

Climate Change

If U.S. intelligence believed there was a small chance that Al Qaeda was doing something to gain a nuclear weapon, do you think we should try to stop it? Columnist Tom Friedman recalls former vice-president Dick Cheney's statement that "If there's a 1 percent chance that Pakistani scientists are helping Al Qaeda build or develop a nuclear weapon, we have to treat it as a certainty in terms of our response." Cheney said we must confront a "low-probability, high-impact event."

Friedman then invites us to see a parallel. What if there were only a 1 percent chance that climate scientists were correct in concluding that human activity contributes to global warming, with catastrophic consequences? Should we try to stop it? Would you be willing to pay something to take out insurance? In fact, a report commissioned by a Pentagon think tank actually took a look at the worst-case scenario for global warming. It suggested such consequences as severe flooding, "mega-droughts" in southern China and northern Europe, a drier climate for American agriculture, and chaos due to widespread famine in China. "Disruption and conflict" become common.

To take action in such scenarios is to endorse the "precautionary principle," which is the idea that even in the face of uncertainty, if potential consequences are significantly harmful, we have a moral obligation to take action to prevent those consequences. Of course the climate system is complex. Of course the earth has its own climate cycles. Whether we get the best or worst case scenario for global warming is uncertain. But despite the climate change deniers and those who have financial interests in maintaining the status quo, the odds that bad things will happen to us and other life forms on the planet because of human contributions to global warming is certainly more than 1 percent. The International Panel on Climate Change concludes that it is 90 percent certain that the "effect of human activities since 1750 has been one of warming." Further, it states that risks are high because of the possibility of very significant consequences.

Many of us have now come away from Earth Day activities with newfound inspiration to take action. But many well-intentioned citizens also question what difference a single person can make. After all, Newsweek's Ian Yarett documents that major environmental progress has come about only through national legislation or global treaty, not my or anyone else's decision to use compact fluorescent light bulbs. And when we get to the national and international levels, political opponents of climate change action often raise the same type of argument, that we ought not hobble our own economy with fees on carbon or federal regulations as long as China is building two coal plants per week. What good is the action of one person or even of one nation, if everyone isn't going to sacrifice?

This resistance points us, however, to the duty and power of one. My action alone accomplishes almost nothing in terms of its straightforward environmental impact globally. But we as individuals should act anyway. Why? First of all, my moral obligation to do the right thing does not go away just because others fail in their duties. Second, morally good behavior provides a witness to one's values. Respecting life is powerful, and it can have a ripple effect

across communities. On the international level, it's called leadership. Third, individual action added to other individual actions has a collective effect. The odds that my vote, for example, would decide an election are infinitesimally small. But if only a few hundred more Floridians supporting Al Gore in 2000 had decided to vote, he would have become president, and we would likely have a dramatically different world today.

The power of one can become the power of collective action that does finally make a difference if directed rightly. Newsweek science editor Sharon Begley wrote that too many people believe that doing things like "buying green" is simply enough. A Gallup poll shows that 90 percent of people recycle, but only 17 percent write an email to senators to support climate change legislation.

For those who don't even accept that Dick Cheney's logic applies to climate change and that all this global warming business is a hoax, what would be the result of acting anyway? As Friedman writes, "we would be driving battery-powered electric cars and powering more and more of our homes and factories with wind, solar, nuclear and second-generation biofuels. We would be much less dependent on oil dictators who have drawn a bull's-eye on our backs; our trade deficit would improve; the dollar would strengthen; and the air we breathe would be cleaner. In short, as a country, we would be stronger, more innovative and more energy independent."

So for the one, and for the many, regardless of the odds, there is no excuse not to act on climate change.

This is Mark Hanson, guest commentator for the Center for Ethics at the University of Montana.