

John Kerry: The Yahoo News Interview

Ben Adler and Sam Matthews

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151



Former Secretary of State John Kerry, now working as the Biden administration's special envoy on climate, joins Yahoo News Senior Climate Editor Ben Adler for a candid one-on-one discussion about climate change.

Video Transcript

BEN ADLER: Secretary Kerry, thank you so much for joining us. We have a lot to talk about. And I wanted to start with President Biden having signed the Inflation Reduction Act, which is the most ambitious climate legislation in history, but still is only projected to get a 40% reduction in emissions by the end of the decade. And the US has promised a 50% reduction by the end of the decade.

JOHN KERRY: Well, we're doing a lot more than just the IRA. The IRA is a package that in and of itself can get the 40%. But in addition to that, the president is issuing executive orders. There'll be changes on automobile, on light truck, heavy truck, heavy duty, a number of initiatives that are being taken by states, subnational, cities. They really kept us in the game, frankly, during the Trump administration, when he pulled out of the agreement.

But we-- 75% of the new electricity that came online during the Trump administration came from renewable resources. So we have a lot of other

BEN ADLER: You mentioned the Trump administration. When you meet with other countries--

JOHN KERRY: Reluctantly.

[LAUGHTER]

BEN ADLER: Well, I'm sure it is. What-- how can you guarantee us that you will stay on track and see all these policies through, some of which are presidential executive authority, like the-- like the car rules if Trump or another Republican wins in 2024?

JOHN KERRY: Well, I think what's important for everybody to note is that achieving our goal is not exclusively dependent on what the federal government says or does. It's critical, but not wholly dependent. Corporations all around America, the largest corporations in the country, Apple, Microsoft, Google, Salesforce, I mean, you know, and a whole bunch of other disciplines, I mean, you've got Boeing, you've got Delta Airlines, United Airlines, a whole bunch of folks have adopted a net zero 2050 target. And they're moving on it. They're doing there what's called scope 1, scope 2 emissions reductions, the emissions that they are directly responsible for and so forth.

So there are a lot of things happening. And nobody can guarantee this. Right now, we're behind. I mean, we're seriously behind. And that was the meaning of the IPCC report that just came out. It's another kick in the you know what to get people moving. So that's our fight, is to get people to do all the things we can do.

Another example, buildings. Buildings lend themselves to remarkable gains in efficiency just by retrofitting them. And efficiency is perhaps the largest gain at our disposal, efficiency in vehicles, efficiency in appliances, and so forth. The marketplace writ large has bought into this. They're-- they're on board.

Look at what we're doing with electric vehicles at this point. General Motors, Ford have said that by 2035, the only vehicle they're going to make is going to be electric. And I think there's a massive movement now in this transition that is bigger than any one administration or one policy. And I don't think anybody in the future could get away with trying to reverse that. It's just not going to happen.

fuel production, the recent approval of the Willow project in Alaska--

JOHN KERRY: For the moment.

BEN ADLER: Yeah.

JOHN KERRY: For the moment. Remember, we have seven years before the 2030 target. And the president is determined that we will stay on that target. But in the immediate moment, while we transition, you don't want to crash your whole economy. You have to be able to keep things moving. That's part of the engine of transition.

If people are earning income and companies are making money, we have the ability to be able to make the transition. If the economy crashes, everything will come to a dead halt. So it's critical that we keep some production levels moving in order to do this. But he's been very, very clear. This is not a long-term strategy to keep something alive that is not in line with meeting our environmental goals.

BEN ADLER: What about exporting liquefied natural gas, which is not for our economy?

JOHN KERRY: Again, critical to the economy of Europe. Europe, these are our allies. NATO is critical. What is happening in Ukraine is an abomination. It's grotesque. It is a violation of everything we have worked to achieve since World War II, where we put in place rule of law, international law.

You don't go crashing in and forcibly changing the borders of another country by force. And so we have to stand up against that as a matter of principle. And I think if we didn't do that, then how much easier would it be for President Xi to decide he's going to invade Taiwan, or someone else to do it somewhere.

You know, this is an important fight, but it's not an exclusive fight. We also have to deal with climate at the same time. It's not, oh, let's deal with Ukraine for the time being, and then we come along and we'll deal with the other. No. Climate is already accelerating in its destructive force. And we have to meet this second crisis, third crisis, whatever you want to call it, we have to meet it at the same time. And we have to win.

