EDITORIAL

THE SMALL BLUE SPHERE

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The Earth was small, light blue, and so touchingly alone,
our home that must be defended like a holy relic.
Soviet Cosmonaut Aleksei Leonov

We are as gods, and might as well get good at it.
Purpose statement, the Whole Earth Catalog

One of the most transformative images of the 1960's was the first publicly released, color picture of the earth as seen from lunar orbit. Like a small, blue-green marble lost in the immense black void of space, this view of earth became a metaphor in 1969 for many of the fragility of our planet, and a timely totem for the then-emerging environmental movement.

The years that immediately followed saw many victories for environmentalists in the United States, including passage of the Environmental Protection Act in 1969 (which established the Environmental Protection Agency), the extension and then amendment of the Clean Air Act (1970 and 1977), and the enactment of the Clean Water Act (1972), Safe Drinking Water Act (1975) and Resource Conservation and Recovery Act, which established the so-called "Super Fund" (1976).

The result of these and other pieces of legislation was cleaner air and water, the remediation of many notorious hazardous waste sites, the conservation of millions of acres of federal and state lands, and increasing awareness of the negative impact that human activities continue to have on our environment.

But the early momentum of the environmental movement of the 1960s and 1970s has not been sustained uniformly throughout the world, where Europe (for example), largely assigns a higher priority to environmental concerns than does the United States, both absolutely as well as philosophically. For example, in the U.S., "hard science" is often demanded to prove that a given action or substance will have a deleterious effect, while in Europe, the possibility of such an effect may be sufficient to result in legislative action. These same divisions are present within the United States itself, resulting in swings of policy when control of government passes from one party to the other. The most significant example of such a swing was the repudiation of the Kyoto Protocol on global warming by the current administration, following signature -- but not submission to Congress for ratification -- of the Protocol by the Clinton administration, which was aware of significant opposition to the Protocol in the Senate.

Historically, such variations in policy might be of concern solely to the citizens of the nation involved. But increasingly, the actions of one nation can impact the welfare of many, not only with respect to over-exploiting a single common resource, but by degrading the very biosphere we all share as well.

The extremely complex example of global warming therefore marks a transition from an era during which the "tragedy of the commons" was the primary international environmental concern (i.e., when everyone shares in the ownership of a resource - such as fish stocks -- there is a greater incentive for any single user to exploit it than to conserve it). And yet efforts to address even single-resource issues via international treaties have proven to be difficult enough.

Nor is global warming the only emerging area of common concern. Currently, an initiative commissioned by the United Nations, known as the World Summit for the Information Society, or WSIS, is concluding a two-year process that includes examination of the question "Who should govern the Internet?" Following the most recent meeting in that process in Geneva in August, the near unanimous opinion appears to be "not the United States," at least as regards the root directory of the Internet, which is currently under the indirect control of the U.S. Department of Commerce.

From one perspective, the Internet and the Web are simply a new virtual element of our environment, and in that sense present parallel concerns to environmental issues. True, telecommunications treaties and commonly agreed upon standards have always existed. But their impact was largely internal to the countries involved -- if you chose not to sign such treaties or adopt such standards, you lost the benefits of the network, but did not harm the interests of others (other than by taking your nation out of the network, either fully or partially). But he who controls the root directory of the Internet can, literally, disconnect an entire nation.

As time goes on, issues that require international cooperation are bound to multiply rather than diminish, and today we have no comprehensive, binding (or even consensual and demonstrably successful) process for dealing with them.

So what are we to do?

Sadly, there are four, seemingly intractable problems to be solved. Using global warming as an example, the first is identifying and quantifying the problem to be addressed (is the atmosphere warming, and are we indeed the cause?). The second is agreeing on the priority to be assigned to the problem at hand (which element should be given greater weight: the impact to the economy, or the impact to the environment?). The third is the means of addressing the risk (should emission controls fall equally on all nations, or should third world countries be granted allowances to compensate for the damage already done by those nations that have already achieved a modern stage of development?)

And lastly, there is the hardest question: will nations be willing to yield a measure of their historical sovereignty in order to achieve effective solutions to global problems?

To date, the answer to that question has been "no," which has made reaching a decision on the first three questions that much more difficult. Some 86 years after the founding of the League of Nations, there is still no global body that is empowered to create a law that is binding upon all.

If we assume that the answer to the sovereignty issue will continue to be "no" for some time, then we have no choice but to find a different way to solve problems such as global warming, because we cannot wait to find a solution.

Perhaps a model for that solution may be found in the standard setting process. After all, what other system exists that is not only global, consensual and successful, but involves the voluntary giving up of rights in order to achieve a common good? This process, in fact, has found a solution to the conundrum of the Tragedy of the Commons by identifying benefits in the exploitation of opportunities that can only be achieved by reaching consensus.

The magic of the standard setting process is that it makes the risk of standing outside the process greater than the costs and concessions required to participate. In consequence, not only do those whose participation is vital to success willingly engage in the process, but they adopt the resulting standards without the compulsion of laws as well.

To an extent, this is how the treaty process has historically operated as well, but characteristically sanctions for non-compliance have been required in order to achieve success, because compliance may be seen to be more costly and disadvantageous than non-compliance.

The lesson of the standard setting process, then, is that it takes carrots as well as sticks to bring stakeholders -- multinational corporations as well as nations -- not only to the table, but to compliance as well, until that day when even more urgent changes force a different answer to the sovereignty question.

Perhaps the WSIS process will provide the crucible within which a first step in this direction may be taken, as the standard setting process and nationalism meet in the same room, in an effort to solve a common problem.

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