Editorial

The Fight of the Decade

At the inauguration of the United Nations (UN) World Environment Day 2005 Conference in San Francisco on 2 June, California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger did an astonishing thing in his opening speech. Such occasions normally invite specimens of banal hospitality: “We welcome this distinguished gathering of international leaders to our great state…” Well, the Gubernator wasn’t having any of that. Instead, he talked about global warming, laying out a real challenge to climate policy as it is practiced in Washington, DC, today. His talk has set up a heavyweight bout between two powerful Republican leaders over the proper role of science in politics. Best of all, we won’t even have to pay to watch it!

So imagine that it’s Fight Night. Before the action begins in the ring, I’ll set the scene and report some of the background. In the lower right corner is President George Bush, the champion by virtue of his office as leader of the world’s largest economy. He’s wearing the red trunks. In various pre-fight interviews he has said that he thinks the climate may be changing, but his seconds are instructed to talk about “climate variability” and avoid the phrase “climate change” at international meetings. He didn’t want to sign the Kyoto Protocol, which would have set targets for timed reductions in greenhouse gas emissions to below 1990 levels. As a White House official now explains, signing it would have cost jobs and raised energy prices. Bush’s Climate Change Science Program, at first criticized by a National Academies report, now gets better reviews from the Academies. It focuses heavily on long-range research, but it contains no targets for reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, the primary cause of global warming. In a pre-fight meeting with reporters, the champ praised the virtues of fuel cells and the hydrogen economy envisioned in his climate plan, and added that his critics are “disassembling.”

In the upper left corner is the challenger, representing the world’s fifth-largest economy: California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, in the green trunks. Sportswriters who have visited his training camp report that the weight machines sit unused in a corner, and that the governor spends all his time reading journals like Science, Climatic Change, and the Journal of Atmospheric Chemistry. That may be why he selected the UN conference to stake out his pre-fight position, in which he asserted: “We know the science, we see the threat, and we know that the time for action is now.” The plan he announced sets tough targets for reducing California’s emissions of greenhouse gases: to 2000 levels by 2010, to 1990 levels by 2020, and to 80% below 1990 levels by 2050. These will require stringent regulatory measures, building on California’s existing commitments to reduce automobile emissions. But the governor said: “We have no choice but to meet this challenge. We must leave a better world for our children and their children.”

Early pre-fight commentary has produced newsworthy partisans on both sides. Representative John Dingell of Michigan, who represents the “Big Three” automakers in Congress, is said to be forming a Democratic Transportation Caucus to offer its crossover support to the president. The mayors of over 100 U.S. cities, who earlier had declared their own intentions to reduce emissions, voiced their enthusiasm for the challenger’s plan. The mayor of Seattle, a prime mover in that effort, has offered to wager a 40-pound Washington salmon against an equivalent stake put up by a backer of the champ. Famed Bush strategist Karl Rove promptly designated a small striped bass, claiming that it’s worth more than its 8-pound weight because it’s a celebrity fish, having been boated by the president in an event pictured on the front page of the New York Times.

Folks, this promises to be the Fight of the Decade in this division, so keep your dial where it is. The charismatic California challenger has a lively rooting section, including soccer moms and children, some carrying signs saying “Stop Polluting Our Greenhouse.” On the other side, NASCAR dads and numbers of elegantly dressed older gentlemen are voicing enthusiastic support for the president. We asked for quick pre-fight statements from each contestant. The champ said that everything was just fine with the climate. His challenger, in a comment directed at his constituency or perhaps his opponent, merely said, “Hasta la vista, baby.”

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