



Tuesday, Mar. 03, 2009

# Despite Snow — and Irony — a Climate Protest Persists

By Bryan Walsh / Washington

**Correction Appended: March 3, 2009**

The call rang out through Washington early on the morning of March 2: the biggest act of civil disobedience against global warming in American history would not, in fact, be snowed out.

Environmental groups, led by Greenpeace and the Rainforest Action Network, had enlisted eco-celebrities such as Robert Kennedy Jr. and Bill McKibben and registered more than 2,000 youth protesters from around the country for a march on the coal-fired Capitol Power Plant, which supplies steam and cooled water to Congress. They planned to shut down the plant by peacefully blocking the entrances, a textbook act of civil disobedience for which many expected — perhaps eagerly — to be arrested. The message was simple: the burning of coal, which accounts for some 40% of U.S. carbon emissions, "is destroying the planet through global warming," as Kennedy put it. America needs to get off coal, which supplies nearly half the country's electricity, if it wants to have any hope of controlling its greenhouse gas emissions, and it should start with the Capitol plant. ([See the top 10 green ideas of 2008.](#))

As it turned out, the action may have been almost too successful. On Feb. 26, just a few days before the protest, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and Senate majority leader Harry Reid called for the 103-year-old plant to switch from coal to cleaner-burning natural gas, a move long pushed for by environmentalists but blocked by representatives from coal-heavy states. Protesters claimed an early victory. "Getting the plant to switch shows the power of popular pressure," said Steven Biel, the director of Greenpeace's global-warming campaign. But there was no doubt that by responding before the protesters hit the streets of the capital, Congress was simply moving one set of goalposts off the field.

But then came the snow. As 2,000-plus young activists — according to the organizers — gathered in the Spirit of Justice Park near the Capitol, bystanders were greeted with the surreal sight of a global-warming protest occurring in the middle of a freak March snowstorm. They chanted slogans like "Who is hot in here / There's too much carbon in the air" while huddling against the windchill. The greatest risk to the protesters wasn't aggressive cops — the D.C. police, just as chilled as the activists, had little interest in confrontation — but frostbite from the hours of marching and standing in the cold. "It's icy out there, so be careful," organizer Joshua Kahn Russell told the crowd before the march began. (There were no reports of injuries, winter-related or other, although after six hours in the elements, this reporter is still waiting to feel his face again.) ([Read "Nuclear's Comeback: Still No Energy Panacea."](#))

The joke was not lost on the media: FoxNews.com noted that it was "snowing irony in Washington." Nor did the protest end quite as expected. After the high-spirited and very well organized marchers left the park and encircled the nearby Capitol plant, groups locked arms in front of the three entrances to the facility, fully expecting to be arrested by the dozens of police monitoring the event. But the arrests never came: the police simply waited and watched as speakers and musicians climbed a mobile soundstage and addressed the increasingly frigid crowd. After nearly three hours, with activists beginning to wonder what it took to get arrested in this town anymore, the protest's leader decided it was time to declare victory and go home. "We won!" Russell told the cheering crowd. "We shut this coal plant down!"

Well, not exactly. Plans are for the plant to open on schedule tomorrow, still powered for the time being by coal. It would be heartbreakingly easy to mock a global-warming protest that was nearly snowed out, but what happened in Washington could be a significant step in the climate-change movement. For all the attention paid to it in the media, global warming remains an amorphous issue for many Americans, one with consequences that are far-off and unconnected to their daily lives. If that is ever going to change, warming advocates need to make climate change a matter of justice, appealing to Americans' sense of fairness — just as social movements like the civil rights one once did. ([Read "America's Untapped Energy Resource: Boosting Efficiency."](#))

As speaker after speaker addressed the plant-protesting crowd — from African-American activists whose cities are blanketed in pollution to protesters from Appalachia, where coal-mining has stripped the land bare — the message wasn't about polar bears or sea levels but the essential injustice of climate change. Unjust because in the U.S. and around the world it is those least responsible for climate change who will suffer the most from warming, and because it is a form of "generational theft," as one activist put it, with the young standing to inherit a ruined Earth. "My generation has blown it," said Rocky Anderson, former mayor of Salt Lake City, one of several politicians who joined the march. "But this power is going to be fueled by the young people."

The young people were fully present, both at the Capitol plant march and over the weekend at the Power Shift conference, which brought together more 11,000 college-age activists from around the country to strategize and rally over climate change. For this generation — post-Cold War, post-9/11, perhaps post-prosperity — global warming is emerging as their issue. Averting dangerous climate change is going to take smart policy, vast technological change and brave entrepreneurs, but it will also require a popular social movement that can alter American values. Global warming is far from inspiring that kind of change — the Capitol plant protest still only attracted a few thousand people — but it is beginning and it is growing, and a snowstorm isn't likely to stop it.

*The original version of this story misstated that the Capitol Power Plant supplied electricity, rather than steam and cooled water, to Congress.*

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