

Mother Jones

Obama on Climate: How Hard Is He Trying?

By [Bill McKibben](#) | Wed September 23, 2009 4:19 PM PST

Word in the halls of the UN this week was that President Obama's speech on Tuesday—the first to the world body by this most admired of world leaders—was a dud, a towering disappointment. Coming at the beginning of what the UN has dubbed "climate week," the speech marked the beginning of a three-month push towards the global climate conference at Copenhagen. Obama used it mostly to downplay expectations. And it's those downplayed expectations that may prove to be tragically self-fulfilling.

Oh sure, there were a few flights of soaring rhetoric: "Our generation's response to this challenge will be judged by history," blah blah blah. But of all issues, this is the one where rhetoric does the least good. The enemy here is chemistry and physics, and they are heartily unimpressed by anything except specific targets for the reduction of carbon dioxide. And on this front Obama was completely unforthcoming, promising only that "we will continue to do so by investing in renewable energy, promoting greater efficiency, and slashing our emissions to reach the targets we set for 2020 and our long-term goal for 2050."

The reason he didn't speak those targets out loud is because anyone who knows anything about climate—and that now includes, on at least a rudimentary level, most of the heads of the state who assembled to hear his speech—knows that those targets are unbearably weak. By 2050 he's talking about 80 percent reductions—but 2050 is so far away as to be almost meaningless without strong interim targets. By 2020 the bill he's backing aims for something on the order of 17 percent reductions, though the legislation is so shot through with weird loopholes that that's probably a meaningless number too. In any event, it's well below what actual scientists are calling for: reductions in carbon emissions from the developed countries of something like 40 percent by 2020. In other words, an all-out, crash effort to change course and avert disaster.

And that's not at all what Obama seems to be planning for. His most immediate priority—"every nation's most immediate priority"—is producing more economic growth. Copenhagen can be a "significant step." We must not "allow the perfect to become the enemy of progress."

Never mind that no one is talking about perfect—we're well past that. I mean, the Arctic is already falling into the sea. But the idea that we should settle for making some "progress" is either a declaration of defeat or a profound misreading of the latest science. Obama gave a speech that would have been great had it come two years ago—but now, with scientists ever more frightened, it left the thousands gathered here for the climate conference feeling deflated.

And most weren't buying his implicit excuse—that Congress couldn't deliver more. Here's how he delicately put it: "all of us will face doubts and difficulties in our own capitals as we try to reach a lasting solution." It's true that the Congress is an obstacle—they're the real villains here, not the president. But Obama doesn't get a pass because he hasn't even tried to do what leaders in democracies must: rally support.

A speech at the UN doesn't cut it, especially one this limp. Even calling in the TV anchors for an Oval Office meeting, like he did on health care over the weekend, doesn't cut it. This man knows

how to campaign—we saw that last year. When he was running for president, he left no stone unturned—hundreds of thousands of us, me included, gave up our free time to knock on doors, make phone calls, do the work of making change. What a triumph when he won! Obama even knows how to campaign about issues—he was, after all, a community organizer.

It will, then, fall to other community organizers to pick up the ball for him now. Tens of thousands of them have already registered their actions at our [350.org website](http://350.org) for Oct. 24, in 120 nations (and rising daily). It's going to be the most widespread day of environmental activism ever, designed to take the most important number on earth and drive it into the debate. Obama may be shy about talking targets, but we're not: science has made clear, right up through this week's edition of *Nature*, that 350 parts per million carbon dioxide is the most the planet can safely deal with.

And that number got an airing at the UN yesterday too, from a man willing to speak more straightforwardly than our president. Obama was followed to the podium by Mohamed Nasheed, who also won an election last year, in his case to head the Maldives. (And in his case over an autocrat who had ruled for three decades, and kept Nasheed a political prisoner for five years). If we didn't take tough action to get back to 350 ppm soon, he pointed out, "We will not live. We will die. Our country will not exist."

Other countries will still exist, though not easily—Sydney, for instance, is today in the grips of a dust storm so severe planes are being diverted. But everyone should feel Nasheed's fire. Let's hope Obama stuck around long enough to listen.



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