

## The United States: Power, Responsibility, and Climate Change

With regards to climate change, the question of relative responsibilities is often raised, and with it arises the question of who has a duty to lead mitigation efforts. I believe that we must turn to other fields of leadership around the world in order to draw from the capabilities of different nations. The United States is recognized as a global leader in many aspects of international affairs, but unfortunately, climate action is not one of these fields. Especially for those in unique positions of power, commitments cannot morally be ignored and standards of leadership must be upheld to include the field of climate change mitigation. As the global hegemon, the United States has a responsibility to be a leader in global climate advocacy, specifically incorporating policy endowed from and shaped by Simon Caney's power and responsibility principle.

The current lack of U.S. leadership by the federal government raises questions as to the compatibility of U.S.'s current climate role and a just system of climate action. Given the unprecedented scale of the challenge that climate change poses to not only the United States, but the entire world, turning to principles of justice as well as other fields of policy are valuable frameworks with which to approach the issue. Many different theories and principles of justice have been proposed as the just manner to combat climate change and mitigate the inevitable impacts it will bring. However, I believe the power and responsibility principle, as proposed by Simon Caney, best articulates why the United States has a duty to act and also provides an especially valuable framework around which the country can build its strategy to fulfill these responsibilities as a global climate leader.

In his article "Two Kinds of Climate Justice: Avoiding Harm and Sharing Burdens," Simon Caney first acknowledges the overwhelming scientific consensus that humans are driving climate

change. Caney then moves on to look at what approaches have been utilized in the past to conceptualize climate change. The first approach he describes is Burden Sharing Justice, which focuses “on how the burden of combating the problem should be shared fairly among the duty-bearers” (Caney 125). Within this mindset, three primary principles have been proposed: polluter pays, ability to pay, and beneficiary pays. There is nothing inherently wrong with these principles and undoubtedly, they can produce good discussion and some positive results. However, as Caney argues, these frameworks cannot be the sole manner through which we approach climate change. I agree with this argument as a broader encapsulating principle is necessary especially for determining global leadership. To this point, these three approaches that have been tried have not led to major U.S. involvement in leading efforts to mitigate climate change. Therefore, I believe that the next approach Caney describes is very useful in order to build a case for the United States’ responsibility to be a climate leader and to prompt action.

Caney turns to analyzing climate change from a perspective that he terms Harm Avoidance Justice. This frame of view begins with an understanding that it is “imperative to prevent climate change,” and has a primary focus on “the potential victims—those whose entitlements are threatened—and it ascribes responsibilities to others to uphold these entitlements” (Caney 126). However, as with Burden Sharing Justice, approaches that emphasize harm avoidance can struggle to outline the relative responsibilities of each actor according to their power. Additionally, it is especially difficult to assign leadership to a group or nation that will take on second order responsibilities, which are duties to ensure that all agents involved in a situation comply with their designated responsibilities.

Moving from the conclusion that neither burden sharing, nor harm avoidance alone is sufficient, Caney proposes a distinct principal, the power and responsibility principle. He says

this principle will importantly account for second order responsibilities. I believe that another way to put this argument is that the power and responsibility principle guides climate leadership to be allocated to those with the unique capacity, and therefore the duty, to act. Understanding these second order responsibilities as a duty to take a central leadership position is key to understanding the responsibility of the U.S. to lead climate change efforts due to its unique role as the hegemonic power.

The U.S. has been described in different contexts as the world's policeman due to being the sole hegemonic power left in the world after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. While this does not necessarily mean that any hegemonic power automatically is the world's policeman, actions by the United States since the second World War have solidified its place in this role. Although China can rival the U.S. in many areas, global policing (such as intervention in local conflicts and especially maintaining control of the world's oceans) still remains largely the purview of the U.S. Whether this is just or right for the U.S. to exercise this power is understandably questionable, especially in situations where the U.S. intervenes without sufficient regard for the other country or region. However, for the purposes of this essay, I am not going to look at whether this is the right thing to do. Rather, I am going to take the role of the global policeman as U.S. foreign policy to argue that, due to this outward stance, coupled with Caney's principle of justice, the U.S. is endowed with a responsibility to take a larger role as a leader combating climate change.

When our guest speaker, Retired Rear Admiral Jon White, came to class and talked about what just decisions mean to him in the context of climate change and the U.S. government, I was struck by a remark he made towards the end of his presentation. While the U.S., for all its global leadership, has a National Security Strategy, there is a notable absence of a National Climate or

Atmospheric Strategy. I found this point very intriguing since for a just system to address climate change, hypocrisies such as this cannot exist within the leadership frameworks of countries.

Given that the U.S. does not have a National Climate Strategy, looking at the most recent National Strategy Report (2017) is important to see if climate issues are incorporated into the national strategy that is being produced. However, the phrase “climate change” is not written a single time in the 55-page report (The White House). This is not necessarily surprising given the environmental record of the current administration. Interestingly, even given the focus of the report on discussing how the administration is prioritizing the domestic affairs, there is still significant language regarding increasing American interests abroad (specifically with the maintenance of a global military presence) as well as broader statements expressing the importance of “advancing American influence in the world” (The White House 29, II).

