Toxic Nostalgia, From Putin to Trump to the Trucker Convoys

War is reshaping our world. Will we harness that urgency for climate action or succumb to a final, deadly oil and gas boom?

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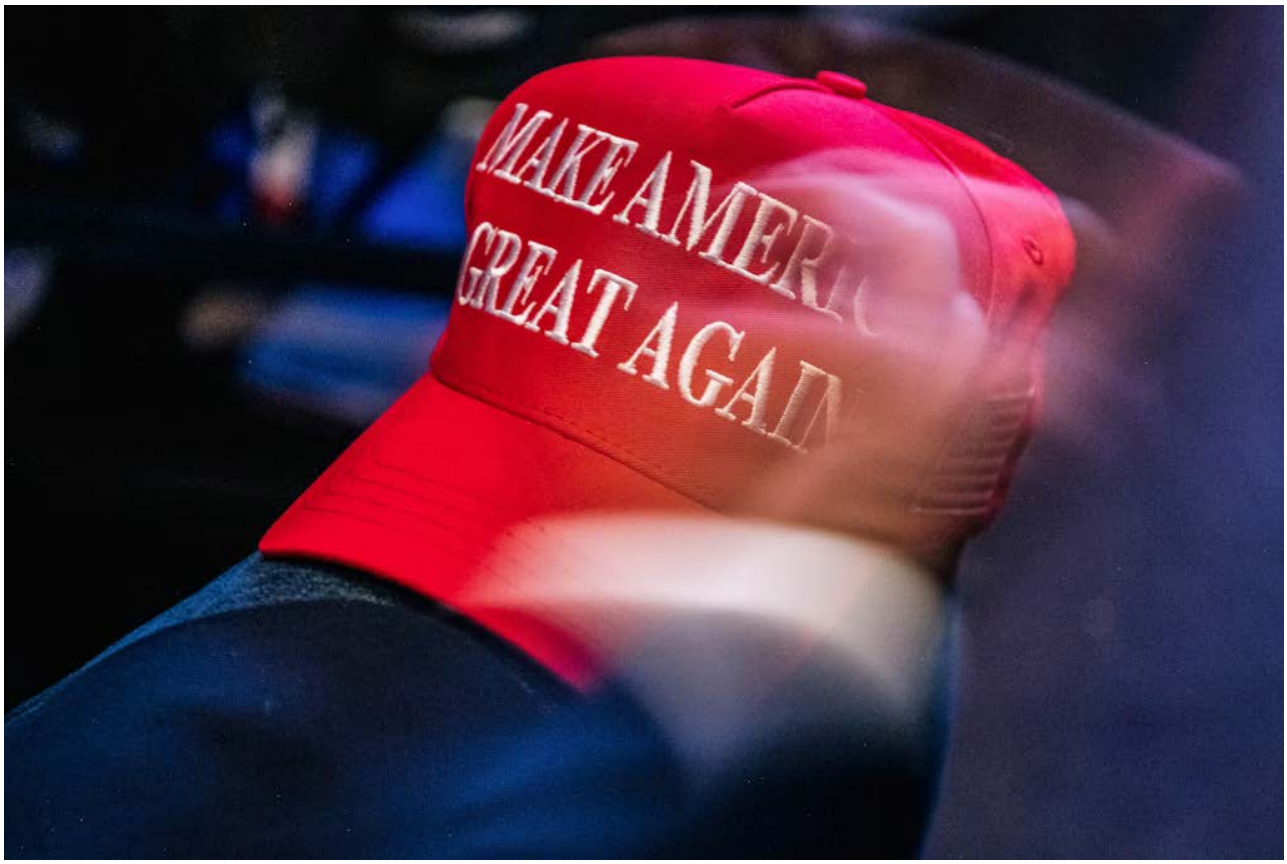


A "Make America Great Again" baseball cap rests on the knee of a person at the "Rally to Protect Our Elections" event in Phoenix, on July 24, 2021. Photo: Brandon Bell/Getty Images

Nostalgia for empire is what seems to drive Vladimir Putin — that and a desire to overcome the shame of punishing economic shock therapy imposed on Russia at the end of the Cold

War. Nostalgia for American "greatness" is part of what drives the movement Donald Trump still leads — that and a desire to overcome the shame of having to face the villainy of white supremacy that shaped the founding of the United States and mutilates it still. Nostalgia is also what animates the Canadian truckers who occupied Ottawa for the better part of a month, wielding their red-and-white flags like a conquering army, evoking a simpler time when their consciences were undisturbed by thoughts of the bodies of Indigenous children, whose remains are still being discovered on the grounds of those genocidal institutions that once dared to call themselves "schools."

