

POLITICO Magazine

POLITICO



Al Gore Is Not Giving Up

A rare, frank conversation with the former vice president and climate-change activist.

April 24, 2014

By DARREN SAMUELSON

Al Gore is richer and skinnier than ever, 14 years out of the White House, a tech titan with elder statesman clout, whose disdain for politics in the capital where he lived most of his life has only grown with each year he's lived away from it. Sure, this new Gore has a great life, what with a net worth well over the [\\$200 million](#) mark following the sale of his Current TV network to Al Jazeera last year, that seat on the Apple board and his starring roles with two investment companies that tout their environmentally friendly business styles: London-based Generation Investment Management and Silicon Valley's Kleiner Perkins Caufield & Byers. He lives well too, between his

20-room, \$4 million home in Nashville's tony Belle Meade neighborhood and a separate apartment in San Francisco's St. Regis luxury hotel residences.

But even in his fabulously wealthy, I'm-not-a-Washingtonian-anymore phase, Gore is still a policy wonk, of course. He may be a trendy, 50-pound-lighter vegan these days, and wear the all-black uniform of the Silicon Valley gurus who have become his peers. But the former vice president still geeks out when talking about the "cost-down curve for photovoltaic electricity," his solar-powered houseboat and the infuriating refusal of the news media and the Republican Party to acknowledge the climate change gorilla in the room.

[\(Sign up for Politico Magazine's Friday Cover email\)](#)

And the new Al Gore is just as steamed as the old Al Gore about the lack of clear progress in combating global warming, a failure that clearly eats at him. When I ask Gore in a two-hour interview in his Nashville office—the longest he's given since last summer—how he would describe his job, he says, "I want to catalyze the emergence of a solution to the climate crisis as quickly as possible. Period."

Perhaps not surprisingly, he is much less eager to discuss the disappointments of why that is so during the presidency of a fellow Democrat who subscribes to Gore's views on the urgency of the climate crisis – never mind his own failure to galvanize more action despite the recognition of a Nobel Prize and even an Oscar award for his climate proselytizing. And then there's the awkward fact of his current low profile, which even Gore friends and allies tell me is very much by design.

If the old rap on Gore was that he was too boring, too stiff to succeed at the highest levels of politics—at one point, it was hard to find a mention of the former vice president's name without the word "wooden" closely nearby—the new complaint, even from Gore's ostensible allies, is that he's too polarizing a figure to lead the movement against climate change, a lament I've heard in numerous recent interviews.

"I don't think he's taken seriously as the spokesman, certainly by no one in the middle," a former House Democrat with battle scars from the last decade's climate change debates told me. "He's preaching to the choir. He's a common scold." Claire McCaskill, the Missouri Democratic senator, says any politician with a background like Gore's is bound to be a problematic face of the climate

fight. "I'd vote for a scientist," she said in an interview. "He may be a statesman, but I think once a politician, always a politician in the eyes of many."

The charge leaves him cold. "It's not about me. And I've never tried to make it about me," Gore, who turned 66 last month, insists. "I think that whoever puts his head up above the trenches and says 'We've got to do this' is going to attract the ire of people who don't want to do it," he says. "And there are plenty of them."

"I think that's a big statement about who he is," says Carol Browner, the former head of the Environmental Protection Agency, who is close to Gore. "Lots of people in our business would care a lot more about being on the front page."

Whether by choice or design, Gore is clearly working hard to not make it about him. He rarely grants interviews, preferring to lobby President Obama and world leaders in private (he tells me he has "no complaints about any lack of access" to the White House). When Senate Democrats invited Gore to brief them last December, he did it behind closed doors at one of their weekly luncheons in the Capitol, rather than in televised committee hearings, like the ones he headlined in 2007 and 2009. He skipped the 2012 Democratic National Convention altogether. And much of his attention these days is clearly on his booming business (though conservatives love to bash him for that too, taunting him for getting rich off going green).

"I think he's channeled some of his political instincts into business now," says Jon Meacham, the former *Newsweek* editor who published Gore's most recent book. As for the complaint that Gore's monetizing his climate fight for personal gain, Bill Daley, the former White House chief of staff, responds: "The fact that Al Gore invests in companies that may be able to help with climate change is somehow evil? In every other format those people would cheer someone who did that."

But it is also indisputably true that Gore's global warming quest has produced few clear successes. Public opinion polls show Americans repeatedly rank climate change near the bottom of their list of priorities for the country. Greenhouse gas emissions have continued their upward march, interrupted only by the 2008 recession. Repeated legislative defeats in Washington and more than two decades of largely fruitless international negotiations have left many in the environmental movement searching for new strategies, and new leaders. And now the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the same U.N.-backed group that shared Gore's 2007 Nobel Prize, [says](#) the

planet won't be nearly as habitable by the end of this century if significant changes aren't made – and soon – in how we get our energy.

