need only to reclaim those technologies. Bicycles with trailers, hand-carts, and electric scooters will be made available as much as possible. Mules, oxen, and draft horses will be bred as rapidly as possible for distribution to our farms, towns, and cities. These will not allow us the mobility of former years, but that is the price we pay for thoughtlessly squandering our fossil fuels.

3. If we are to be a less-mobile, more-localized people, we will need to start producing most of the necessities of everyday life in the places where we live. Globalized trade was a brief artifact of the now-ended age of cheap fossil energy. We will need to re-learn lost **manufacturing** skills and regain the proud craftsmanship of our forebearers. This great re-skilling of America will be a high priority in the coming years. The list of self-manufactured goods we’ll need is long. It includes tools, clothes, blankets, furniture, housing materials, bikes, wood-burning stoves, solar cookers, and rainwater collection systems -- among many other items. Trade of these goods will again take place locally -- within and between our regions, rather than across oceans and hemispheres.

Now I know what many of you are thinking: Must we really throw out our 20th century technological gains? Is the reclaiming of 19th century technology really necessary? Aren’t we giving up? I respond by saying this: What choice do we have? Where is the fossil energy to run our computers, cars, and tractors? I’ll tell you -- it’s gone; squandered by seven generations of tragic excess. Gone forever.

Can We Do This?

So can we do this? Can we make this monumental transition towards some sort of lower-energy, lower consumption, humane living arrangement that can persist within the limits now pressing down upon us from all sides? Can we humans carve out our necessarily-limited niche on this planet without overstepping our boundaries? Can we do it without the violent convulsions to which humans are historically prone?

I, of course, am confident that we can, and I am willing to make great personal sacrifices to achieve this success. I hope many of you share my confidence and my resolve.

Make no mistake – our journey forward will not be easy. Change of this magnitude will be a monumental task with no guarantee of success. There will be pain and suffering -- our past excesses have guaranteed this. Our only hope is to minimize this suffering as much as possible while resolutely pursuing some sort of livable future for our children.

So it’s time to get down to work. May we manage the decline phase of our civilization with every bit of intelligence, kindness, and dignity our species can summon.

Now if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got to go outside and dig a garden.



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