This is not the warm and cozy nostalgia of fuzzily remembered childhood pleasures; it's an enraged and annihilating nostalgia that clings to false memories of past glories against all mitigating evidence.

All these nostalgia-based movements and figures share a longing for something else, something which may seem unrelated but is not. A nostalgia for a time when fossil fuels could be extracted from the earth without uneasy thoughts of mass extinction, or children demanding their right to a future, or Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reports, like the one just released yesterday, that reads, in the words of United Nations Secretary General António Guterres, like an "atlas of human suffering and a damning indictment of failed climate leadership." Putin, of course, leads a petrostate, one that has defiantly refused to diversify its economic dependence on oil and gas, despite the devastating effect of the commodity roller coaster on its people and despite the reality of climate change. Trump is obsessed with the easy money that fossil fuels offer and as president made climate denial a signature policy.

The Canadian truckers, for their part, not only chose idling 18-wheelers and smuggled jerry cans as their protest symbols, but the

leadership of the movement is also deeply rooted in the extra-dirty oil of the Alberta tar sands. Before it was the "freedom convoy," many of these same players staged the dress rehearsal known as United We Roll, a 2019 convoy that combined a zealous defense of oil pipelines, opposition to carbon pricing, anti-immigrant xenophobia, and explicit nostalgia for a white, Christian Canada.

Oil is a stand-in for a broader worldview.

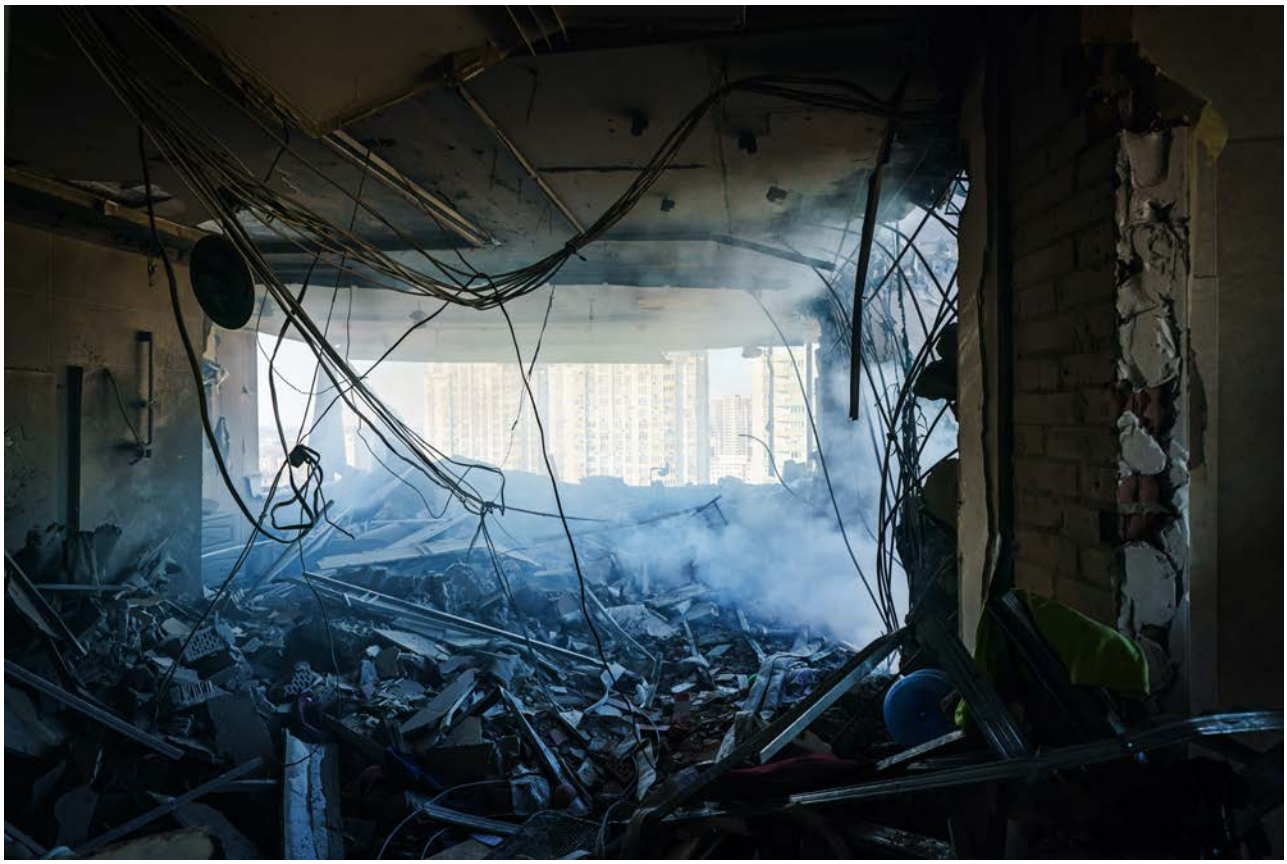
Though petrodollars underwrite these players and forces, it's critical to understand that oil is a stand-in for a broader worldview, a cosmology deeply entwined with Manifest Destiny and the Doctrine of Discovery, which ranked human as well as nonhuman life inside a rigid hierarchy, with white Christian men at the top. Oil, in this context, is the symbol of the extractivist mindset: not only a perceived God-given right to keep extracting fossil fuels, but also the right to keep taking whatever they want, leave poison behind, and never look back.