Gore spends most of his time on climate issues, running his NGO and giving speeches, but even those operations have scaled back, too. Before Obama's historic election, Gore had pledged to spend \$300 million to pass a climate bill, telling CBS's *60 Minutes* in 2008 that his new Alliance for Climate Protection would lead a "blitz as sweeping and expensive as a big corporation's rollout of a new product." At its peak, the alliance had more than 230 employees and field operations in 28 critical battleground states. It reported a high of \$87.4 million in grants and contributions in 2008. But with no big climate bill on the table, budgeting and staffing are much smaller now for Gore's group, with 41 employees in the United States and donations around \$7.6 million. It also has a new name – the Climate Reality Project – and a different focus, training select members of the public through three-day seminars where the former vice president lectures for an entire day and through [interactive online tools](#) that seek to engage a casual, drive-by audience by showing how a warming planet will lead to poorer quality beer and underwater golf courses in Florida and Hawaii.

Add up the losses and Gore confidants admit it has taken a toll. "There's been a lot of frustration, for many decades," says Peter Knight, a Gore business partner who served as his chief of staff in the House and Senate.

But when we meet, Gore says he's more convinced than ever that climate change can be stopped, predicting a coming "political tipping point" and reaching for historical analogies like the civil rights movement or the battle for gay rights for inspiration. "How long will it take us to get to the point where we really start solving it?" he asks. "Not long."

Here's what else he had to say in our conversation, over black coffee at his sleek Nashville office's conference table made from recycled wood salvaged from the bottom of the nearby Tennessee River:

POLITICO MAGAZINE: On climate change, scientific warnings continue to build. Is it at this point too late to turn the tide?

Al Gore: No, not at all. But let's define the terms you use in your question. No one should suffer the illusion that we're capable now of stopping all of the impacts. Some impacts will unfold no matter what we do. And we'll have to do our best to adapt to them. And some impacts will continue to occur for a long time into the future. However, the truly catastrophic impacts can still be avoided in the view of most scientists. There are a few who have a darker view, but the ones I believe are worthy of the most attention and respect almost all say, "Yes, we still have time to avoid the catastrophic consequences."

Now, that invites a definition of catastrophic. What's already been happening? Super Typhoon Haiyan, when it came across the Pacific headed to the Philippines, it was more than 3 degrees Celsius warmer than normal in the Pacific. When Sandy came across the areas of the Atlantic just windward from Manhattan and New Jersey, it was 9 degrees Fahrenheit warmer than normal.

So those are catastrophic impacts, but we're talking about a different scale of impacts here. Crop failures in many of the most important growing regions. Hundreds of millions of climate refugees.

Most of those impacts can still be avoided. But we need to move quickly, because as you know we're still putting 90 million tons a day into the atmosphere as if it's an open sewer. Some of that will stay there for 10,000 years. ... So the sooner we get started the better. And yes, once we reach the political tipping point and there's a shared resolve to do something about it, and we will reach it, then yes we can make an enormous difference and we can start the recovery.

PM: Define the political tipping point. Is that a moment in American politics?

AG: Every issue is paralyzed now because our democracy has been hacked and we're suffering from what some have called demosclerosis. Big money is now at toxic levels. I don't have to tell somebody from POLITICO that. And that's too bad, but even in the U.S. it will come. There are encouraging signs that China is turning the corner now. All over the world there's a growing chorus of people demanding action.

There are really two game changers that people have been underestimating for the last couple of years. And each of these game changers addresses respectively one of the two big questions that have to be answered. When you look at the climate crisis and the response of human civilization to it, there are really two questions. One is: "Do we have to make this change? We get 85 percent of

our energy from carbon fuels. It's been a long good run. Do we really have to do this?" And the second question is: "Can we do it?"

The game changer for the first question is the extreme weather events related to climate that are now 100 times more common than they were just 30 years ago. This is having a huge impact. And they're getting more frequent. More common. Bigger. More destructive. And people are looking at their hole cards. And they're saying...

PM: But the public is confused too. Snowstorms come and your face gets splashed across the screen. Bill O'Reilly is interviewing people in Central Park asking, "Why is Al Gore so wrong?"

AG: The extreme weather events and the knock-on effects with the stronger ocean-based storms, the bigger downpours, more floods, mudslides, the saturation of that hillside in Snohomish County, for example – these things are way more common now, because the extremes are more extreme and they are more frequent.

