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MAN ON A MISSION

by Bom Kim
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02138's Bom Kim traveled to Los Angeles to ask the former vice president and environmental missionary about the earth's lost balance, the current inhabitants of the White House, his respect for Michael Moore, and how it feels to be Harvard's most influential alum. Oh, and one other thing: Is he running for president or what?

Vice President Gore, we're arguing that you are, at this moment, more influential than President Bush. Are we nuts?

Well, thank you for feeling that way, but yes.

We'll have to agree to disagree then. But how influential do you think you've



been since leaving the White House?

I've simply tried to have a positive impact. I actually feel that I have failed to reach my principal objective of moving the U.S. and the world past a tipping point on the climate crisis. It's important to not confuse progress with success.

Are you having more fun these days?

(Laughs) It's a tricky question, because the issue that I'm most focused on isn't one associated with having a lot of fun. But there is joy in expending one's fullest efforts in a cause that feels worthy and feels like it's what you're supposed to be doing. So in that sense, yes.

You were often referred to as the most powerful vice president.

That was before Dick Cheney.

Point taken. Cheney has made the argument that the vice presidency is not part of the executive branch. Is he right?

(Laughs) Of course the vice presidency is part of the executive branch! But I fear that I'm losing my objectivity where President Bush and Cheney are concerned. Not much surprises me anymore. I have a lot of friends who share the following problem with me: Our sense of outrage is so saturated that when a new outrage occurs, we have to download some existing outrage into an external hard drive in order to make room for a new outrage.

A recent poll shows that if you entered the presidential race, you would handily win the New Hampshire primary. Isn't that tempting?

Sure. But I am old enough and have been a candidate enough times to have a very high level of resistance to temptations of that sort. I trust my instincts, and it doesn't feel like it's the right thing for me.

But if you believe global warming is such a crisis, wouldn't you be more effective within the White House than outside it?

I'm under no illusion that there's any position in the world as influential as that of president. But it doesn't feel like the right thing for me to be a candidate at this point. I have had the experience of seeing how necessary it is to have adequate support among the people as a whole for the dramatic policy changes that are needed. It may well be that the best use of whatever skills and talents and experiences that I have gained is to concentrate on creating that sea change in mass

opinion about this issue, so that whoever is elected will face a groundswell from the people themselves.

Will you endorse a candidate in the primary?

Odds are that I will.

Who?

I haven't made that decision yet.

Do you feel some obligation to endorse the wife of your former boss?

Uh ... no. I have friendships with her and with the other candidates, and they're all on equal footing at this point as far as I'm concerned.

Are you advising any candidates?

No.

Talking to any?

Several of them have called from time to time.

Which ones?

I'm not going to violate the privacy of those conversations, but several of them have called regularly. Some have made private visits to Nashville, and I appreciate that.

Among the current crop of candidates, who has the strongest position on global warming?

I don't think anyone has given it the emphasis that it should have. But [Connecticut senator] Chris Dodd deserves credit for proposing a CO2 tax—I'm convinced that we should eliminate the payroll tax and replace it dollar for dollar with a CO2 tax.

You've been talking about global warming for decades, but some critics still say that you're talking up the environment only to punch your ticket to the White House. Does part of your hesitation to run come from a desire to prove them wrong, to keep the environment elevated above politics?

Well, those are separate questions. The answer to the first is no, that would be a very indirect way

of thinking. But I do think it's very important to elevate this issue above partisan politics. The world would be better served if that becomes the case.

Are any Republican candidates good on the issue?

No. John McCain was strong on the climate crisis in the past, before he got swept up in the effort to court the base voters of his party. Mike Bloomberg has had a responsible position on the issue, but he's no longer a Republican.

At the recent Democratic debate in South Carolina, every candidate claimed to support the fight against global warming. But six of the eight candidates took private jets to get there. Doesn't that kind of behavior create a risk that global warming will be seen as just a trendy cause for fat-cat, private-jet Democrats who don't practice what they preach?

It's not necessarily a fair litmus test for these candidates, who have Secret Service entourages and staff. It would be a mistake to get sidetracked on something like that.

But personal behavior matters. After your daughter's wedding, you took some heat for allegedly serving endangered Chilean sea bass. Turned out that the fish came from both legal and green sources. Some people, it seems, are determined to catch you in an environmental screw-up.

Did you see the autopsy of that original story? It was completely false. But it's not new for advocates to try to shoot the messenger who is delivering a message they don't want to hear. And in this case, there is nothing new about the way they've been trying to do that.

Speaking of messengers ... you're hanging out with Leonardo DiCaprio a lot these days. What have you taught Leo about politics, and what has he taught you about acting?

I like Leo a lot. He read *Earth in the Balance* when he was coming off *Titanic*. He asked if he could come see me, and I said of course, and we talked for maybe three hours. I was impressed that he had not only read the book cover to cover, but thoroughly understood it—he was in his early twenties at that stage. I encouraged him to continue learning and to use the platform of his celebrity and the communication skills of his profession to build public awareness of this crisis, and I have been very impressed by the way he has done so. What have I learned from him? He illustrates how celebrity advocacy can be a noble calling when it is culled with intensive study, mastery of detail and passionate concern.

Anyone else come to mind?

Bono, of course. Angelina Jolie is doing a very impressive job. My friend, George Clooney, who's done such a great job on Darfur.

What can politicians in general learn from people in entertainment?

If you don't spend all your time raising money, you can communicate about the public interest.

Michael Moore has said that you are his pick for president. Do you accept his endorsement?

I have a lot of respect for Michael, and I hope that Sicko leads, along with other things, to the passage of national health insurance. It's way overdue. He came to my house in Nashville a couple years ago and we had a good long talk. He's an incredibly intelligent and passionate guy with terrific communication skills. He cares a lot about this country and about the world. But no, I haven't talked to him about him wanting me to run for president.

Larry Summers and others at Harvard are leading an effort to draft a new Kyoto treaty. If Summers asked you to participate, would you join them?

I have such enormous respect for Larry that I would, of course, be responsive to him. We had an extensive dialogue about the global environment when he joined the Clinton-Gore administration, and I found him to be very responsive. We've remained friends and allies all these years. He has, of course, an extraordinary intellect. I'm sure that I'll have an opportunity to be in dialogue with them because Larry is a good friend.

Let's talk about your family a bit. You were chatting earlier about your grandchildren. What are your concerns about their future?

If we don't act very quickly, before my grandchildren are even close to my present age they would live in a world where there is no polar ice cap. And that would be a very different planet, because that ice cap is one of the principal ways that the earth cools itself. The destabilizing of Greenland and the extensive snow melting in West Antarctica are ominous signs where very large increases in sea level are concerned. And even a one-meter increase would displace a hundred million climate refugees in the world. A six-meter increase would displace 450 million climate refugees.

You and Tipper are famous for your strong relationship. Your youngest daughter Sarah was recently married in L.A. Any secrets to a successful marriage that you would like to impart to Sarah and her new husband?

Communication. Communication is a bedrock skill, and it requires perseverance. I don't pose as an expert—the secret to my happy marriage is very simple: Tipper.

Your father once said that you were ready for the presidency because you were raised for it. Have you raised your children with a similar bent?

No, not at all. My hope for each of them is that they will do what feels most right and most fulfilling in their lives. I'm very proud of all four of them.

Before we finish, Vice President Gore, I have to ask one more time: You're completely ruling out a run for president?

I have not completely ruled out the possibility of reentering politics as a candidate at some point in the future. I doubt that will ever happen. But just as it doesn't feel right to be a candidate at this point, it doesn't feel right to make a so-called Sherman statement.