

United States Senate Committee on Environment and Public
Works

Testimony of Major General (Retired) Robert Scales

April 13, 2016

Mr. Chairman, thank you very much for inviting me to testify before the Committee on the relationship between climate change and war.

The Administration's passion to connect climate change to war is an example of faulty theories that rely for relevance on politically correct imaginings rather than established historical precedent or a learned understanding of war. The theories linking climate change to war come from a larger body of political thought that ascribes human conflict to "Global Trends". Advocates of the Global Trends theory argue that environmental scourges such as diminishing water supplies, urbanization and the AIDS/HIV epidemic shape the course of human conflict. Lately, thanks to legitimacy provided by the Obama Administration, climate change has become the most prominent of all the global trends that seek to

link global misfortunes to war. President Obama codified his embrace of this particular global trend during his graduation address at the Coast Guard Academy in 2015:

“So I’m here today to say that climate change constitutes a serious threat to global security, an immediate risk to our national security.”

It’s interesting to note the hypocrisy within the scientific communities that argue for a connection between climate change and national security. Scientists generally agree on the long-term consequences of global warming. Radical environmentalists delight in excoriating the so-called “junk science” espoused by climate change deniers. But they are less than enthusiastic in questioning the “junk social science” that environmentalists and their Beltway fellow travellers use to connect climate change to war.

Of course not all theories from Global Trends activists are off the mark. They have a legitimate argument when they warn of the consequences of pandemics on the course of warfare. The Greek historian Thucydides recounts that the great Athens plague of 430 BCE resulted in the retreat of the Athenian army and navy as well

as the death of the great Greek military leader Pericles. The Byzantium emperor Justinian's ambition to expand his empire to the West was shattered by the horrific Plague of 540 AD. A small band of Spanish conquistadors conquered all of central and south America in just few short decades because their conquests were preceded by Western diseases they carried with them from Europe.

However, no historical evidence exists that makes a "cause and effect" argument linking war to rising global temperatures. Where does the Administration get their facts about climate change and war? First, they contend that a warming planet causes drought, which leads to mass migration away from areas of creeping desertification. To be sure rising temperatures combined with over grazing in places like central Africa have caused displacement of peoples. But the misery of these peoples leads to, well, misery, not war. Tribes striving to exist in these often horrific environmental conditions have little energy left over to declare war against a tribal neighbor. The nations of Central Africa are in the grip of conflicts started by Boko Haram in Nigeria and al Shabaab in Somalia. But these transnational terrorists are motivated to kill by the factors that have always caused nations (or entities masquerading as nations) to start wars. These factors are timeless and immutable. First of course is hatred induced by fear of alien

cultures, religions, ideologies, as well as social and racial differences. The common spark for all wars is jealousy and greed amplified by centuries-long animosities and political ambitions. The catalyst for war is the ignorance of leaders that leads them to misjudge. Humans start wars believing they will be profitable, short, glorious and bloodless. These truths never change. None are affected in the least by air temperature.

But the myth of climate change as an inducement to war continues to curry favor among Washington elites. One source for connecting war to temperature comes from the political closeness between environmentalists and the anti war movement. Their logic goes like this: “global warming is bad. Wars are bad. Therefore they must be connected.” Remember, prior to the 1991 Gulf War, environmentalists warned of a decade of global cooling that would come from burning Kuwaiti oil fields. More recently environmental radicals argued against bombing ISIS oil trucks fearing the environmental consequences. Sadly those in the Administration who lobbied against striking a legitimate military target because of imagined environmental damage caused by these strikes may, in all likelihood, have sustained ISIS by refusing to interdict their richest source of income. The point is that in today’s wars politically correct theories when inserted into a battle plan

might well extend wars needlessly and get soldiers killed.

The passion of environmentalists to use policies and laws to interfere with our military is long and sordid. In the eighties my unit in the 82nd Airborne Division was denied maneuver and firing authority due to a trumped up allegation that the presence of soldiers in their own training areas might endanger woodpeckers. Our soldier's ability to train for war at the National Training Center at Ft Irwin California was continually impeded by environmentalists who claimed, falsely, that Army exercises were threatening the desert tortoise. Both of these claims turned out to be false. The woodpecker and the turtle are doing fine.

The three thousand-year historical record of human conflict argues conclusively against any causal relationship between war and temperature. Let me be more specific. Never in the written history of warfare, from Megiddo in 1,500 BC to the Syrian Civil War today, is there any evidence that wars are caused by warmer air. Nations simply don't go to war because the polar ice caps are melting. Other than our short lived and disastrous 1993 humanitarian effort in Somalia, human misery and global disasters have not been followed by shooting wars involving American combat forces. The bad taste left by the Somali expedition pretty

much makes any similar adventure in killing for humanitarian reasons extremely unlikely.

At best climate change might, over centuries, contribute minutely to the course of warfare. The key word is “contribute”. Climate change will never “cause” wars. Thus it can never be an actual threat to national security. Because the administration has elevated climate change to the status of a primary threat, the military has become an unwitting agent for propagandizing the dangers of climate change to the American people.

There is nothing wrong with advocates of “global trends” theories cranking out new concepts, even the patently ridiculous ones cited above. The problem comes when silly ideas become strategies and influence how we fight and how we pay for wars. As we see today in Washington the process begins with a chorus of a-historical acolytes who preach loudly enough for concepts to become a political mantra then morph into defense theories that induce the Department of Defense to establish offices in the Pentagon and lines in the defense budget.

The Administration’s contention that climate change is a national security threat would be just another example of mindlessly

applied political correctness if it were not for the potential impact of this silliness on our actual security. The military follows orders and intuitively embraces the spoken intent of their commander in chief. A politically correct embrace of climate change as a national security threat might in time cause our military to embrace alternative sources of energy before these technologies are proven. Should this happen our men and women in uniform might well be fighting a war with underpowered and poorly performing weapons. In its zeal to follow orders the military might deflect resources away from fighting the war against global terrorism to fight a contrived war against global warming. Every dollar spent on initiatives that don't apply directly to fighting the enemy and keeping our Soldiers and Marines safe on the battlefield is a dollar needlessly wasted. Again, no soldier should die in battle for the sake of political correctness.

Our men and women in uniform are smart and perceptive. They can spot phoniness in a heartbeat. Think of a Soldier in Afghanistan or Iraq returning from a dangerous and exhausting mission being obliged to listen to a senior defense official lecture them on the revelation that fighting climate change is their most important mission. These men and women see the realities of battle all around them. The military threat of rising temperatures is not

one of them. Our young military leaders are already jaded and discouraged by an Administration that seems to be out of touch with their real world, day to day, life or death needs. Do we really think that they will become more confident about the wisdom of their leaders if they are obliged to turn away from ISIS and fight a war against rising temperatures? Somehow I don't think so.