



WHEN THE BORDER VANISHES

Program Script: When the Border Vanishes: Diplomacy and the Threat to Our Health and Environment

INTRODUCTION TO GLOBAL AFFAIRS

Today Americans confront a range of complex international issues. Global interdependence brings prosperity—and problems, like climate change and the H1N1 virus. Diplomats call these problems “global issues.” But what makes them unique?

Modern air travel dramatically reduces the distance between nations. In 1980, 200 million people traveled from their home countries. Today, 900 million people are on the move every year. Incubation times for disease haven’t changed, but air travel can now spread disease around the world in days.

Global issues are also too big for individual nations to solve. Former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan called them “problems without passports.” Effective solutions always require international diplomacy.

Global issues diplomacy relies in part on non-diplomats. Scientists and doctors provide technical information. Private citizens and non-governmental organizations—or “NGOs”—publicize the issue, mobilize public support, and sometimes implement the agreed action.

Two global issues are of great importance to 21st century Americans: the environment and the impact of disease. Each crosses international boundaries. To understand modern diplomacy, we must understand our history.

DISEASE AND DIPLOMACY

What makes America strong? Is it our economic power and military strength? Or is it something very different? One of our nation’s most valuable assets is our health. When Americans are vulnerable to disease, the nation is at risk.



Plague and the Revolution

They called it the American Plague. Yellow fever would terrify Americans for 250 years because no one knew how it spread. Smallpox and malaria killed both newcomers and Native Americans. Disease even put our independence in doubt.

Smallpox gave the British an advantage early in the Revolutionary War. British troops were inoculated against the disease but the Americans weren’t. But in 1780 when the war moved to the South, the tables were turned. Years of exposure gave Americans more immunity to malaria and yellow fever. The Americans had the advantage.



In 1781 General Cornwallis marched through Virginia. 30,000 former slaves joined him. While building the British defenses at Yorktown, many were infected with smallpox. 3,000 former slaves died at Yorktown. Thomas Jefferson later estimated that only 10 percent of the former slaves survived the war.

Disease threatened the existence of the new United States in 1793. Refugees fleeing the Haitian Revolution brought yellow fever to Philadelphia. Business collapsed. Schools closed. The poor starved. Other cities and states kept Philadelphia refugees away at gun point. Many died on the road.



The Federal Government almost fell apart. Cabinet officials and congressmen fled. Some departments stopped functioning. After a six-week absence at Mount Vernon, President Washington returned to see if it was safe. Yellow fever was gone but it would return to kill every summer. No one was safe.

In 1798 Congress created the Marine Hospital Service to check incoming ships for disease and quarantine those who were ill. If deadly disease couldn't be stopped at the border, there was no other way to stop it.



Yellow Fever & Expansion

Disease moved West with the pioneers. Memphis was the richest city in the South until 1878 when yellow fever arrived on a ship from New Orleans. In two weeks 25 percent of the people were dead. 70 percent of those who stayed—died there. Memphis was bankrupt, and Atlanta became the most important city of the South instead.



As Americans settled the continent, leaders like Theodore Roosevelt and Henry Cabot Lodge looked to Cuba for new territory. But Cuba was a hotbed of disease. Before American power could expand, yellow fever had to be conquered.

During the Spanish-American War seven U.S. soldiers died of disease for every soldier who died in combat. At the end of the war, 25 percent of the American soldiers had yellow fever. Because American leaders could not risk another major outbreak at home, the soldiers had to stay in Cuba.

The Army sent Dr. Walter Reed and his Yellow Fever Commission to Cuba. They tested the theory of Cuban doctor Carlos Finlay who believed the mosquito transmitted the disease. Finlay was right. Once the Americans drained the mosquito's breeding grounds, Cuba was free of yellow fever.

Americans now wanted to build a canal across Panama. But tropical disease made Panama the pesthole of the world. During the 1880s, 25 percent of French canal workers died from disease. Americans took over the project in 1902. Yellow fever was controlled by 1905. But American workers were still dying of malaria. Malaria was very expensive to control. Because the Canal was guaranteed to make a huge profit, the money was spent. The Canal opened in 1914.