This is all over the world. In the Philippines, there were four million homeless refugees and still are. That's twice as many as the Indian Ocean tsunami. The Philippines has always been hit hard by typhoons, but this is something different and the warmer ocean is connected to it. And all over the world, people are saying, "Whoa, this is getting pretty crazy."

So the first question increasingly is being answered, "Yes, we do have to solve this."

Now here's the second game changer: Can we do it? The cost-down curve for photovoltaic electricity, and to a lesser extent wind electricity, even to a greater extent efficiency technologies and adaptations, is pushing alternative sources of energy below the grid-average price in country after country. There are now, as of [the first quarter of 2014], 79 countries where the price of photovoltaic electricity is equal to or less than the grid average price. Now I don't care what the carbon polluter lobby says or does, or what the anti-statist right-wing ideological groups do or say; there's just a very big difference between cheaper than and more expensive than. This is coming on so strongly. ... We're seeing a quiet largely invisible but unstoppable revolution in the shift toward renewable energy.

So these two things together bring me back to your original question about the political tipping point. When enough people agree, "Yeah, we've got to have action, and our elected officials have

to act” and have the conviction that it’s not hopeless – yes we can do this, let’s get busy and do it. That’s when it’s going to happen. It is already. The tipping point has already been reached in a lot of places.

PM: During the “[24-hour project](#)” [a Gore-led October 2013 effort to raise awareness about climate change], there were a lot of critics who said it didn’t get the right message out, that you weren’t the best messenger, either. There was one [response](#) in particular that summed it up that came from Mike Shanahan, from the International Institute for Environment and Development: “Climate change needs a Gandhi or a Martin Luther King or a Mandela and Al Gore is none of those.” What do you say when critics note that Al Gore as a person polarizes half the country; you need someone different to lead the cause?

AG: It’s not about me. And I’ve never tried to make it about me. And far be it from me to disagree with someone who says I’m not Gandhi or Martin Luther King Jr. or Nelson Mandela. I have to plead guilty to that charge. I wish that I had the greatness of those three men.

But I’m enough of a student of history to know that Martin Luther King Jr., to pick one example, was considered extremely polarizing and was by many hated and despised. And in the South it was not uncommon to hear people trying to appear reasonable on civil rights but nevertheless digging their heels in, who’d say, “Well, if King would just get out of the way this would just happen.” I think that whoever puts his head up above the trenches and says, “We’ve got to do this” is going to attract the ire of people who don’t want to do it. And there are plenty of them.

The partisanship that characterizes opinion polls on climate in the U.S. now is relatively new, and it has been intentionally created. You know, after I left the White House and started my NGO, I had an equal number of Republicans and Democrats on the board. I ran advertisements with Newt Gingrich and Pat Robertson and other Republicans. Even now, I have Republicans that I have featured in the latest version of the slide show I give.

PM: Sen. John McCain supported cap and trade but backed away from it when President Obama was elected. He had his primary that he was thinking about in 2010.

AG: *Hello!* The Koch brothers and the others who operate the way they do have worked overtime to put fear in the hearts of Republicans that if they as much as breathe a favorable breath about solving the climate crisis they’re going to get a well-financed primary opponent. And so they’re all

running scared. And this is part of the hacking of American democracy. Money. Big money has paralyzed American democracy to a shocking extent. Now it can change. And it will change.

PM: Will it take a Republican in the White House – a Jeb Bush or Chris Christie – to make it easier for the party to work on climate change?

AG: I don't know that any Republican who is in favor of solving the climate crisis can get the nomination.

PM: McCain was at his most vocal when Bush wasn't.

AG: If you go back to the 2000 campaign, which I don't want to do, if you look at the positions that then-Governor Bush took, he was in favor of limiting CO2 emissions. And then that changed quickly.

PM: Do you regret not swinging on climate during the debates against Bush in 2000?

AG: Well, I did make quite a few speeches and try to make that issue. But the coverage of that issue has also been a problem, for reasons that are not entirely disconnected.

Here's an analogy. You think of a family of an alcoholic father who flies into a rage every time the word alcohol is mentioned. Well, the rest of the family sometimes learns to never mention the gorilla in the middle of the room in order to avoid the rage. Well, that is what happens to some in the news media. ... they get told by the conglomerate owners and managers hitting the bottom line: Our ratings go down if you make this percentage of people so angry that they switch the channel.

I don't pretend to understand all of it, but I know that virtually every news and political talk show on television across the dial, one of the three largest advertisers is the American Petroleum Institute, the coal industry, the oil industry, the oil companies, the gas companies. It's not uncommon to say, "Look I don't want my ad to be adjacent to a story about the following list of issues." In any case, there's been an issue of coverage. I think that's changing now a little bit, thankfully.