This is why the fast-moving climate crisis represents not just an economic threat to people invested in the extractive sectors but also a cosmological threat to the people invested in this worldview. Because climate change is the Earth telling us that nothing is free; that the age of (white, male) human "dominion" has ended; that there is no such thing as a one-way relationship comprised only of taking; that all actions have reactions. These centuries of digging and spewing are now unleashing forces that make even the sturdiest structures created by industrial societies — coastal cities, highways, oil rigs — look vulnerable and frail. And within the extractivist mindset, that is impossible to accept.

Given their common cosmologies, it should come as no surprise that Putin, Trump, and the "freedom convoys" are reaching toward one another across disparate geographies and wildly different circumstances. So Trump praises Canada's "peaceful movement of patriotic truckers, workers, and families protesting for their most basic rights and liberties"; Tucker Carlson and Steve Bannon cheer on Putin while the truckers sport their MAGA hats; Randy Hillier, a member of the Ontario Legislature who is one of the convoy's loudest supporters, declares on Twitter that "Far more people have & will die from this shot [the Covid vaccines], than in the Russia/Ukraine war." And how about the Ontario restaurant that last week put on its daily specials board the announcement that Putin "is not occupying Ukraine" but standing up to the Great Reset, the Satanists, and "fighting against the enslavement of humanity."

These alliances seem deeply weird and unlikely at first. But look a little closer, and it's clear that they are bound together by an attitude toward time, one that clings to an idealized version of the past and steadfastly refuses to face difficult truths about the future. They also share a delight in the exercise of raw power: the 18-wheeler vs. the pedestrian, the shouted manufactured reality vs. the cautious scientific report, the nuclear arsenal vs. the machine gun. This is the energy currently surging in many different spheres, starting wars, attacking seats of government, and defiantly destabilizing our planet's life support systems. This is the ethos at the root of so many democratic crises, geopolitical crises, and the climate crisis: a violent clinging to a toxic past and a refusal to face a more entangled and interrelational future, one bounded by the limits of what people and planet can take. It is a pure expression of what the late bell hooks often de-

scribed, with a playful wink, as "imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy" — because sometimes all the big guns are needed to describe our world accurately.



A rocket hits a residential building in Kyiv, Ukraine, on Feb. 26, 2022. Photo: Marcus Yam/Los Angeles Times via Getty Images

The most urgent political task at hand is to put enough pressure on Putin that he sees his criminal invasion of Ukraine as too great a risk to sustain. But that is only the barest of beginnings. "There is a brief and rapidly closing window to secure a liveable future on the planet," said Hans-Otto Portner, co-chair of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change working group that organized the landmark report released this week. If there is a uniting political task of our time, it is to provide a comprehensive response to this conflagration of toxic nostalgia. And within a modern world birthed in genocide and dispossession, that requires laying out a vision for a future where we have

never been before.