Americans entered the 20th century with the ability to control malaria and yellow fever. But the biggest killer of all time was waiting to deliver a death sentence to 50 million people.

The United States entered World War I in April 1917, but it took time to mobilize the army. In early 1918 thousands of soldiers reported to training camps across the country. A new influenza virus—called H1N1—emerged in Kansas in March. 1,100 soldiers were hospitalized during the first week alone. Soldiers spread the virus to nearby cities and then, around the world.

But no reports of the virus appeared in American newspapers. The Espionage Act of 1917 made it a crime to interfere with the war effort or damage morale. Even though the soldiers were dying, no one stopped them from coming. President Woodrow Wilson never acknowledged the existence of the deadly influenza.

H1N1 crossed the ocean and hit the armies on both sides. In April 1918 the Germans suddenly halted their attack on Paris. In part, they were too sick to fight. The Germans never resumed their offensive. H1N1 was even more deadly when it returned in the fall. It killed at least 25 percent of the population. The war ended unconditionally in November 1918.

American doctors and scientists had learned how to control or eradicate many diseases, but the U.S. Government had no plans to do so. The next advance came from a surprising source. In 1908 billionaire John D. Rockefeller funded a campaign to eradicate hookworm in the American South. The success of that campaign changed the way Americans thought. We weren't powerless to fight disease—and it was our duty to help others at home and abroad.



The Rockefeller Foundation campaigned against hookworm in 52 countries on six continents. In 1916 the Foundation attacked yellow fever in South and Central America. Yellow fever was virtually eradicated from Brazil, Peru, Columbia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Panama, the Caribbean, and Mexico by 1923.

Some American businessmen realized that a healthier workforce would mean financial profit. The United Fruit Company owned 3 million acres in Central America. The company eradicated hookworm from its workforce and saw profits rise.

Although these private initiatives were effective, it took World War II to spur the U.S. Government into action.



Old Enemies, New Threats

Before shipping out, America's WWII soldiers were immunized against many diseases including yellow fever, bubonic plague, influenza, and typhus. But those diseases still threatened the troops in the European, North African, and Asian war zones.

During a 1943 typhoid outbreak in Italy, the Army's Malaria Control Unit discovered that a chemical called DDT could kill mosquitoes and other insects at all stages of their life cycles. Yellow fever and malaria would no longer just be controlled. They could be eradicated. All military airplanes returning to the United States were disinfected. No deadly epidemics followed the soldiers home.

The best way to protect Americans at home was to control disease overseas. In 1946 the Army Malaria Control Unit became the Centers for Disease Control or CDC with a new mission. During the 1960s, the CDC worked on smallpox eradication in Central and West Africa and Tonga. International cooperation led to the global eradication of smallpox in 1977. Diplomacy and medicine, working together, made the world healthier.

But new health threats emerged. In 1981 people began dying from HIV/AIDS. Confusing reports came in from around the world. Some people panicked. Countries tried to impose quarantines and travel restrictions. They didn't work.



Graphic

Nations needed to share information. In 2004, Congress funded a new Global Disease Detection program. Centers in Thailand, Kenya, Guatemala, China, Egypt, Kazakhstan, and India can now communicate directly with the CDC in Atlanta.

Less-developed countries, especially in Africa, have been hard hit by infectious diseases. HIV/AIDS alone has orphaned more than 13 million children worldwide. More than 9.5 million people die from infectious disease each year. Many of them are children.

In 2000, 147 heads of state met at the United Nations. They agreed on eight millennium goals to make the world a better, safer, and healthier place. Goal Number Six was the fight against HIV/AIDS and other tropical diseases.

The United States is active in this fight along with other nations and private citizens like Bill Gates and Bono. The Gates Foundation will spend \$10 billion during this decade on new vaccines to fight tropical diseases. But vaccines alone aren't enough.

During the 1990s, former President Jimmy Carter negotiated a six-month "guinea worm" cease-fire in Sudan. At the time it was the longest cease-fire in the Sudan's civil war.

Good health makes our nation strong. Improving the health of other nations may keep us safe.

DIPLOMACY AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Borders are more than lines on a map. Borders define a nation and determine who has does—and does not—have access to its natural resources. But what would it be like to live in a place without any borders at all? Would that affect your attitude toward natural resources?



