Panel III: International Law, Global Environmentalism, and the Future of American Environmental Policy

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I will start with a brief survey of some of the principles that President Clinton and Vice President Gore bring to international environmental policy. I will then recap some of the things that this new administration has accomplished and other things that we are working on.

The President and the Vice President have a strong commitment to elevate environmental policy from its lowly status of the last twelve years, and to integrate environmental policy with other areas of governmental policy. This commitment was signified by the establishment of the Office on Environmental Policy in the White House and the Global Environmental Affairs Office within the National Security Council. The creation of the latter office reflects an understanding that international environmental issues are numerous and important enough to be a core part of the White House’s internal foreign policy institutions. “Environmental security” is now part of the definition of “national security.”

In our first year in the White House we have undertaken what might be called a thorough house inspection to see what is in the government’s attic on global environmental issues. We have already made important changes in policy on the greenhouse effect, forest destruction, species extinction, and other issues. We are seeing extraordinary pressures around the world on resources vital to agriculture, including shortages of fresh water and desertification. We have seen the collapse of certain fisheries from overfishing. In short, we are seeing many patterns of economic activity and resource use that are unsustainable over the long haul.

The scientific foundation of each of these problems is very real, even though scientific uncertainty concerning their extent and effects remains. We believe that the only responsible approach to these uncertainties is a precautionary approach. Humanity is running a series
of large-scale experiments on this planet, experiments that can be tried only once. We have a responsibility to ourselves and to future generations not to make big mistakes. Our responsibility calls for a principle of insurance and precaution in dealing with environmental problems. This principle entails taking early measures to mitigate these problems. Most often these measures are good for the economy in the short- and the long-run as well.

Let me review a couple of the administration's major policy changes. On Earth Day, 1993, President Clinton announced two initiatives in the international sphere. The first was an important step to combat climate change resulting from the greenhouse effect. The President announced the U.S. commitment to meet 1990 levels of greenhouse gas emissions by the year 2000. We are near to issuing a plan with specific policy actions to carry out that commitment. Second, the President announced that the United States would sign the Biodiversity Convention to which most other nations agreed in 1992.

We are also committed to working with developing countries to help them develop and protect the environment. When the Vice President spoke to the Commission on Sustainable Development in June 1993, he enunciated two principles that capsulize our approach. The first is the principle of national responsibility. Each nation has the responsibility to care for the resources within its borders. The second is the principle of international partnership. Many environmental problems cannot be addressed by individual nations because they spill over across borders, and because of pressures of international competitiveness. There are also major differences in the resources that developed and developing countries can bring to bear on these things.

We are making important strides toward implementing these two principles in the restructuring of the Global Environment Facility (GEF), which is a joint activity of the World Bank, the United Nations Development Program, and the United Nations Environment Program. The three-year GEF pilot phase is coming to a close. If appropriately restructured, the GEF likely will become the instrument for developed nations to provide developing nations with financial assistance to address such issues as climate change and biodiversity loss. The United States did not participate in the GEF pilot phase (although the United States did undertake a large bilateral aid pro-

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2. The President announced that the U.S. would sign the Biodiversity Convention at a White House Ceremony, October 19, 1993. See, e.g., Clinton Backs Earth Treaty, Chi. TRIB., Apr. 21, 1993, at C1.
gram with similar objectives), but the Clinton administration is committed to support the GEF if it is appropriately reformed.

The parties are engaged in a multilateral evaluation of the results of the projects that the pilot GEF has funded and the results of the governing structure that it has used. We are well on our way toward a new cooperative arrangement between North and South countries that will respect the rights, resources, and capacities of both sets of countries. The balance of decisionmaking power in the new GEF will lie neither with the North, nor with the South. Rather, partnership between North and South will be the key to leveraging public and private resources to help achieve sustainable development.

The principle of partnership is based on the idea that when we help a developing country or a former Eastern bloc country improve its energy efficiency, we help ourselves as well, because we have reduced the greenhouse gas emissions going into the air. When we help conserve biodiversity, we may be retaining medical resources that otherwise could be lost forever. That helps the North as well as the South. When we help slow desertification and deforestation, we may in turn prevent the impoverishment that can lead to political instability, armed conflicts, and movements of refugees. Thus, environmental security promotes national security as traditionally defined. In short, there is as much for "us" as for "them" to gain from this principle of partnership.

The new administration has taken a number of extremely important environmental initiatives at home also. We have enunciated a plan for sustainable management of the forests in the Northwest, as part of a U.S./international effort to manage our forests sustainably. Domestic action consistent with our international goals is necessary to enhance our credibility in efforts to convince developing countries to move towards sustainable management of their forests.

In closing, let me remind you that, through his or her consumption of resources, a child born in the United States will have many more times the impact on the world than a child born in a developing country. We must work with other countries on population and sustainable development issues and, at the same time, work to make the American economy both stronger and more ecologically sustainable.