



# Environmental and Political Activism in Africa

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*Changemakers are people who can see the patterns around them, identify the problems in any situation, figure out ways to solve the problem, organize fluid teams, lead collective action and then continually adapt as situations change...*

*Today, schools have to develop the curriculums and assessments to make the changemaking mentality universal.<sup>1</sup>*

November 10, 1995 was a chilly Wisconsin day I will never forget. I was sitting in the rear seat of a taxi taking me from the airport to the university campus in Madison. The taxi driver asked the reason for my visit. I told him it was to attend a conference on Nigeria. He replied that he had just heard Nigeria mentioned on the radio. I asked him what it was about. He said someone had been hanged by the government. I felt more

chilled than from the outside air. “No”, I said to myself, “they didn’t do it”. “They didn’t hang Ken Saro Wiwa?”



*Ken Saro Wiwa*

My fears were immediately confirmed when I reached the venue. Ken Saro Wiwa - writer, poet, and political activist - had been hanged by the government of military dictator Sani Abacha. Abacha had seized power exactly two years earlier after the junta of which he was a member had blocked the installation of Moshood Abiola as the country’s elected president in mid-1993. Ken Sawo Wiwa had vigorously challenged this northern-dominated government on behalf of the Ogoni people of the Nigerian Delta.

For decades, Nigeria’s petroleum wealth had flowed from the lands and fishing creeks of the Ogoni and other ethnic groups as well as from offshore drilling sites. Oil spills from the extraction and export of black gold had despoiled the land and waterways. The

24-hour flaring of natural gas, which the country was ill-equipped to capture for domestic use and export in liquefied form, had polluted the air and destroyed vegetation and crops.



*Wangari Maathai*

Another environmental activist, Wangari Maathai, founder of Kenya's Green Belt Movement in 1977, fought the government and private developers over unregulated construction that swallowed up green spaces in Nairobi and other cities. She was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004 for her bravery and tenacity. Like Saro Wiwa, Dr. Maathai was an environmental and political activist. Her movement was credited with planting thousands of seedlings to counter the deforestation that has blighted so much of the continent and the world. Like Saro Wiwa, her main adversary was the government.

The struggle for social justice today must include determined and courageous efforts to protect Earth itself. An op-ed by Drew Dellinger in the *New York Times* on December 22, 2017 reminded me of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr's Christmas Eve sermon five decades earlier in Ebenezer Baptist Church. He was assassinated less than four months later. Sounding more like a Buddhist teacher, Dr. King advocated a perspective that embraced the entire planet. "All life", he said, "is interrelated". Not only are all social struggles connected, the "interrelated structure of reality" made them, in a sense, one struggle with different manifestations. Ultra-materialism was as much a force to be resisted as overt political oppression. In this regard, as in others, Dr. King was ahead of his time. We have not caught up with his vision as concerns race, peace, and Earth itself.



*Dr. King at Ebenezer Baptist Church*

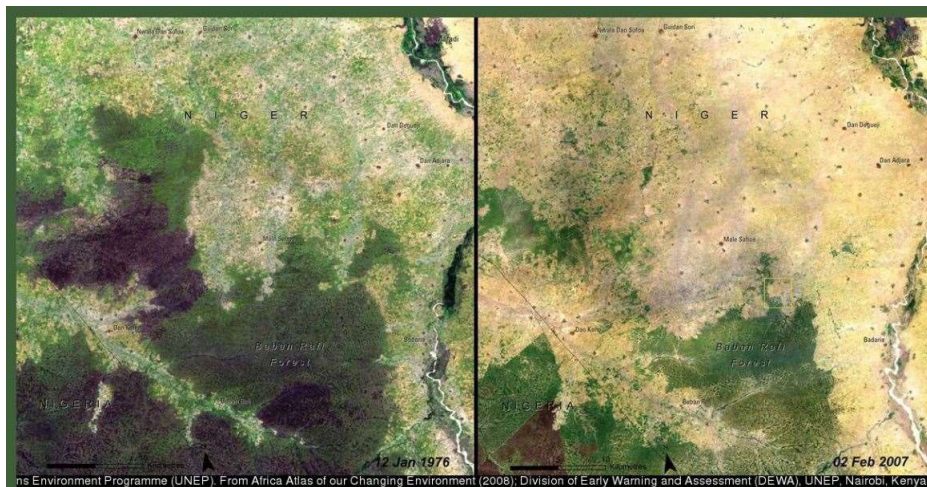
It does not benefit us to drink milk at an “unsegregated lunch counter”, Dr. King stated, if there is “strontium 90” (produced from nuclear tests) in it. The contemporary generation of American college students can replicate the achievements of my generation in the early 1960s as changemakers. They can perceive patterns, organize flexible problem-solving groups, and engineer collective action. The instruments available to them, in view of communication technologies, exceed dramatically what was available to us. What we accomplished, therefore, can be multiplied many times over.