Looking at the world today, the U.S. military is spread across the entire world and truly does fulfill the role of a global policeman and hegemonic power. Even just looking at the overseas deployment of forces, the U.S. military has over 200,000 active duty personnel deployed to at least 170 countries across the world (McCarthy). Many of these troops are stationed in allied nations such as Japan and Germany; however, others are in live combat zones. Additionally, and more closely related to the global policeman role, the U.S. has been involved in the destabilized regions of Iraq, Libya, and Syria, as well as anti-piracy efforts via the United Nations Security Council in the waters off Somalia. This is a unique role in the world and it emphasizes the U.S. perspective of itself as the global leader to maintain stability and security.

While many today question the specific reasoning of and paths to climate action, I believe Caney’s argument can provide both a justification and framework for successful action. Having looked at the current lack of a climate strategy, the U.S.’s role as the global policeman,

and Simon Caney's frameworks of analyzing climate change, I now will explain how these factors contribute to the first part of Caney's principle — the aspect of power. As one of the most developed and wealthiest countries the world has ever seen, the U.S. does hold the capacity to take sweeping actions. As Caney puts it, they have "considerable leverage" (Caney 143). In the context of climate mitigation efforts, this leverage is not only having influence within a country, but the ability to lead by example and shape the actions of the rest of the world, such as with innovative measures to reduce carbon emissions.

Like many similar capacity principles, Caney's argument is based on the idea that those with a "crucial and privileged causal role" must take the lead in terms of climate action (Caney 143). To break down this statement, action by those with power (those in privileged roles) is crucial since without action by international giants such as the U.S., the climate crisis cannot be sufficiently addressed. This is due to the fact that the climate is a collective space, and therefore climate challenges are collective problems. The actions of one can and do hurt communities unconnected from the source of emissions or pollution. Additionally, Caney mentions the "causal role" which raises matters of the responsibility of the polluters to address problems they created. Caney does not go in depth with regards to this aspect; however, the historical or causal responsibility is compounded by their ability to act. In terms of a "privileged" role, not only does the U.S. have the capacity to act, but this is a "capacity that many others lack" (Caney 143). Due to strong economic, political, and strategic positions, the U.S.'s actions can be very influential domestically and internationally. It is also important to acknowledge that these actions, for good and bad, are high profile on the global stage. Due to these factors, as well as its overall position as the global hegemonic power, the U.S. has the power to enact climate action.

Now with the first part of the principle fulfilled, I want to move on to how this power translates into a responsibility to lead climate action. This includes the concept of taking on second order responsibilities. Unfortunately, the situation currently exists such that the U.S. only leads where it wants to, with climate not being one of these areas. If it is to continue being a leader in other global spheres, the U.S. has the responsibility to take climate action now. Caney's principle operates off of the basic idea that "with power comes responsibility" (Caney 141). Due to its power as the global hegemon, the country has a responsibility to take action. Not only does the U.S. have a responsibility to take action, but it also has a duty to be a leader in terms of accepting second order responsibilities to ensure actions are taken collectively on this global issue. Using the power responsibility principle as a framework for increasing climate change mitigation leadership, the country has a responsibility to take action in large part because of its unique position to help create and lead positive changes.

However, some may argue that the U.S. does not have a duty to lead climate action efforts. A counter to the argument that I have posed is the burden sharing oriented approach of grandfathering. Grandfathering relies on the idea that "to those who have more, more shall be given" (Roser and Seidel 109). This principle would argue that rather than basing our future climate actions on principles saying how to build a more just future, we should turn to the current emissions situation as a foundation. Rather than the U.S. taking a lead internationally to reduce carbon emissions and mitigate climate change, the U.S. should participate in a system based on the idea that "eliminating climate change is a joint task, which must therefore be shouldered equally by all" (Roser and Seidel 111). This alternative proposal is based on the idea that it allows those in western nations such as the U.S. to continue their lives without cuts that are too demanding and would frustrate the legitimate expectations of people in industrialized nations.

Clearly, similarities exist in the idea that climate change is a shared issue and needs a collaborative response. However, the interpretation of what this joint task is and how to move forward with concrete actions is very different between the two theories.

The normative claims made by the grandfathering principle are not acceptable for a just solution to sufficiently address climate change. While it still attempts to combat the current lack of climate action, grandfathering is not a just proposal as it completely ignores the different capacities of each country. While it is primarily based in the line of argument that past use gives future entitlements of use, I believe that a more just approach that also aligns with the severity of the situation is the idea that past use gives current capabilities and a duty to future action. If the idea is to generate change and move forward, maintaining the limited climate action status quo is not the solution. Grandfathering acknowledges that addressing climate change is a joint task. However, it uses this to justify limited action by global giants such as the U.S. Instead of recognizing that this joint task requires leadership, it spreads out responsibilities, making accountability and second order responsibility more challenging.

When the U.S. does not take this leadership, it is hypocritical to its otherwise clear global leadership role, such as that of being the world's policeman. If the country has a duty to protect not only its own citizens but also those across the world, we must consider the contribution we have made to the problem and the country's unique position to lead decisive action. Specifically, this leadership means that, as a joint task, someone has to pick up the second order responsibility to ensure progress is achieved and goals are met from all parties involved. With its global reach, the U.S. has a unique capacity or power to act, and therefore the country has a responsibility to take on this global challenge.

2340 words.

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