BEN ADLER: You recently switched, I read, from flying private flying commercial.

JOHN KERRY: No, I didn't fly private while I was in this job.

JOHN KERRY: It's just a missioner. I've had one, maybe two private flights, which are US military flights in order to get to China during COVID, where we were forced into that. But I fly commercially.

BEN ADLER: The reason I bring that up is private aviation is an example of something where people are starting to pay more attention and-- but when people who go to Davos to talk about climate change fly private, it seems like they don't want to make--

JOHN KERRY: Well, they actually-- I've talked to them about it. They offset.

BEN ADLER: Yeah.

JOHN KERRY: They buy offsets, they offset. And they are working harder than most people I know to be able to try to effect this transition.

BEN ADLER: Right.

JOHN KERRY: Aviation as a whole, all of aviation in the world is about 3% of our emissions in the world. And if we're able to move fast enough in these other areas, that we're already moving on sustainable aviation fuel, Boeing and United and others have joined in a pledge to use-- now 5% of the fuel they're going to use is going to be sustainable aviation fuel, even though it's far more expensive than other fuel available.

They're paying the green premium in order to accelerate the transition. So I think it's important to note. Do they need to be part of the transition? Yes. Do they need to make good on their word about net zero? Of course, they do. But-- but we have to be thoughtful about, you know, you're not going to suddenly wipe out every aircraft in the world and not fly.

BEN ADLER: There are some people who don't want to change their lifestyle. We're going to have to switch at some point from gas for heating and cooking to electricity if we're going to reach net zero.

JOHN KERRY: Unless somebody were able to provide that with zero carbon intensity, I mean, if you can do that. Now that's not doable today. So yes, gas at a certain point becomes a serious challenge here. Let's say you're going to take a coal plant, you want to shut it and you're going to do gas instead.

For about the next seven, eight years or so, that's something that you could do because it's an immediate 30% to 50% reduction in the emissions. But after that period of time, we have to meet the net zero

BEN ADLER: Are you saying people aren't going to have to change their lifestyle at all to prevent catastrophic climate change?

JOHN KERRY: I think you have to frame that the right way. When you say change your lifestyle, people feel, oh, you're challenging me to have a lower quality of life. No, we don't have to have a lower quality of life. But do you have to change some of the choices you make in your life? Yeah.

I have now a solar field outside the house that's feeding the house. I have-- I drive an electric car now. I didn't do that five years ago. And when I got in the electric car, I said to myself, why did I wait so long? It's a fabulous drive. So I think that, yes, we have to make different decisions, but they do not have to and shouldn't, absolutely shouldn't reduce the quality of life of citizens.

BEN ADLER: You traveled all over the world for this job, and previously, as secretary of state and chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. I'm curious to know is there anything that you've seen in person in terms of climate change or maybe someone you've met who's been affected by climate change that has really stuck with you or really changed the way you look at the issue?

JOHN KERRY: Oh, absolutely. I mean, I was just in Brazil and I met with Indigenous population of the Amazon. And in many parts of the world now, we always try to meet with Indigenous population because they actually have been the greatest curators, preservers, if you will, of landmass around the world. And they have a lot to teach us about nature-based solutions.

And in many parts of the world, there are people now affected in food production. Farmers are not able to farm the way they used to be. They can't grow the same crops. I've met people who are deeply affected by the kind of work they do, who because of the intense heat now are limited in the amount of time they can work outdoors. It was 140 degrees in some places Fahrenheit last year.

And hottest year-- you know, you had three continents that recorded the hottest day in their history simultaneously, the same day, three different continents. We are seeing changes that are just beyond unprecedented. They're frightening. The Arctic, the Antarctic, the melting of ice, the rate of the melting.



soon. And everything is sort of happening faster. So we have a fundamental responsibility, certainly as public people. But every citizen has a responsibility to try to make sure that we're doing a better job for future generations. And right now, I have to tell you that despite all the efforts, we're not at the pace we need to be to meet the goals we've set. So we have to pick up the scale, pick up the efforts of transition.

