

June 18, 2010 Lunch Notes

Leon Fuerth, Research Professor of International Affairs at The Elliot School at George Washington University speaks at the June lunch.

At the NCAC-USAAE luncheon on Friday, June 18, Professor Leon Fuerth addressed the topic of National Security Implications of Energy and Climate Policies: An Historical Perspective.

He began his remarks by referring to the broad conclusions of the Measurements of Earth Data for Environmental Analysis program (MEDEA), a joint effort by some of the nation's top scientists and the US Central Intelligence Agency. (See article at <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/05/science/earth/05satellite.html>)

Professor Fuerth said that the general assessment of this group concerning climate change was grim. Among the issues being investigated are:

- “At what point could we see irrevocable change?”
- “What damage could that do to our government and institutions?”
- “How might civilization be shifted away from catastrophe?”

After the predictable failure to reach a binding agreement at Copenhagen, Professor Fuerth suggested that “the law of the commons” offers a suitable analogy to the problems surrounding policies aimed at dealing with climate change. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tragedy_of_the_commons

Broadly speaking, establishing climate policy is complicated by differing approaches to governance, according to Fuerth. Individual initiative marks our understanding of “Western Capitalism” said Fuerth, but “State Capitalism” is based on leadership from the center. As Fuerth sees it, China's primary goal (as seen from the outside) is to boost per capita incomes first before dealing with climate. Internally, however, he sees China taking the lead on green manufacturing as part of its export strategy. In both instances, the West is disadvantaged.

Fuerth worries that Western institutions may not be up to the task of agreeing on what needs to be done, citing the lack of long-range planning and the “politics of confrontation” that have been dominating the US political process recently. Taken together, the result is a situation not conducive to foresight or change, and unlikely to result in the tempering of current levels of energy consumption that might be required to ameliorate climate change.