Interview - Alice Hill

https://www.e-ir.info/2020/01/06/interview-alice-hill/

E-INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, JAN 6 2020

Alice Hill is Senior Fellow for Climate Change Policy at the Council on Foreign Relations. Her work at the Council focuses on the risks, consequences, and responses associated with climate change. Hill most recently served as a Research Fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution. She was previously Special Assistant to President Barack Obama and Senior Director for Resilience Policy on the National Security Council staff where she led the development of national policy to build greater climate resilience. She recently published ***Building a Resilient Tomorrow: How to Prepare for the Coming Climate Disruption*** (with Leonardo Martinez-Diaz).

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

Climate change affects everything. It affects the food we eat, the water we drink, and the air we breathe. It touches virtually every corner of the globe. Climate change impacts will stress the capability and reach of our governments, businesses, and non-governmental institutions. Given the breadth of climate change issues and challenges, it's difficult for me to single out any particular areas of research and debate as the most exciting. With that said, I find the identification of the pervasive effects of climate change on human health particularly compelling. These effects range from our bodies' inability to deal with heat extremes to the geographical spread of disease. Learning how to prepare for and respond to the emerging health threats is a challenge that requires urgent action.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

Over time, I have come to view climate change as an existential threat to civilization as we know it. A decade ago, I had little understanding of what caused climate change or really even what it was. What little I knew came from the sporadic reading of media reports. Like many baby boomers, I had received no formal education on the topic of climate change. In 2009, I had the opportunity to delve deeply into the topic for the first time. I had joined the United States Department of Homeland Security (DHS) as Senior Counselor to the Secretary. One of my first assignments was to work on an executive order issued by President Obama requiring federal departments and agencies to begin climate adaptation planning. DHS is a large-sprawling security department. It is the third largest federal agency after the Departments of Defense and Veteran Affairs. To respond to the executive order, DHS created a task force of experts from across the department, which I chaired. The task force drew on the expertise of other federal agencies and departments including the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the Navy's Task Force Climate Change. As its first endeavor, the DHS task force sought to determine whether our department needed to take actions now to prepare for climate impacts in the coming decades. After examining the evidence and hearing from a broad spectrum of experts, the task force concluded that, given its responsibility for emergency management, immigration, and the US Coast Guard mission, DHS needed to incorporate consideration of accelerating climate change impacts in its operational planning.

After Superstorm Sandy's path of destruction across 24 states revealed how ill-prepared the nation was for climate-fueled disasters, my conviction that we needed to prepare now for climate change impacts only grew. As I have continued to work on climate change issues during the past ten years, both at the White House and as an academic, my conviction that we need to build resilience to climate change impacts has only strengthened.

In your work, you emphasize the need to build resilience to destabilizing events, especially the impacts of climate change. What does resilience mean to you?

I don't have a "go to" definition of resilience. During my time in the Obama administration, the federal government used a variety of slightly different definitions. When I first joined the White House, I initially thought that it would be helpful to have federal departments and agencies agree on a single definition of the word "resilience." It did not take long for me to conclude that the federal bureaucracy could spend a great deal of time debating various definitions, time that would keep it from the important job of building resilience. With that said, for me, resilience encompasses the ability to prepare for, absorb, respond to, and recover from adverse events. I would also note that in the Disaster Recovery Reform Act of 2018, Congress required the Federal Emergency Management Administration to work with federal agencies to come up with a definition of "resilience" and "resiliency."

Oftentimes, it seems like resilience overlaps with other concepts, such as climate adaptation or disaster risk management. What are the benefits or drawbacks of framing things in terms of resilience, as opposed to other concepts like these?

The word resilience is very inclusive. It includes climate adaptation and disaster risk management. It is also apolitical and therefore can be a "safe" word for politicians and others to use when talking about what to do about a topic that has divided politicians along party lines, namely climate change. When the word is used in the context of preparing for climate impacts, however, it is important for everyone to understand that building resilience to climate change includes building resilience to future risks that may exceed those experienced in human memory including greater heat extremes, deeper droughts, more intense storms, and bigger wildfires.

How do you convince people to start on the path towards resilience, and what are some steps that people can take today to prepare for how climate change will affect them tomorrow?

Convincing people to invest in resilience can be challenging. Appealing to common sense can help overcome resistance to the concept. After a flood washes away a bridge, most people can agree that building it back exactly as it was before might not make sense when climate change projections indicate that the bridge will experience even more extreme flooding in the coming years. Making an incremental investment in greater resilience to flooding seems sensible: the bridge probably won't fail in the next big storm.