The leadership of our various countries, with very few exceptions, are nowhere near meeting this challenge. Putin and Trump are backward-facing, nostalgic figures, and they have plenty of company on the hard right. Jair Bolsonaro was elected by playing on nostalgia for Brazil's era of military rule, and the Philippines, alarmingly, is poised to elect Ferdinand Marcos Jr. as its next president, son of the late dictator who pillaged and terrorized his nation through much of the '70s and '80s. But this is not only a right-wing crisis. Many liberal standard bearers are deeply nostalgic figures too, offering as antidotes to surging fascism nothing but warmed-over neoliberalism, openly aligned with the predatory corporate interests — from Big Pharma to big banks — that have shredded living standards. Joe Biden was elected on the comforting promise of a return to pre-Trump normal, never mind that this was the same soil in which Trumpism grew. Justin Trudeau is the younger version of the same impulse: a shallow, attention-economy echo of his father, the late Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau. In 2015, Trudeau Jr.'s first statement on the world stage was "Canada is back"; Biden's, five years later, was "America is back, ready to lead the world."

We will not defeat the forces of toxic nostalgia with these weak doses

of marginally less toxic nostalgia. It's not enough to be "back"; we are in desperate need of new. The good news is that we know what it looks like to fight the forces enabling imperial aggression, right-wing pseudo-populism, and climate breakdown at the same time. It looks very much like a Green New Deal, a framework to get off fossil fuels by investing in family-supporting unionized jobs doing meaningful work, like building green affordable homes and good schools, starting with the most systematically abandoned and polluted communities first. And that requires moving away from the fantasy of limitless growth and investing in the labor of care and repair.

The Green New Deal — or the Red, Black, and Green New Deal — is our best hope for building a sturdy multiracial working-class coalition, based on finding common ground across divides. It also happens to be the best way to cut off the petrodollars flowing to people like Putin, since green economies that have beat the addiction to endless growth don't need imported oil and gas. And it's also how we cut off the oxygen to the pseudo-populism of Trump/Carlson/Bannon, whose bases are expanding because they are far better at harnessing the rage directed at Davos elites than the Democrats, whose leaders, for the most part, are those elites.

Russia's invasion underlines the urgency of this kind of green transformation, but it also throws up new challenges. Before Russia's tanks started rolling, we were already hearing that the best way to stop Putin's aggression is to ramp up fossil fuel production in North America. Within hours of the invasion, every planet-torching project that the climate justice movement had managed to block over the past decade was being frantically rushed back onto the table by right-wing politicians and industry-friendly pundits: every canceled oil pipeline, every nixed gas export terminal, every protected fracking field, every Arctic drilling dream. Since Putin's war machine is funded

with petrodollars, the solution we are told, is to drill, frack, and ship more of our own.

There is no such thing as a short-term fossil fuel play.

This is all a disaster capitalist charade of the kind of I have written about too many times before. First, China will keep buying Russian oil regardless of what happens in the Marcellus Shale or the Alberta tar sands. Second, the timelines are fantastical. There is no such thing as a short-term fossil fuel play. Every one of the projects being flogged as a solution to dependence on Russian fossil fuels would take years to have an impact and, in order for their sunk costs to make financial sense, the projects would need to stay in operation for decades, in defiance of the increasingly desperate warnings we are receiving from the scientific community.

But of course the push for new fossil projects in North America is not about helping Ukrainians or weakening Putin. The real reason all the old pipe dreams are being dusted off is far more crass: This war has made them vastly more profitable overnight. In the week that Russia invaded Ukraine, the European oil benchmark, Brent crude, reached $105 a barrel, a price not seen since 2014, and it is still hovering above $100 (that's twice what it was at the end of 2020).

Banks and energy companies are desperate to make the most of this price rally, in Texas, Pennsylvania, and Alberta.

As surely as Putin is determined to reshape Eastern Europe's post-Cold War map, this power play by the fossil fuel sector stands to reshape the energy map. The climate justice movement has won some very important battles over the last decade. It has succeeded in ban-

ning fracking in entire countries, states, and provinces; huge pipelines like Keystone XL have been blocked; so have many export terminals and various Arctic drilling forays. Indigenous leadership has played a central role in nearly every fight. And remarkably, as of this week, $40 trillion worth of endowment and pension funds at over 1,500 institutions have committed to some form of fossil fuel divestment, thanks to a decade of dogged divestment organizing.

