



Obama's Speech on Food and Climate Change

Delivered in Milan, Italy, on May 9, 2017, and adapted from *The Guardian*

Key background info to note before reading:

This was adapted from a lecture given by Barack Obama at the Seeds & Chips Global Food Innovation Summit shortly after his presidency ended. Seeds & Chips is one of the world's foremost food innovation events. Details: seedsandchips.com

You can find the video of this speech at the following URL if you'd like to watch it (start watching at minute 13:30): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1yBJHQ-jMUY>

Below is an excerpt from this speech that you can choose for the rhetorical analysis assignment:

During the course of my presidency, I made climate change a top priority, because I believe that, for all the challenges that we face, this is the one that will define the contours of this century more dramatically perhaps than the others. No nation, whether it's large or small, rich or poor, will be immune from the impacts of climate change. We are already experiencing it in America, where some cities are seeing floods on sunny days, where wildfire seasons are longer and more dangerous, where in our arctic state, Alaska, we're seeing rapidly eroding shorelines, and glaciers receding at a pace unseen in modern times.

Over my eight years in office, we dramatically increased our generation of clean energy, we acted to curtail our use of dirty energy, and we invested in energy efficiency across the board. At the 2015 climate change summit in Paris, we helped lead the world to the first significant global agreement for a low-carbon future.

But here's the thing: even if every country somehow puts the brakes on emissions, climate change would still have an impact on our world for years to come. Our changing climate is already making it more difficult to produce food, and we've already seen shrinking yields and spiking food prices that, in some cases, are leading to political instability. And when most of the world's poor work in agriculture, the stark imbalances that we've worked so hard to close between developed and developing countries will be even tougher to close. The cost will be borne by people in poor nations that are least equipped to handle it. In fact, some of the refugee flows into Europe originate not only from conflict, but also from places where there are food shortages, which will get far worse as climate change continues. So if we don't take the action

necessary to slow and ultimately stop these trends, the migration that has put such a burden on Europe already will just continue to get worse.

Now, the good news is that there are steps we can take that will make a difference: in the United States, we have been able to bring our emissions down even as we grow our economy. The same is true in many parts of Europe. Take food production, for instance. It's the second leading driver of greenhouse gas emissions, second only to energy production. But we have already identified ways in which we can address this challenge. The path to a sustainable food future will require unleashing the creative power of our best scientists, and engineers and entrepreneurs, backed by public and private investment, to deploy new innovations in climate-smart agriculture. Better seeds, better storage, crops that grow with less water, crops that grow in harsher climates, mobile technologies that put more agricultural data – including satellite imagery and weather forecasting and market prices – into the hands of farmers, so that they know when to plant and where to plant, what to plant and how it will sell.

All these things can help to make sure that food security exists in poor countries, but it can also help us ensure that, in producing the food that we need to feed the billions of people on this planet, we're not destroying the planet in the process.

A part of this is also going to be wasting less food. We have to create a food culture that encourages a demand for healthier, more sustainable food. In fact, making sure people have healthy food to eat alleviates a lot of the medical cost that we're seeing increasing in the advanced world, and if we're able to reduce our healthcare costs, that in turn will allow us to divert those resources into further relieving poverty in many parts of the world. When families get the nourishment they need, we see education outcomes rise, we see healthcare costs fall, and we see economic activity improve; and when, in the United States, the number one disqualifier for military service is obesity, we might even be able to strengthen our security as well.

So the good news is that we're starting to see a better way to feed a growing planet, combat hunger and malnutrition, put healthy food on the table and save our environment. And none of this is impossible. We can look at the successes we've already made: in just the past decade, the number of undernourished people in the world is down by more than 160 million.

I do not believe that any part of the world has to be condemned to perpetual poverty and hunger. And I do not believe that this planet is condemned to ever-rising temperatures. I believe these are problems that were caused by man, and they can be solved by man.