What Dr. King understood implicitly, we now know explicitly - leaving aside, of course, the science deniers. We recognize that we are living in the Anthropocene era and that Earth and the biosphere are shaped and misshaped by human actions. We are producers, and thus owners, of islands of trash floating in the oceans, the acceleration of global warming, the extinction of species, and the changes altering the chemical composition of the seas and degrading coral reefs.



*A Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) ranger stacks elephant tusks, part of an estimated 105 tons of confiscated ivory to be set ablaze. November 2016. Photo: Reuters.*

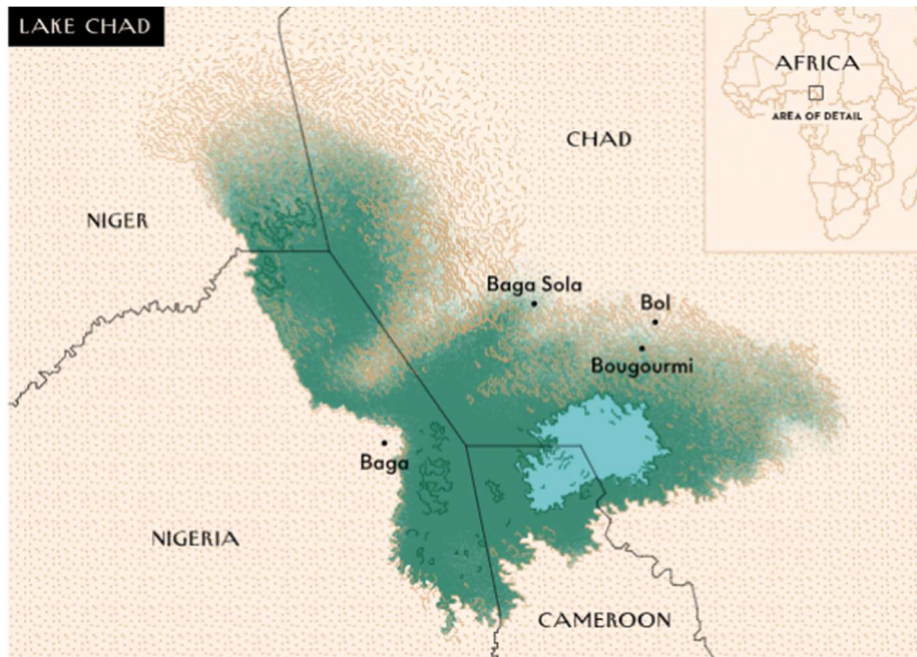
The slaying of elephants and rhinos for their tusks and horns, the illegal capture of pangolins in West Africa to strip off and export their scales...eco-carnage is unabating. Humankind is ravaging this planetary speck and the habitats of many of its creatures. As a longtime student of Africa, I have seen this erosion, and its social consequences, up close. But that did not prepare me for the awesome aerial photographs taken by Edward Burtynsky of the Nigerian Delta.<sup>2</sup> Beyond the destruction caused by oil spills - sometimes involuntary but increasingly voluntary when pipelines are broken to steal crude oil - is the artisanal refining of petroleum by thousands of local residents. These illicit activities have polluted the landscape with acres of toxic waste. A clean-up would require many billions of dollars.