But here is a secret our movements often keep even from themselves: Since the price of oil plummeted in 2015, we have been fighting an industry with one hand tied behind its back. That's because the cheaper, easier-to-access oil and gas is mostly depleted in North America, so the pitched battles over new projects have primarily been over unconventional, costlier to extract sources: fossil fuels trapped in shale rock, or under the seabed in the deep ocean, or under Arctic ice, or the semi-solid sludge of the Alberta tar sands. Many of these new fossil fuel frontiers only became profitable after the U.S. invaded Iraq in 2003, which sent oil prices soaring. Suddenly, it made economic sense to make those multibillion-dollar investments to extract oil from the deep ocean or to turn Alberta's muddy bitumen into refined oil. The boom years were upon us, with the Financial Times describing the frenzy in tar sands as "north America's biggest resources boom since the Klondike gold rush."

However, when the price of oil collapsed in 2015, industry's determination to keep growing at such a frenetic pace wavered. In some cases, investors weren't sure they would earn their money back, which led some majors to pull back from the Arctic and the tar sands. And with profits and stock prices down, divestment organizers were suddenly able to make the case that fossil fuel stocks weren't just immoral, they were a lousy investment, even on capitalism's own terms.

Well, Putin's actions have untied the hand behind Big Oil's back and

turned it into a fist.

This explains the recent wave of attacks on the climate movement and on the handful of Democratic politicians who have advanced science-based climate action. Rep. Tom Reed, a Republican from New York, claimed last week, "The United States has the energy resources to knock Russia out of the oil and gas market entirely, but we don't use those resources because of President Biden's partisan pandering to the environmental extremists of the Democratic party."

The precise opposite is true. If governments, many of whom ran promising Green New Deal-like policies over the past decade and half, had actually implemented them, Putin would not be able to flout international law and opinion as he has been doing so flagrantly, secure in the belief that he will still have customers for his increasingly profitable hydrocarbons. The underlying crisis we face is not that North American and Western European countries have failed to build out the fossil fuel infrastructure that would allow it to displace Russian oil and gas; it is that all of us — the U.S., Canada, Germany, Japan — are still consuming obscene and untenable amounts of oil and gas, and indeed of energy, period.

We know the way out of this crisis: Ramp up the infrastructure for renewables, power homes with wind and solar, electrify our transportation systems. And because all energy sources carry ecological costs, we must also reduce demand for energy overall, through greater efficiency, more mass transit, and less wasteful overconsumption. The climate justice movement has been saying this for decades now. The problem is not that political elites have spent too much time listening to so-called environmental extremists, it's that they have hardly listened to us at all.

Now we find ourselves at a strange moment, when a great deal feels

up for grabs. BP announced on Sunday that it will sell off its 20 percent stake in Russian oil giant Rosneft, and others are following its lead. That's potentially good news for Ukraine, since pressure on this most critical sector will certainly get Putin's attention. However, we should also be clear that it is likely only happening because BP is planning to take full advantage of the oil and gas frenzy, unleashed by higher prices, in North America and elsewhere. "BP remains confident in the flexibility and resilience of its financial frame," it reassured market watchers in its press release announcing the Rosneft move.

It's significant too that BP's news came within hours of German Chancellor Olaf Scholz announcing that his country will build two new import terminals to receive shipments of natural gas, further locking in dependence on fossil fuels in the middle of a climate emergency. The terminals had long been opposed by German environmentalists, yet now they are being pushed through under cover of war, presented as the only way of making up for the gas that Scholz had recently announced would not flow through Nord Stream 2, the newly built pipeline running under the Baltic Sea. That move turned a state-of-the-art piece of fossil fuel infrastructure into an "$11-billion hole in the ground," in the words of The Globe and Mail's European bureau chief, Eric Reguly.

Yet it's not only fossil fuel projects that are being killed and revived. "We are doubling down on renewables," Ursula von der Leyen, the president of the European Commission, announced ahead of Russia's invasion. "This will increase Europe's strategic independence on energy."