But anyway, the point I was trying to make is, I didn't polarize it. When I started my efforts after the White House, I had Republicans joining with me to do it, and then there was a new orthodoxy

enforced in the Republican Party. A law was laid down: You cannot admit that there is such a thing as man-made global warming and expect to survive in the Republican Party.

II. On his relationship with President Obama:

During the 2008 presidential campaign, Obama sounded out the former vice president on joining his team. The discussions never went anywhere, and Gore's role instead has been part cheerleader, part attack dog and part private consigliere: sounding the public alarm on climate, advising the administration on how to spend \$80 billion in clean energy funding and urging Congress to pass a cap-and-trade bill to limit greenhouse gas emissions. None of it to much avail.

Gore sympathized with the president's political constraints, but by the summer of 2011, his frustration with the White House's cautious approach had grown such that he dedicated a couple of lines in a 7,000-word *Rolling Stone* [essay](#) to criticizing Obama for failing "to use the bully pulpit to make the case for bold action on climate change." The article turned heads in the White House. "It was definitely an 'Oh, shit'" moment, a former senior Obama staffer says. "Not only because it's an issue the president really cares about, but also you never want to be the guy who in those stark terms lets down a large segment of the progressive community."

But Gore kept his lines open to the West Wing. In January, during the president's visit to a Nashville high school, the two men powwowed on global warming in the windowless office of the women's basketball coach, surrounded by team awards and a shelf of red, white and royal blue uniforms. "I have no complaints about any lack of access," Gore now says, though he declined to share any details of his conversations with the president.

PM: What was your chat like with Obama in Nashville?

AG: It was great. It was great. We had a long one-on-one. Much longer than I expected it to be, because he was running late. But you know that routine. The crowd. The excitement builds. So they don't really care that much. But no, I had a real good talk with him. I never yield up specifics of a conversation with a president. But it was an excellent talk and it was completely about climate.

PM: Was it spontaneous?

AG: He reached out and asked for it.

PM: Do you have the bat-phone number [for Obama at the White House]? Can you call him at any point in time?

AG: Yeah.

PM: Do you use it frequently?

AG: Not frequently, no. But I've had a number of conversations with him since he's been president, obviously, and more conversations with his staff. I have no complaints about any lack of access.

PM: When your 2011 *Rolling Stone* [article](#) appeared, you had a couple of sentences on Obama.

AG: I knew that some people would pick that out.

PM: Did you call the White House to give them a heads up?

AG: I believe at that point Bill Daley was his chief of staff. I called Bill and gave him a heads up.

PM: Was Daley upset?

AG: He didn't tell me that. But I wouldn't be surprised. At that point in time, the whole piece was about the weird way that the news media was not covering the issue. You may remember the artwork that accompanied the piece. Jann Wenner [the publisher of *Rolling Stone*] had commissioned a painting that had floods and fires and then a TV screen being held up out of the flood – nice peaceful scene, everything's fine, nothing to see here, move right along. That's what the piece was about. But I didn't feel that I could write that piece at that moment in time without including a brief snapshot. I didn't want to put all the blame on the news media. It doesn't deserve all the blame. But look, I'm very sympathetic with anybody in the White House who wants to do something about this and faces the situation that they face in the Congress now. It's tough.

PM: Obama gave a speech last summer on climate that put this front and center.

AG: Terrific speech. Terrific speech.

PM: Is he doing everything he can now?

AG: I have a huge amount of respect for President Obama. I also have a pretty good understanding of the obstacles that he faces. I'd say that his election night speech in November of 2012, and his inaugural address and his State of the Union address that year and his speech last June, you take those four together that's a very, those were very powerful statements. The addition of John Podesta to the West Wing staff has made a difference. The priority being placed by Secretary Kerry on climate is quite impressive. The activities of the EPA head Gina McCarthy are very impressive. None of this would be happening without a continuing focus by President Obama on this issue.

Would I like to see more? Of course I would like to see more. Of course. But I have noticed a significant difference in the first year of his second term. A significant difference. Not all of it is headline material, highly visible. But at all levels I see a significant difference. I think he's really trying hard.

PM: Hillary Clinton recently spoke about climate change in Arizona at her husband's conference. She called it an important issue that she'd like to see a major mass movement emerge on. If she runs for president, is she strong enough in your eyes on this issue?