*Deforestation in Baban Rafi Forest, Niger; 1976 (left), 2007 (right). Photos from NASA.*

The best place to see what is happening on the ground in Africa, paradoxically, is from outer space.<sup>3</sup> A few years ago, I was invited to take part in an online discussion of Nigeria that involved research entities funded by the U.S. government. One of these had put together satellite mapping of Nigeria and neighboring countries based on decades of aerial photographs. Desertification was staggering when viewed in these

longitudinal maps. What was particularly shocking was the shrinkage of Lake Chad. The maps conveyed the likely destruction of livelihoods as a consequence of the shrinkage of ground cover and large bodies of water. Farmers, herders, fisher-men and -women would be ineluctably brought to the brink of existence by the erosion of their environments.<sup>4</sup>



*Lake Chad, which was once as large as New Jersey, has shrunk by 95 per cent.*

Map by La Tigre, appeared in *The New Yorker*, December 4, 2017. *Lake Chad: The World's Most Complex Humanitarian Disaster* by Ben Taub.

Today, in the zone shown in the time-photo sequences, tens of thousands of persons climb aboard lorries every week to embark on perilous journeys to the northern coasts of the continent.<sup>5</sup> They may head to the borders of the Spanish possessions with Morocco (Ceuta and Melilla) or those of Libya (or what used to be the state of Libya) to try and get on board rickety boats to Italy or another European country. Years ago, “Barcelona ou la mort” was the rallying cry of “futureless youths” in Senegal and neighboring countries. The unfortunate consequences of this grueling migration are well known: robberies, rapes, and even enslavement along the way, plus boat crossings that often result in mass drownings.

This zone has also become the spawning ground of jihadist movements. Vast areas now constitute a war zone with American special forces fighting alongside local militaries while drone aircraft patrol above. Nascent state structures have been eroded by corrupt governments, startlingly so in the case of Mali. The choices facing young people are dire; the appeal of millenarian movements is obvious. It is not surprising that Boko Haram has emerged, and endured, in Nigeria's poorest region. Borno state environs have high fertility rates, low education standards, and experienced environmental decay. Almost a decade of warfare has decimated agricultural and other productivity. Tens of thousands of residents are now housed and fed in refugee camps.



In Nigeria and Kenya, two at-risk democracies, perennial conflicts between herders and farmers commingle with ethnic and religious identities to form a combustible compound. Factor in automatic weaponry and acts of group slaughter periodically occur in the fault



line between the northern region and Nigeria's Middle Belt states. Similar tragedies are endemic in northern Kenya.

### *Changemakers in a World-at-Risk*

Where do today's students come in amid these trends? How can they be changemakers? First, of course, are the serious problems posed to the globe by the current American government. In the past year, there have been significant reversals on environmental custodianship. The United States has withdrawn from the Paris Climate Change Agreement. Legislation and executive orders intended to advance cleaner water and air, and create more nature preserves and limit Arctic and off-shore drilling for oil, have been nullified. The Earth is no longer to be nurtured but ravaged for short-term profits. Many efforts by private, state and other local entities will be needed to counter the rollback of environmental gains. Judicial and legislative interposition, where possible, is essential. Someday, hopefully in the not-too-distant future, there will again be a government in Washington that is pro-science, pro-Earth, and pro-Eumanity, that is, committed to safeguarding the creatures, animal and plant, with whom we share this planet.

Second, we must act skillfully to actualize Dr. King's vision of the interconnectedness of all creation. Let me give a trigger warning for what I'm about to say. To the question, "Why do we bother about these shithole countries?", after recoiling, we can excise the expletive and respond: "Why indeed should we bother about Haiti and African countries?" There are 54 of the latter and their people amount to over 1 billion members

of humanity. The answers will flow in torrents.<sup>6</sup> Again, we should avoid knee-jerk responses and proceed as changemakers: discern the patterns, analyze the problems, and organize collective responses. Moreover, as David Brooks cautions, we must both practice and facilitate agency, especially among those adversely affected by the patterns.<sup>7</sup>

For the word “shit”, substitute “excrement”. The processes of life generate waste materials that must be disposed of, preferably in ways not hazardous to life itself. What happens in Africa? What happens in many fast-growing cities worldwide? This is a problem most of us do not have to think about. Count the population of any city and you can work out an approximate number of daily excretory needs - just as can be done regarding the millions of gallons of potable water to be consumed. The pollution of water, air, and land is outstripping the efforts of governmental and other agencies. Without adequate sanitation, humans naturally pollute the land and waterways. Since I have visited several African countries periodically over four or five decades, I have a personal awareness of environmental decay, an ‘in-built monitor’ so to speak.<sup>8</sup>

Rwanda, to its credit, has banned the use of plastic bags, one of the most noxious pollutants in Africa, indeed the world.<sup>9</sup> But, staying with the question: What is being done to ensure the dignified disposal of human urine and feces, especially given explosive urbanization? In slum dwellings in Nairobi, Kenya, in Maputo, Angola, and elsewhere, plastic bags are often turned into disposal units - convenient for dog walkers in America but lethal when slung from windows in slums or “informal settlements”.



*Maroko Floating Houses*

Let me share with you two experiences from Nigeria that show how energy, water, and human waste connect to fundamental issues of governance. When you travel across the extended bridges that connect the mainland in Lagos, Nigeria, with islands sporting elegant homes, business enterprises, and entertainment venues, you will observe communities of floating houses. On a recent visit, I crossed one of those bridges several times to and from my hotel. I also read an investigative report in a local paper on these fascinating settlements.

Well, as you would guess, there is usually no sanitation. When the reporter asked the obvious question, she was shown the holes through which human excrement would be deposited, that is, into the very waters in which canoes crossed regularly. As I retired to the room of my luxurious hotel, I wondered at the funds that would be required to create adequate toilet facilities, not only for the floating houses in Maroko but to serve the

millions of persons who spend most of their working day away from their homes in Greater Lagos. There is a pattern here that anyone can see. Responses at all levels can be organized and collaborative action generated. We are not talking rocket science. Thousands of military troops are taken anywhere at short notice and all their basic needs are met.



*Traffic and vendors in Lagos, Nigeria*

Dr. King spoke in 1967 of the need for a “revolution of values”, of the “inescapable network of mutuality”, and of “a single garment of destiny”. He spoke against the grain and I am doing so today. I conclude these personal narratives with one from a long and dear Nigerian colleague, Professor Biodun Jeyifo. Professor Jeyifo, now at Harvard University, built a home for his retirement in Oke-Bola, Ibadan, where he grew up in

southwestern Nigeria. In a series of newspaper articles, now collected in a book, Jeyifo describes having to buy two generators and an inverter to provide electricity for his home, arranging purchases of water deliveries for his tank, and having his household trash hauled away.<sup>10</sup> Many of his neighbors, lacking his financial resources, often coped without electricity altogether. Nigeria has failed abysmally to increase power from the national grid despite enormous expenditures. Most petroleum products needed for transportation, cooking, and to fuel millions of private generators are imported. Many of Jeyifo's neighbors burn their household trash and dig ever deeper boreholes, thereby lowering the water table. Many of the basic services Jeyifo mentioned were adequately provided in the same town where he grew up. As with the artisanal refining of crude petroleum in the Delta, the struggle to meet basic needs is destroying the very environment for sustainable living. This vicious cycle is also evident in the denuding of forests for firewood in Ethiopia and other countries over decades.



*Professor  
Biodum Jeyifo*

I began writing four decades ago about “Affluence and Underdevelopment”, systemic corruption (or prebendalism), misgovernance and other features of political life in Nigeria when Jeyifo and I were university colleagues.<sup>11</sup> We must, collectively, not only

rise to the dire challenge of the destruction of Earth systems, we sometimes must go *backwards* in many regards. When there's a cliff ahead, progress is not about rushing forward. How many imaginary handbrakes were lifted by viewers of the film "Thelma and Louise" as the car hurdled towards the cliff? We have to reach for our handbrakes as ecological depredation accelerates.

David Brooks refers to "agency moments" when we realize we can, indeed must, find the handbrakes and get a hand on the steering wheel. We can facilitate such "agency moments" in institutions such as New College; in our communities, such as Sarasota; in our states, such as Florida; in our nations, particularly the United States where the helm is now erratically steered, to say the least; and in our global institutions.

I began this talk by commemorating two formidable environmental and political activists. Let me caution that our activism must be skillful but also responsible, despite the intense indignation we may experience. I was present when an act of vigilante environmental activism occurred. The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York had set up a small exhibit of the terra cotta warriors dating from the early 3rd century BCE, in Shaanxi province, China. As I circled the exhibit, hemmed in only by a low-hanging rope, I was startled by a sudden scream. When I turned around, someone had placed air filter masks on a few of the statues and bolted. He was later apprehended. His precarious act was a protest regarding the high level of air pollution in China. This moment of guerrilla activism placed at risk an artifice made of the Earth itself, buried in the Earth, and whose fragments have been painstakingly re-assembled. While I understood his motivation and righteous anger, I believe some of the onlookers

(including myself) would have physically stopped him if we could. The terra cotta, indeed Earth, warriors, belong to all humanity, no different from the Egyptian pyramids and the tombs within them, whatever the nature of the dynasties that created them. Understandably, others will view and assess this incident differently.<sup>12</sup>

Changemaking mentalities can be fostered in our schools, colleges, and universities, but also in faith-based and civic institutions. Environmental activism can also be skillfully and responsibly conducted. There will be individuals who see the need for direct action, and organizations like Greenpeace that practice it. Many of us felt and acted this way during the Civil Rights movement and the Indochina wars. But we are obliged to set moral boundaries and observe limits of efficacy.<sup>13</sup>

I have talked about Africa, but the urgency is seen worldwide. Houston was made vulnerable to flooding by its explosive expansion without regard to drainage and water dispersion; humans and nature are contributing to wildfires and mudslides in California; Cape Town, South Africa, has grown without heeding the potential catastrophe facing its water supplies...You don't have to look far to see the risks, the degradation, and the opportunities for action.

### *Back to the Future*

Simultaneously advancing ecological resilience and social justice requires being Janus-like, looking both forward and backward. In colleges and universities, we have the time and space to recuperate the past and create changemaking collectives of any desired scale and reach. I have had the opportunity to do so several times in my career.

Geoengineering the biosphere is no longer a fantasy. Seeding clouds of aerosols in the atmosphere to reflect sunlight is no longer a fantasy, nor is the steady shift to renewable fuels. Massive reforestation can be a global project, while coal formations can be left undisturbed along with other Earth compounds. Industrial fishing that vacuums fish and other sea creatures thousands of miles away from the home stations of factories-on-the-water can be strictly regulated. This need is particularly urgent off the coasts of Africa where countries lack the means to patrol and control their waters.

What will I do? I was born in the Caribbean, so I have a particular fondness for blue waters, leaping fish, and flying birds. Our Sarasota home is ten minutes from New College, so I share many of the environmental resources of this area. For the last few years, discussions have taken place regarding Civic and Global Engagement centered in New College and other Sarasota institutions. I will recommend to the persons who have enlisted to participate, virtually at present, that we consider Environmental Protection and Social Justice as an initial focus topic. The report of this symposium and the text of this talk can be made available to initiate such reflections.

On December 4, 2017, I delivered the plenary address at the annual African Economic Conference sponsored by the African Development Bank, the UN Economic Commission for Africa, and the United Nations Development Program in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The theme of the conference was “Governance for Structural Transformation in Africa”. In that address, I spoke of the need for a Governance and Development Learning Network that would build on a Governance and Development Study Group and a Freedom Gates Project on peace and democracy, both underway at Northwestern



University. I will also suggest “Environmental Protection and Social Justice” for consideration by this proposed Network.

Developmental Governance in Africa requires going back to go forward. Prof. Biodun Jeyifo recognized that Nigeria’s local governments must recapture the capacities and commitments he knew as a child. Another close Nigerian colleague, Pulitzer-Prize winning journalist Dele Olojede, made a road trip several years ago around the country and reported on the infrastructural and environmental decay he witnessed. There are people still alive who remember when there was a regular train service, now long defunct, in parts of Nigeria. Major roads today are not only clogged with air-polluting diesel-fueled lorries, but hundreds of these behemoths can be seen parked along major arteries creating informal encampments that spawn environmental decay.



*Ampitheater at Ashesi University*

We will not slow, much less reverse, environmental decay unless government and other institutions become optimizers in the production of public goods. There are such optimizers in public and private institutions. My dear friend, Patrick Awuah, the founding president of the private Ashesi University in Ghana, gave family members and me an exciting tour of his permanent campus in 2014. It was thrilling to see how his University had tackled the challenges of water and electricity provision in ways that were cost-effective and environmentally sustainable.

As I look to engage with the New College and Sarasota communities in coming years, I hope to work with you in advancing the global ecology and social justice perspective that Dr. King and many others have articulated. Changemaking has been an essential dimension of my personal and professional life from my undergraduate days at Dartmouth College through my graduate studies at New College, Oxford and beyond. I look forward to sharing the next phase with you.

To conclude: While writing about Iran and the Middle East, Thomas Friedman could very well have been discussing (with adjustments) sub-Saharan Africa:

*“The Iran story is repeating itself across the Middle East - environmental stresses mixing with misgovernance, sparking uprisings. And it is going to get worse...If you want to understand the Middle East today, study Arabic and Farsi, Hebrew and Turkish - but most of all, study environmental science.”<sup>14</sup>*

The shortcomings worldwide in governing institutions provoke awareness of how much local action – whether to strengthen resilience in the face of flooding in Rotterdam, Netherlands or to protect threatened eco-systems in Boulder, Colorado – will drive sustainability.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, communication technologies can create communities of global citizens that transcend barriers of language, ethnicity, faith, and nationhood. We live in challenging times, but they can also be inspiring, especially for our youths.

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<sup>1</sup> “Everyone a Changemaker,” *New York Times*, February 9, 2018. David Brooks, citing the founder of Ashoka and advocate of social entrepreneurialism, Bill Drayton. This talk was delivered on February 10, 2018. Alexander Smith helped produce this revised version and prepared the excellent graphics.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/12/19/edward-burtynskys-epic-landscapes>

<sup>3</sup> Of unique significance in this regard is the work of my former Oxford University classmate, Frank White, author of *The Overview Effect* (1987).

<sup>4</sup> See Thomas Friedman, “Trump, Niger and Connecting the Dots”, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/31/opinion/trump-niger-africa-desertification.html>

<sup>5</sup> I was first made aware of these developments in a conference in Ghana in 2004 funded by UNDP and the local Embassy of the Netherlands. See the resulting edited volume: Takiywaa Manuh, *At Home in the World? International Migration and Development in Contemporary Ghana and West Africa* (2005).

<sup>6</sup> See Nicholas Kristof’s response, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/17/opinion/shithole-countries-africa.html>. Kristof, understandably but implausibly, hops around the continent to identify positive achievements..

<sup>7</sup> In this regard, see Richard Joseph and Alexandra Gillies, eds., *Smart Aid for African Development* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2008).

<sup>8</sup> Some years ago, I was appalled at the poor maintenance of the grounds outside the national museum in Dakar, Senegal. I had a similar reaction in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in December 2017. The immediate surroundings of the national museum were decrepit. Even the toilet facilities were appalling; and this in a city with many new high-rise buildings and luxurious hotels.

<sup>9</sup> See Joseph Curtin, “Let’s Bag Plastic Bags,” *The New York Times*, March 24, 2018.

<sup>10</sup> *Against the Predatory Republic* (Carolina Academic Press, 2016), pp. 90-97.

<sup>11</sup> Many of these writings are being made available in an online volume, *The Nigerian Crucible*, Arch Library, Northwestern University. Already published are the first two sections covering 1977-1997. [https://arch.library.northwestern.edu/collections/rb68xb902?utf8=%E2%9C%93&sort=system\\_create\\_dtsi+asc&per\\_page=20](https://arch.library.northwestern.edu/collections/rb68xb902?utf8=%E2%9C%93&sort=system_create_dtsi+asc&per_page=20)

<sup>12</sup> The enormous enclosure housing the statues in Xi’an, China, is a Unesco World Heritage site. After this talk in Sarasota, a report appeared regarding another incident in which a warrior was vandalized in a Philadelphia museum. An individual snapped and absconded with the thumb of a statue for no plausible reason. See Austin Ramzy, “As Thumb Goes Missing, Sticking Fingers are Suspected,” *The New York Times*, February 20, 2018.

<sup>13</sup> Environmental activism is being adopted in a multiplicity of ways. This is the case regarding the Keystone Pipeline intended to transport crude oil from the Alberta tar sands in Canada to Texas refineries. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/13/magazine/afraid-climate-change-prison-valve-turners-global-warming.html>. Conflicting ethical and security claims are inherent to such endeavors. With regard to cultural artifacts, the International Criminal Court opened an investigation of the destruction by extreme jihadists of culturally-significant religious works and publications in Timbuktu, Mali, as a possible crime against humanity.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/23/opinion/trump-iran-climate-change.html>.

<sup>15</sup> See Daniel P. Aldridge, “The Right Way to Build Resilience to Climate Change,” *Current History*, January 2018.