
Negotiating an International Climate Accord

A CONVERSATION WITH DANIEL REIFSNYDER,
CO-CHAIR OF THE UN CLIMATE SUMMIT

FLETCHER FORUM: *You started your career at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). How did your time with NOAA shape your views on climate change?*

DANIEL REIFSNYDER: It didn't—at least not directly. I worked at NOAA from 1974 to 1984 and then moved to the State Department, first in fisheries and then in science and technology. I did not get involved in the climate issue until October of 1989 when I took over as Director of the newly minted Office of Global Change.

But my work in fisheries taught me many lessons, some of which I have been able to apply to my subsequent work in climate. For example, in the run-up to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, I felt strongly that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (the IPCC) should remain outside the convention if we were to have any hope of securing objective scientific and technological advice. My view was strongly influenced by the relationship I had seen between the International Commission for the Northwest Atlantic Fisheries (ICNAF) (the international body that regulated fisheries in the Northwest Atlantic before nations extended their jurisdiction to 200 miles) and the International Council for the Exploration of the Seas (a scientific body in Copenhagen that provided annual scientific advice to ICNAF on the status

Daniel Reifsnyder is Deputy Assistant Secretary for Environment, leading the OES Bureau's Environment Directorate. Dr. Reifsnyder was previously Director of the OES Office of Global Change and he served as alternate head of the U.S. delegation in the negotiations from 1991 to 1992 that led to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. He earned his Ph.D. in international relations from The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University.

of the fish stocks in the Northwest Atlantic). It was an arm's length relationship that worked very well and promoted the integrity of the scientific information that formed the basis of management decisions.

FLETCHER FORUM: *You've had a long and distinguished career as a diplomat in the energy and climate space. How have the style, tenor, and substance of climate talks evolved since your first negotiations?*

REIFSNYDER: I began working on the climate change issue in October 1989, which was about a year after the beginning of the modern era for this issue. I mark that beginning very specifically at June 23, 1988—the day that NASA's Jim Hansen and others (including The Fletcher School's own Bill Moomaw) testified before a hearing chaired by Tim Wirth of the Senate Energy and Commerce Committee. Phil Shabecoff's article the next day made the front page of *The New York Times*. In those early days, climate change was not widely understood, and at best it was thought to be an esoteric, far-off problem. In the years since, recognition of the problem and its immediacy—as well as serious efforts to address it—have expanded exponentially.

FLETCHER FORUM: *As the co-chair of the UN climate change negotiation process, how would you define success at this year's climate conference?*

REIFSNYDER: I think success will be defined not only by the agreement we reach in Paris but by the broader mobilization of actors that is taking place across a wide spectrum. France, which holds the presidency of the Conference of the Parties (COP) this year, and Peru (last year's COP president) recognize the need for and value of this broader mobilization of civil society and are working hard to encourage and promote it.

.....
Success will be defined not only by the agreement we reach in Paris but by the broader mobilization of actors that is taking place across a wide spectrum.

FLETCHER FORUM: *What issue or sets of issues have proved the most difficult as co-chair to tackle? That is, what are the major sticking points between parties in the current text?*

REIFSNYDER: The decision in Durban in 2011 that launched this round

of negotiations called for work in six areas: mitigation, adaptation, finance, technology cooperation, transparency, and capacity building. Finding the right approach to each and the right balance among them is the most complicated issue facing the parties, in my view—that and crafting an agreement that will truly be “applicable to all.”

FLETCHER FORUM: *How has the recent U.S.-China bilateral climate accord impacted the UN climate negotiations?*

REIFSNYDER: The joint announcement last November by President Obama and President Xi stating what the United States and China intend to contribute to the global effort proved electric. That the presidents of these key countries would make such an announcement together was historic. Their announcement—and the announcement by a host of countries totaling USD 10.2 billion in pledges to the Green Climate Fund—put wind in the sails of the negotiations in Lima last December. That wind still blows.

FLETCHER FORUM: *What is the role of a chairperson in the climate negotiations? What have you found to be the most effective negotiating strategies to convince countries to compromise and come to consensus?*

REIFSNYDER: The role of a chair in the climate negotiations is to assist the parties in moving forward to an agreement. That requires doing everything possible to help the process—but not a second before it is needed. It also requires listening carefully to the views of all parties and being clear, transparent, and even-handed at every step along the way. I’m not sure what the most effective negotiating strategy is exactly, but a very effective tool in climate negotiations, as in many other things, is humor.

FLETCHER FORUM: *What at Fletcher equipped you for your current assignment as co-chair?*

REIFSNYDER: My work focused in three areas: Environment, the United States, and Southwest Asia. Each has helped me enormously. My work with Professor Moomaw on energy and environmental issues helped me understand energy basics and the broad suite of environmental issues that arise from its rational use. My work with Professor Henrikson helped me understand U.S. diplomatic history and draw parallels to previous events and crises. My work with Professor Hess helped me understand the Middle

East and the complex history of this critical, emerging region. I would also say that my brief but very positive association with Professor Martel helped me understand the meaning of devotion.

FLETCHER FORUM: *What leader or negotiator do you look to as inspiration during difficult negotiations?*

REIFSNYDER: I am often reminded of what Bob Reinstein, the U.S. negotiator who led the talks that resulted in the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, said to me once. When I observed that the pressure on him must be enormous and told him that I didn't know how he could handle it, he said that, if he felt that it was all up to him, he would likely be crushed under the weight of the responsibility—but he said that it wasn't. He said every other negotiator in the process wanted the same thing—a successful outcome—and that it was not an individual but a distributed effort. I have come to understand and share Bob's perspective, we're all in this together.

FLETCHER FORUM: *Any final thoughts you would like to share?*

REIFSNYDER: I think that Fletcher is an incredible place and the Fletcher “family” is truly extraordinary. It is a family that extends around the world and includes any number of remarkable people doing critical things. My Ph.D. committee members told me often that the degree was a means to an end, not an end in itself, and that the point was to use it for good. I hope to do just that. *f*