AG: Well, I think it's premature. I don't know what her decision will be. Nobody does. Maybe she doesn't even know. I have no idea. I'm of course fully aware of the general expectation that she will run and that she'll get the nomination. And if that happens, I certainly hope that she wins and I certainly hope that if she wins she'll be an effective advocate on climate. I will say that during the 2008 campaign she called and spent a lot of time asking me about the issue. Asking for advice on what the most forward leaning positions she could take would be. And I really appreciated that. I didn't endorse in the '08 contest for the nomination. I had great respect for both of them. In any case I really appreciated that. And I think the speech she made after that conversation was really an outstanding speech. I don't have any doubt that her heart is in the right place on the issue and that she would like to be an agent for positive change on the issue. Now I'm not much of a political pundit so I'll not engage in speculation on politics.

PM: There's a million different ways to ask you the 2016 question. If Hillary [Clinton] doesn't run, would you even consider it at that point in time?

AG: You say you can ask the question a million ways. I'm going to only answer it one way. With apologies, I'm sure you've heard this answer before. I am a recovering politician. And the longer I avoid a relapse the more confidence that I will not succumb to the temptation to run yet again. But I'm a recovering politician. I'll just leave it at that.

III. On being Al Gore:

The former veep still keeps a punishing work schedule ("10 days a week," his spokeswoman Betsy McManus says). He lives in Nashville, where he bases his operations from a green-certified office building overlooking a parking lot and a Dillard's department store, and San Francisco, but shuttles around the world more than half the year for various events and meetings for his investment firm, Generation Investment Management. Friends and associates say they've never seen him happier or more energized, and he certainly looks trimmer than in his post-2000 mourning period, when his weight ballooned and he grew a beard. Friends say he's lost north of 50 pounds, a figure he politely declines to confirm. It's been nearly four years since his separation from Tipper (they have not officially gotten a divorce), and he is in a long-term relationship with Elizabeth Keadle, an environmental philanthropist from southern California. "I don't want to get into my personal life, but we're a couple," Gore says.

PM: So you've gone vegan?

AG: I decided a year ago January 1 to try that out just to see what it was like. And I was pleasantly surprised. I felt better. I felt healthier. And decided to stay with it. It's not more complicated than that.

PM: What kind of car do you drive these days?

AG: I own a Prius. I own a Lexus hybrid. And I want one of those Teslas. But I don't have room in my garage for it. I think that's a very cool car.

PM: What do you do for fun?

AG: Hiking. Movies. I have a solar-powered houseboat up on the lake, about 50-60 miles from here on Center Hill Lake. It's a redneck yacht.

PM: I'd heard you are trying to turn your family farm into something of an environmental scientific experiment?

AG: It just feels like the right thing to do. It's my parents' place. I had a little farm across the river and now I've got them both. It's not that big. The whole thing is just 400 acres....So I'm restoring my parents' home and making it green and zero carbon. And putting in a solar orchard, they call it.... I'm putting a small green addition onto it. It's nothing major.

PM: Is there "An Inconvenient Truth" part two documentary in the works?

AG: There have been discussions of it. But those discussions are not at a stage where I can say yes there is one in the works.

PM: You have more to say on climate? Is the public interested in seeing another film?

AG: Let me answer both parts of the question separately. Do I have more to say on climate? Yes, I do. As the evidence not only gets even stronger, but as the picture resolves into a finer-grain image of regional impacts and better understandings of exactly how the water cycle is being disrupted, for example, then yes, I and others have a lot more to say about this.

This is the challenge of our time. We have to solve this. We have to solve it. And we can solve it. And it will be solved. We're going to solve this. The only question is: How long will it take us to get past that political and social tipping point? We're getting there.

Forty-nine years ago ... after the march from Selma to the Pettus Bridge in Montgomery, Martin Luther King Jr. made a famous speech in which he said, "How long? Not long. Because no lie can live forever. How long? Not long. Because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." That's where we are on the climate crisis. How long will it take us to get to the point where we really start solving it? Not long.

PM: So you see climate change reaching a tipping point like civil rights or gay rights?

AG: Absolutely. No question about it. ... [W]hat [all three causes] have in common is that ultimately, when any question is resolved into a choice between what's clearly right and what's clearly wrong, the outcome is foreordained, just because of who we are as human beings. And most of the effort by the climate deniers has been to delay the arrival of that binary choice. To

cloud the issue. To create false doubt. To sow confusion. Just like the tobacco industry did in hopes that they can delay the clarity of the choice. It's clearly wrong to do what we're doing. It's clearly right to change. We will change. It's just a matter of time. And again, how long? Not long.

Correction: An earlier version of this article incorrectly referred to Mike Shanahan's group as the International Institute for the Environment and Energy.

Darren Samuelsohn is a senior policy reporter for POLITICO who has covered climate change for 14 years. The interview has been condensed and edited for clarity.

This story tagged under: