

From 2001 to 2009, the US sat on its hands while the atmosphere filled with carbon. Much of that carbon came from the US itself, at six billion tons per year up to the 2008 crash. The story of how this came to pass is yet to be fully written. It is, in part, a tale of misguided idealism (in the person of Ralph Nader) and of broken promises (by George Bush).

The Nader part is familiar. If he had won the 2000 election, Al Gore was guaranteed to take action on climate change. It was his signature issue, from the time he sponsored the first congressional hearings on the subject in 1976 through his role in negotiating the Kyoto Protocol. As we all know, Gore lost Florida by only a few hundred votes. Nader racked up 96,000 votes in Florida; the outcome would have flipped if even 1% of them had voted for Gore. Instead, we got Bush, an outcome that those voters found far less to their liking than Gore would have been.

While the impact of Nader on the outcome is still often discussed, Bush's breach of faith seems to have slipped out of most people's memory. In early September of 2000, candidate Bush [pledged](#) to cap U.S. carbon dioxide emissions. After the inauguration, Christine Whitman at EPA and Paul O'Neill at Treasury pushed for action on climate change. But there was an onslaught of pressure from the fossil fuel industry, funneled through Dick Cheney among others. Bush caved within three months in office. His pledge had lasted just long enough to help him get to the White House.

Thus, Bush's lack of principle combined with Nader's excess of idealism to produce an eight-year hiatus in U.S. climate policy. If Nader hadn't blocked Gore's election, or if Bush had stood by his word, the world would be eight years ahead of where we are today in fighting climate change. During those eight lost years, the US emitted about fifty billion tons of carbon, much of which will still be in the atmosphere three centuries from now.