To Europeans, the New World felt like a desert or an ocean. Vast and empty. The land and its resources seemed inexhaustible. American settlers believed it was true. But the colonists soon learned they wouldn't prosper until they could control those resources. They needed borders.

In 1763 Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon used astronomy to cut a border between Pennsylvania and Maryland. Virginia sent a team of surveyors to finish the job in 1784. Each member of the team was paid as much as Virginia's governor.

One of those men was Andrew Ellicott. President George Washington chose Ellicott for a delicate diplomatic mission to cut an international border through the swamps between the state of Georgia and Spanish territory in Florida.

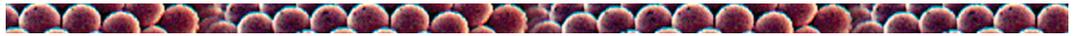
Washington's Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson was interested in borders—and especially what was on the other side of them. He first proposed a mission of exploration to the Pacific Northwest in 1792 before the United States had any claim to the territory.

In 1803 Jefferson sent Lewis and Clark to explore the Louisiana Territory and beyond to the Pacific Ocean. Jefferson also wanted to explore the southwest, but Spain closely guarded all information about its territory. It was difficult to know what was on the other side of that border until 1804 when a German scientist arrived in Philadelphia.



Alexander von Humboldt had traveled more than 6,500 miles through Central and South America. He studied the relationship between the Earth and living creatures, and was the first to recognize the effects of deforestation on climate change. Humboldt saw things that no European had ever seen, and he kept detailed records and maps of his journey.

After five years of exploration, Humboldt traveled to Washington, D.C. He admired the American Republic and President Thomas Jefferson so much that he gave Jefferson his detailed maps of Spanish territory. Those maps would guide U.S. explorers like Zebulon Pike and John Fremont through the West for the next 40 years.



Humboldt's maps influenced America's future—but so did his ideas about the link between living creatures and the physical world. Some Americans became convinced that Humboldt was right: man could have a negative impact on his environment.



**Moving
West:
More
Becomes
Less**

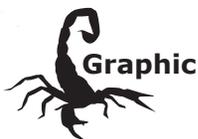
A 19th century European traveler said that Americans were insensible to the wonders of nature. Americans agreed with President Andrew Jackson when he praised them for replacing wilderness with cities, towns, and prosperous farms. They valued civilization—not wilderness. An untouched forest or prairie—no matter how beautiful—meant a struggle for survival.

Rich and educated people from Northeastern cities were the first to worry that the landscape had changed forever. The Hudson River School of artists celebrated the beauty of the land before it was settled. Romantic poets wandered the forests, and James Fennimore Cooper idealized the "Last of the Mohicans." The frontier in the East was gone, so tourists traveled West to find it.

Artist George Catlin hurried to capture Native American customs on canvas before they disappeared. He hoped the West would remain an undeveloped park forever. In the 1830s, author and diplomat Washington Irving came west to see herds of buffalo. 50 years later, it took Theodore Roosevelt one entire week to find a single bison to kill. What would America be like when the Western wilderness vanished, too?

Roosevelt wanted to keep hunting big game. He understood that animal habitats had to be protected or the game would disappear. Roosevelt founded the Boone and Crockett Club in 1887 to promote ethical hunting and the creation of wildlife preserves. Conservationists like Roosevelt wanted to protect—but still continue to use—America's resources.

But others had different ideas. Preservationist John Muir believed forests were places of rest, inspiration, and prayer and should be untouched by man. In 1892 he cofounded the Sierra Club, which attracted thousands of like-minded members. Americans did not agree on whether to follow preservationist or conservationist environmental policies.



Graphic

Those differences were even greater when the problem crossed our border. The United States and Canada shared the valuable resources of the Great Lakes. During the 1890s, over-fishing caused an 84 percent drop in the sturgeon catch. Secretary of State John Foster knew it was time for diplomats to act, but the negotiations failed. Each side valued short-term profit over protection. But the issue could not resolve itself. US-Canadian fishing practices were regulated in the Inland Fisheries Treaty of 1908.



