

GUEST COMMENTARY OPINION

Eventually, Paris withdrawal will overshadow impeachment | Commentary

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Given the current state of affairs, it's tempting to imagine that historians will regard Donald Trump's impeachment as the most significant event of his presidency. However, nearly three years into his presidency, the president's decision to withdraw from the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, unmistakably committing the United States to the wrong side of the world's effort to combat the climate crisis, is the most consequential and — in the long term — it's likely to be the most lasting and harmful action of his presidency.

Though it has taken a good long while for many to accept a fairly longstanding scientific consensus, it is now beyond serious dispute that the continuing warming of our planet is a direct result of human activity.

Climate change is under way, and it has already resulted in melting glaciers and ice sheets, sea level rise in coastal areas, prolonged summer heat waves, floods, droughts, exceptionally intense hurricanes, massive wildfires, and ocean acidification. These conditions are all expected to worsen as global levels of carbon dioxide, methane, and other green house gases continue to rise—with devastating consequences for human beings and a plethora of other species.

Sadly, rather than asserting bold leadership in the face of this deepening global crisis, Trump continues to deny the relationship between climate disruption and human

activities, burying his head in the sand even as rising seas engulf the beach. His administration's formal notice to the United Nations that the United States intends to become the only nation to withdraw from the 2015 Paris Accords is particularly dangerous and irresponsible.

While imperfect because it does not go as far as it should have, the Agreement, signed by more than 220 countries, represents a crucial beginning of a cooperative international framework for tackling climate change. Without active U.S. leadership, however, the prospects for improving the effectiveness of the Paris Agreement are dim.

In fact, during the Trump presidency, U.S. abdication of what was once a leadership role on climate change has all but invited other nations to follow suit. And they have. Very few have shown any willingness to toughen their emissions targets, and some have simply refused to meet the ones they've already set.

Only the United States, the world's largest economy, has the diplomatic clout to successfully reverse these destructive trends. The Trump administration has made no such effort. Indeed, it has rolled back a series of Obama-era measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, determined, apparently, to seal the fate of the only planet we have.

As it happens, the Trump administration's notice to the United Nations allows the United States to pull out of the Paris Agreement once and for all exactly one day after the 2020 election. If the president follows through, the damage will be severe. If he's reelected, he'll undoubtedly continue along his current course. If he's defeated and still withdraws, re-entry to the global pact will be slow and laden with obstacles.

In the meantime, the United States would be relegated to the status of an "observer" in future climate negotiations, and suspicion of the reliability and seriousness of purpose of our nation may be expected to persist.

In the balance hang disastrous consequences — in the form of lives lost to extreme heat, intense storms, new diseases, immense economic disruptions, food shortages, enormous human displacement, extensive cross-border population migrations, and the extinction of millions of species of animals and plants. The time to avoid these collective woes is limited and fleeting, and what is at stake simply could not be more vital.

So, while impeachment rises to the fore when examining the Trump record from the perspective of his third year in office, it's likely that his most significant legacy will be related to climate change — his refusal to acknowledge it, his failure to do anything about it, and his ongoing effort to sabotage global efforts to prevent or slow its effects.

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