The Sinclair Wyoming Refining Co. oil refinery in Sinclair, Wyo., on Feb. 24, 2022. Photo: Bing Guan/Bloomberg via Getty Images

Watching these geopolitical chess pieces fly across the board in a matter of days, along with the latest wave of dramatic sanctions against Russian banks and air travel, there are plenty of reasons for dread, including a repeat of measures that punish the poor for the crimes of the rich. But there are flashes of optimism too. What is heartening is less the substance of any individual move than their sheer speed and decisiveness. As in the early months of the pandemic, the response to Russia's invasion should remind us that despite the complexity of our financial and energy systems, it turns out that they can still be transformed by the decisions of mere mortals.

It's worth pausing over some of the implications. If Germany can abandon an $11 billion pipeline because it's suddenly seen as immoral (it always was), then

If BP can walk away from a 20 percent stake in a Russian oil

all fossil fuel infrastructure that violates our right to a stable climate should also be up for debate. If BP can walk away from a 20 percent stake in a Russian oil major, what investment cannot be abandoned if it is premised on the destruction of a habitable planet? And if public money can be announced to build gas terminals in the blink of an eye, then it's not too late to fight for far more solar and wind.

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As Bill McKibben wrote in his excellent newsletter last week, Biden could help in this transformation, using powers only available during times of emergency, by invoking the Defense Production Act to build large numbers of electric heat pumps and shipping them to Europe to mitigate the pain of losing Russian gas. That is the creative spirit we need in this moment. Because if we are building new energy infrastructure — and we must — surely it should be the infrastructure of the future, not more toxic nostalgia.

There are many lessons we must take from the trembling moment we are living through. About the dangers of allowing nuclear weapons to proliferate unchecked. About the short-sightedness of shaming once great powers. About the grotesque double standards in Western media about which lands, and which lives, are treated as invadable and disposable. About which forced migrations are treated as crises for the people moving, and which are treated as crises for the countries they are moving to. About the willingness of everyday people to fight for lands — and about whose fights for self-determination and territo-

rial integrity are celebrated as heroic, and whose are cast as terrorist. All of these are lessons we must learn from living through this moment of naked history.

And we must learn this one as well: It is still possible for humans to change the world we have built when life is on the line, and to do it quickly and dramatically. As we were two years ago when the pandemic was first declared, we are in yet another terrifying but highly malleable moment.

War is reshaping our world, but so too is the climate emergency. The question is: Will we harness wartime levels of urgency and action to catalyze climate action, making us all safer for decades to come, or will we allow war to add more fuel to a planet already on fire? That challenge was put most sharply recently by Svitlana Krakovska, a Ukrainian scientist who is part of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change working group that produced this week's report. Even as her country was under the Kremlin's attack, she reportedly told her scientific colleagues in a virtual meeting that "Human-induced climate change and the war on Ukraine have the same roots, fossil fuels, and our dependence on them."

Once you've denied climate breakdown, denying pandemics, elections, or pretty much any form of objective reality is a light lift.

Russia's outrages in Ukraine should remind us that the corrupting influence of oil and gas lies at the root of virtually every force that is destabilizing our planet. Putin's smug swagger? Brought to you by oil, gas, and nukes. The trucks that occupied Ottawa for a month, harass-

ing residents and filling the air with fumes and inspiring copycat convoys around the word? One of the occupation's leaders showed up in court a few days ago wearing an "I ♥ Oil and Gas" sweatshirt. She knows who her sponsors are. Covid-denialism and surging conspiracy culture? Hey, once you have denied climate breakdown, denying pandemics, elections, or pretty much any form of objective reality is a light lift.

At this late stage in the debate, much of this is well understood. The climate justice movement has won all the arguments for transformational action. What we risk losing, in the fog of war, is our nerve. Because nothing changes the subject like extreme violence, even violence that is being actively subsidized by the soaring price of oil. To prevent that from happening, we could do far worse than to take inspiration from Krakovska, who apparently told her colleagues at the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in that closed-door meeting, "We will not surrender in Ukraine. And we hope the world will not surrender in building a climate-resilient future." Her words so moved her Russian counterpart, eye witnesses reported, that he broke ranks and apologized for the actions of his government — a brief glimpse of a world looking forward, not back.