A much smaller creature—the bird—launched a powerful international conservation movement. Migrating birds crossed state and international borders every year. Along the way they were killed for sport, to supply restaurants, and to decorate ladies' hats and accessories.

The Lacey Act of 1900 stopped the illegal trade in birds across state lines. Theodore Roosevelt established the first bird sanctuary on Pelican Island in Florida in 1903 to protect breeding grounds. A new organization, the Audubon Society, then lobbied the Department of State to protect migrating birds across international borders.

The Migratory Bird Act of 1918 was so successful that it still forms the legal basis for all U.S. environmental treaties.

But growing American concern for the environment didn't always apply to other parts of the world. For President Theodore Roosevelt, a Panama Canal was essential for American power. Nature was an impediment to success. The jungle was flattened and 262 million cubic yards of earth moved to create the Panama Canal. No wonder President Theodore Roosevelt was unimpressed with the landscape in Panama during his 1906 visit. He preferred the unspoiled scenery of Puerto Rico.

Roosevelt's attitude toward the international environment changed because of Gifford Pinchot. Pinchot was the first chief of the U.S. Forest Service. He explained that conservation had to be global to be effective. Roosevelt enthusiastically backed a World Conservation Congress scheduled for September 1909 after his presidency ended. Roosevelt was certain that his successor, William Howard Taft, would hold the conference. But Taft cancelled it.



The 20th Century & The Ultimate Border

The borders of the United States changed just once during the 20th century—in 1912—when Alaska became an organized territory. America was secure because it stood between allies and surrounded by oceans. That was why October 4, 1957, was such a shock.

The Soviet Union launched an artificial satellite called Sputnik into Earth orbit. Americans panicked. Senate Majority Leader Lyndon Johnson vowed that the United States would not live by the light of a communist moon. In 1961, President John F. Kennedy challenged Americans to cross the final frontier and land on the moon by 1969.

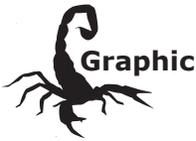
At the same time, Americans learned about a new threat even closer to home. In 1962 nature writer Rachel Carson published a book called *Silent Spring*. She was the first to understand that pesticides like DDT damaged the environment. Her book changed American thinking forever.

So did the view from space. On December 24, 1968, the crew of Apollo 8 became the first humans to see the entire Earth at once. Everyone watching TV saw pictures of a world where national borders had vanished.

Senators Edmund Muskie, Hubert Humphrey, and Stewart Udall sponsored laws to improve U.S. air and water quality. In 1970, Richard Nixon became the first President to discuss the environment during a State of the Union message.

But Wisconsin Senator Gaylord Nelson believed Americans needed to know more about the environmental problems facing the country. He proposed a day of teach-ins on college campuses. An estimated 20 million Americans participated in the first Earth Day on April 22, 1970.

People around the world wanted action. In 1972 the United Nations held its first conference on the environment in Stockholm, Sweden. Representatives from 113 governments and more than 400 NGOs attended. During the next two years, American diplomats concluded treaties to protect polar bears, endangered species and wetlands, and migratory birds. But suddenly progress stopped.



People on Earth seemed to retreat behind their own borders. In December 1972 the astronauts of Apollo 17 became the last humans to see the entire Earth from space. War, energy shortages, and political turmoil made environmental issues a lower priority—for the next 20 years.

In 1992, representatives from 172 nations—including 108 heads of state—attended the UN's Earth Summit in Brazil. The Earth Summit influenced all UN policy since, because environmental impact is considered as a part of every new international conference.

Nations today still find it a challenge to agree on the causes and impact of environmental issues. In December 2009, the UN hosted a climate change conference in Denmark. While most nations agreed that global warming was one of the 21st century's greatest challenges, they could not agree on what action to take. But that won't be the end of the issue. Diplomacy is about building international consensus—no matter how long it takes.

American diplomats continue to work on environmental issues beyond our borders: protecting sea turtles and migratory sharks, conserving vanishing rainforests, controlling the movement of hazardous wastes, and stopping the illegal trade in wildlife.

The most difficult environmental issues of the 21st century will be those that cross our borders. Continuous diplomacy will be the key to their solution. ■