

The White House and the Greenhouse

May 9, 1989



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The world has started to take very seriously the established threat to the life-protecting ozone layer from industrial chemicals. Many countries are now eager for President Bush to take the lead on another threat to the global climate - the feared warming of the earth's atmosphere by pollutant gases like carbon dioxide. But despite Mr. Bush's ringing

campaign pledge to do just that, his Administration flounders in confusion and timidity.

This week, the U.S. is chairman of an international meeting in Geneva to discuss the greenhouse effect. Yet Washington's various bureaucracies have not agreed on a position, and the American delegates will sit on the sidelines.

Leadership on the issue has thus fallen to Europe. Last month Prime Minister Thatcher made her Cabinet sit through a daylong briefing on the greenhouse effect from climatologists. And yesterday the British delegate to the United Nations called for a new international convention to deal with global warming.

Washington's only recent activity on the greenhouse effect seems to have been the Office of Management and Budget's decision to soften public testimony on that subject by a Government scientist. James Hansen, a NASA climatologist, complains that the O.M.B. toned down his conclusions about the severity of global warming before he presented them yesterday to a Senate committee headed by Albert Gore. The O.M.B.'s duty is to coordinate Government policy. But its heavy-handed intervention sends the signal that Washington wants to go slow on addressing the greenhouse problem.

This contrasts strangely with Mr. Bush's campaign oratory last summer. "Those who think we are powerless to do anything about the greenhouse effect forget about the 'White House effect'; as President, I intend to do something about it," he said in Michigan on Aug. 31. Mr. Bush promised to convene an international conference on the environment. "We will talk about global warming," he said, "and we will act."

Mr. Bush has not acted. He hasn't called for an international conference or even arranged a conference of his own policy makers to resolve their differences. Hence he is hearing no clear advice.

The threat is clear enough, even though experts disagree on how immediate it is. Pollutant gases do indeed trap the sun's heat and might seriously warm the earth's climate. It's far too soon to advocate the most direct and drastic remedy, which is to stop burning coal. But it makes eminent sense to buy insurance against global warming with steps that are worth taking in their own right, from raising auto efficiency to protecting tropical forests.

The threat cannot be addressed unless America assumes a major role. Far from leading the charge, the White House hasn't even joined it.