People who want to prepare for climate change can start learning more about how it will affect them personally. The National Climate Assessment is a great place to start. People should check their insurance policies to make sure that they cover the types of weather extremes that accompany climate change. They can use the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) website to determine if they are living anywhere near a flood zone, and, if they are, they can obtain flood insurance. As they make choices about where they live they can investigate the likely future impacts. They can also engage with their local governments to determine if sufficient action is being taken at a community level to protect against climate risk. They can get to know their neighbors so that during times of weather extremes, neighbors can look out for one another. Social science research demonstrates that the socially isolated are more likely to die during extreme events. Finally, they can use their vote to make sure that elected officials adequately focus on the accelerating risks of climate change and what to do about them.

Can you give us a behind-the-scenes tour of what resilience policy-making was like during your time in government?

In the summer of 2013, President Obama issued his Climate Action Plan. That document acted as a roadmap for federal departments, agencies, and policy-makers until the conclusion of Obama's presidency. Within the White House different groups took responsibility for leading particular initiatives called for by the Plan and elsewhere. For example, one of the climate goals was to establish a federal flood risk management standard that would require structures built with federal tax payer money to be high enough to withstand future flooding exacerbated by climate change. The National Security Council was given responsibility for leading the process to develop the flood standard and that duty fell to me. Working with the White House Council on Environmental Quality and the Office of Science

and Technology Policy, the Office of Management and Budget, FEMA, and other agencies, we used an interagency process to craft the actual standard.

When internal disputes arose as to the scope of the standard, the President's Counselor, John Podesta, in his role as overseer of climate efforts for the President, had to resolve the differences so that the policy could be completed. Only after the President had signed the order could the federal departments and agencies begin the hard work of implementing it. Unfortunately, 10 days before Hurricane Harvey dumped over four feet of rain on Houston, Texas, President Trump revoked President Obama's order establishing the flood standard. To date, there is still no federal flood risk management standard even though, in subsequent years, the nation has suffered record levels of flooding in many areas, flooding that was exacerbated by climate change.

Do you think policy-makers and elected officials in the world are currently doing enough to prepare for the impacts of climate change?

We are not doing enough. Government decision-making at all levels from the municipal to the national must incorporate consideration of climate resilience. In the United States, that is not yet occurring in any systematic fashion. Indeed, President Trump has indicated that he does not believe in climate change and under his administration discussion of the issue has disappeared from important documents such as the National Security Strategy and FEMA's strategic plan. More would get done if climate change emerged as an issue of greater political importance. Unfortunately, polling shows that the degree of concern about climate change among US voters corresponds to their political party affiliation. If voters begin to prioritize action on climate, elected officials would undoubtedly respond.

What prompted you and Leonardo Martinez-Diaz to write *Building a Resilient Tomorrow* and how does it bring a new perspective to the topic of climate resilience?

We wrote the book because we saw in our own policy-making efforts that consideration of climate risk remained siloed within disciplines. Few people were looking at how broadly and deeply climate impacts would affect virtually every system upon which humans rely and every corner of the globe. It will force communities to remake themselves to be more resilient to worsening extremes. The book identifies the levers that could propel large scale adaptation – the built environment, the legal system, and the markets. It explores the barriers that hold back action and offers policy solutions to jump-start greater resilience. We next identify tools readily available to decision-makers to reduce climate risk – tools like finance, data-analysis, and workarounds for decision-making heuristics. Finally, we look at the consequences of climate change that could upend global stability – increased migration, growing inequality, deepening national security risks, and changing threats to public health. Our goal was to analyze the latest research as well as promising government and private sector approaches to identify policy options that would lead to better outcomes.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars?

Get involved. Learn about the problems that are already occurring on the ground and the challenges that are projected to emerge in the future. Focus your scholarship on questions that need answers. Write in plain English so that your work reaches more than just your academic peers. Explain complex concepts in the plainest terms you can. Engage with policy-makers so that they can learn from your research. Just because you do excellent research does not mean policy-makers will pay attention. You need to help them appreciate the relevance and the best way to do that is to make your work relevant to the challenges they face. Finally, I would add that, as worrisome as climate change is, focusing on climate challenges will provide opportunities to work on a wide-range of questions that urgently need answering. Whether we like it or not, solving climate challenges will prove the "full employment act" for generations to come.