

You Will Have to Make Sacrifices to Save the Planet

We can save millions of lives from climate change, but only if we change our own. Democrats should start acknowledging that.

When it comes to climate change, Washington Governor Jay Inslee is unlike any other Democrat running for president. He's based his entire campaign on addressing the crisis, and his climate plan is the most detailed and aggressive of all of his competitors. Inslee is also uniquely willing to admit to hard truths about what victory in this fight will require, even when those truths are political minefields. He's admitted that it requires eradicating the fossil fuel industry. He's admitted that it requires eradicating Republicans.

"They need to fall, and they have fallen," he said last month. "Ten Republicans [in the Washington state legislature] lost last fall, in part because of this issue. We elected 10 Democrats. So until they get an epiphany, until the spirit of Teddy Roosevelt rises again, the only answer is to remove Republicans from office. I wish it was otherwise."

But saving millions of lives and preserving a livable planet will also require something that even Inslee seems too cautious to admit: personal sacrifice from all Americans. In that way, he's just like every other Democrat in the pack.

First and foremost, that sacrifice includes paying higher taxes. In an interview with NPR on Friday, host Rachel Martin asked him if he would commit to not raising taxes to cover his \$9 trillion climate plan. Inslee said no, but only because "nobody running for office can make a statement about the future like that." He then assured Martin that most of his climate plan would be paid for by private companies. "The government does have a role," he admitted—but only an "appropriate public investment" would be made.

"Appropriate public investment" makes it sound like the effect on the taxpayer will be minimal. But what is appropriate to save humanity? As Inslee's plan rightly shows, it's the exact opposite of minimal. The entire fossil-fuel economy has to be transformed in a very short amount of time. That's going to cost trillions, an "appropriate" chunk of which is going to have to come from taxpayers. Whether

that money comes from higher federal taxes on Americans, or taxes on private companies that pass down the costs to consumers, it doesn't really matter. We will feel it, and it will hurt.

There is no avoiding this pain—and we're not just going to feel it in our pocketbooks, but in our personal lives. Along with transitioning to a renewable-energy economy, any truly meaningful climate plan is also going to drastically reduce industrial meat production, expand public transportation, end our reliance on cars, and change the way cities are planned and built. The way we eat, the way we get places, and the way we live are all going to change. It will be much more than just an annoying inconvenience.

The Democratic Party's most prominent politicians are currently choosing to write off this reality instead of addressing it, perhaps understandably so. The last time a Democrat tried to acknowledge such personal sacrifice was when Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez gently suggested cutting back on meat consumption to help fight climate change. Republicans went berserk, claiming that Ocasio-Cortez wanted to ban hamburgers. Republicans have created similar hysteria when any Democrat suggests raising taxes, which is one reason why the federal gas tax hasn't been raised in 25 years.

Democrats may also fear backlash from the left. In France, left-wing protesters rioted in the streets after the government tried to implement a gas tax to reduce the country's reliance on fossil fuels. But that protest was not because they didn't want to solve climate change, or because they didn't understand the need to sacrifice. It was because the French government demanded only sacrifice from the poor and middle class, not the rich. And policies like Inslee's plan and the Green New Deal demand most of their sacrifices from corporations and the rich—those who are largely responsible for the climate crisis, and those who can most afford to help solve it.

In the service of avoiding political chaos now, Democrats might be ensuring societal chaos later. Implying that Americans won't have to make sacrifices now to solve the climate crisis simply masks how bad the problem has become. The climate crisis threatens far more human and animal life than any war we've ever faced. And yet, we're pretending that it doesn't warrant anywhere near the type of sacrifices taxpayers made during World War II when rationing affected every American household and was widely considered to be for the common good.

Solving climate change likely won't require the same type of sacrifice Americans made in the 1940s. But it will require a similar level of commitment and a shared understanding that we're all in this fight together. If we fail in this regard—if we kick the can down the road—the struggle will only get harder. The planet will continue to warm, and American taxpayers will still have to make sacrifices—just ones that they didn't choose to make and weren't prepared for. They will pay more for food as the agricultural system fails; fund more wars and more international aid; pay higher medical bills due to increased heat and pollution; and suffer greater losses—of life as well as property—from sea-level rise, flooding, wildfire, and drought.

In this latter scenario, Americans won't be rewarded with an economy that powers itself and a planet with a livable climate for future generations. We will be, quite simply, f***ed. Our politicians ought to have the courage to tell us, in frank terms, what we'll have to give up today to avoid this grim fate.

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