I'm fond of quoting the words of Dr Martin Luther King Jr, who believed that there is such a thing as being too late. When it comes to climate change, the hour is almost upon us. If we act boldly and swiftly, if we set aside our political interests in favour of the air that our young people will breathe, and the food they will eat, and the water they will drink; if we think about them and their hopes and dreams, then we will act, and it won't be too late. And we can leave behind a world that is worthy of our children, where there's reduced conflict and greater cooperation – a world marked not by human suffering, but by human progress.

Food has not been the focus of climate change discussions as much as it should have been. Part of the problem is that we haven't publicized the impact of food production on greenhouse gas emissions. People naturally understand that big smokestacks have pollution in them – they understand air pollution, so they can easily make the connection between energy production and greenhouse gases. Most people aren't as familiar with the impact of cows and methane. So part of the problem that we need to address is just lack of knowledge in the general public. Keep in mind how long it took to educate people around climate change, and we still have a lot of work to do.

Part of it is that food is a very emotional issue. Because food is so close to us, and it's part of our families, and it's part of what we do every single day, people are more resistant to the idea of government or bureaucrats telling us how to eat, what to eat, how to grow it. The truth is that agriculture communities in every country are very strong, politically. Historically, in the United States, the one area where Democrats and Republicans agree is on the agriculture committee, because they usually come from agricultural states, and they are very good at joining across party lines to protect the interest of food producers.

If you combine all those things with the fact that the system is so uneven – there are countries that just need more food, and there are countries where there is a glut of food – it makes for a difficult political dynamic in which to shape rational policy. Now, having said that, this is an area where we are starting to see some progress. In the United States, one of the things that we tried to do is to work with farmers to think about how they could produce the same amounts of food more efficiently, with fewer greenhouse gas emissions. And what I've always said is that if you want to make progress in this area, you have to take into account the interests of the producers themselves. Farmers work hard, and especially with small farms, or family farms, they feel that they are always just a step away from losing everything.

Obviously, a large portion of agriculture is dominated by agribusiness, but to the extent that you can show small- and medium-sized farmers ways to do things better that will save them money – or at least doesn't cost them money – they're happy to adopt some of these new processes. But if what they see is that you are putting the environmental issues as a priority over their economic interest, then they'll resist.

That's true in advanced countries, and it's also true in poor countries. My father is from Kenya. The first time I visited, I was speaking to some conservationists who were very upset because some of the game parks were being encroached upon by farmers – either the Maasai with their cattle, or subsistence farmers who were slashing and cutting down the ecosystem. And my sister – who's from Kenya and has a less romantic view about animals and game parks – said: “Well, if all the money from the game parks is going to the tour agencies in Nairobi and not going to the farmers next door, then of course they are not going to care. But if they see some economic interest in helping to conserve this land, they'll participate.” And that, in fact, has been the case. Where you've seen success in conservation, it's because you've brought in the local farmers and you've taught them how this is better for them. So that has to be a top priority. If we're going to be successful, we have to engage producers.

We also have to engage consumers. My good friend Sam Kass cooked for us at the White House, and helped to shape America's nutrition policy. He worked with my wife to promote healthy eating, and most of the impact he had was not legislation, it was raising awareness with parents about what unhealthy eating was doing to their children, and showing how millions of young children could eat healthier meals. The key is giving people good information. We can make progress in educating the advanced world about the need to reduce, just for dietary reasons, the amount of meat that people consume at any given meal, particularly if it's wasted. When you have fresh food, you are less likely to waste it, because it doesn't last as long – you buy it on the day that you are going to eat it and you use it. We're seeing businesses in the United States trying to come up with efficient, smart ways in which people can have the convenience of fast food, but with the food being healthier, and as a consequence, less is wasted.

If people feel as if they don't have control over their lives, or that their children don't have a good future, then they will resist efforts to deal with climate change because right now they're concerned about feeding their child. It's a luxury to worry about climate change; you have to have enough to eat before you start worrying about what's going to happen to the planet 30 years from now. If we do not pay attention to increasing inequality – and the fact that technology and globalization are accelerating – there will be a backlash.