And frankly, nobody should fear this. This is not a-- as I said, it's not a challenge to our quality of life. There are great jobs in this transition. I mean, last year, the year before, the fastest growing job in America was wind turbine technician. And the third fastest growing job was solar panel installer. There are jobs in this transition. We have to build a grid in America. We don't even have-- or several grids.

We do not have the ability to send electrons from one part of the country to another, where we might need to. Yet, they can do that in Mexico, they can do that in Europe. We're behind. And what the president is trying to do is accelerate America's transition because the evidence is absolutely clear. It can result in a safer and a healthier and cleaner life for all of us.

BEN ADLER: You mentioned the world not being on pace to meet the 2030 targets that have been laid out to avert catastrophic climate change in terms of how much we need to reduce emissions. Obviously, the single biggest emitter right now is China. And every expert that I've talked to says China is going to have to make bigger cuts than they've currently planned for the world to hit that target.

JOHN KERRY: If we're going to meet our goal. We have to work with China. We have to work with India. We even have to find a way, ultimately, if we can resolve the war in Ukraine, to work with Russia because Russia is a huge emitter. And any one of these countries has an ability if it doesn't move to change its energy base, to make it much harder for the rest of the world, if not impossible, to reach the goals we've set.

India, for instance, has a major goal. They're really working at this. They understand that they've got to try to find a way to reduce coal, but they're also fighting this question of keeping their folks employed and being able to keep their economy moving. China has 1.4 billion people. They have the same feeling, that they can't suddenly unemploy their entire population and survive. So they're trying to mix it.

Now China is the largest deployer of solar panels. In China, they have deployed far more renewable energy than we have or than Europe has. So

what we're trying to do. And the president has tried very hard.

Our president has tried hard to separate climate from the other issues that are real, that we obviously have with China. But we can't get bogged down by that because this is a universally felt existential challenge to the planet. And it's important that the two largest economies in the world work to try to resolve it.

BEN ADLER: You mentioned the recent IPCC report, came out Monday. And obviously, very sobering, like those reports always are. And the big news out of it was that in addition to the 43% cut in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 that they've already said we need to make, in addition, they say now a 60% reduction by 2035. So that's a steep drop in the early 2030s. And obviously, what happens in the early 2030s is really being determined by the policy that we make right now.

JOHN KERRY: Correct.

BEN ADLER: So do you think the world can get there? Do you think that these next few climate conferences, the COPs will bring forth pledges that big and plans to actually meet those pledges?

JOHN KERRY: I know that the world can get there, but I am not convinced that we will. And the biggest reason is there's a business as usual attitude in too many places in the world. There are some CEOs still of major corporations who have not moved their companies or haven't bought in to scientific facts. There are sort of different cultures and different universe of facts that are passing each other day and night. And that's a challenge. It's a serious challenge.

But I think a lot is happening. Let me give you an example. For the first time, there's more than a trillion dollars-- probably about a trillion four--1.4. We need about 4 and 1/2 trillion every year to be invested in this transition. But we're up to about a million and a half. Much of it, venture capital, exploring green hydrogen, battery storage, direct air carbon capture, carbon capture and storage, utilization of carbon in different forms. Someone's going to break through.

Now you can't sit there and bank on that and say, we don't have to do anything because someone's going to break through. That would be really kind of stupid. But we have to include in our equation the possibilities of human ingenuity coming through with different results. And I'm seeing that.

which separate water and hydrogen. And the commercial scale of hydrogen is moving. And we're not there yet. We need to do more. But there really is a lot happening in the field of innovation and research and development.

BEN ADLER: You have children. Do you have grandchildren?

JOHN KERRY: I do, I do.

BEN ADLER: What do you think the world will be like in terms of climate change and the planet that they'll have to live on, let's say, when they're your age.

JOHN KERRY: It depends entirely on the decision that their parents and grandparents make today. We have it in our hands to guarantee them a healthy and strong future. We also, by virtue of indifference, arrogance, inattention, we have it in our capacity also to really foul the planet beyond recognition. And that's why, it's what motivates me and a lot of people I know to be working hard at this.

BEN ADLER: I want to ask you about the next COP in the UAE.

JOHN KERRY: Yeah.

BEN ADLER: Some environmentalists are critical of the fact that the CEO of Abu Dhabi's national oil company is going to be the president of that climate conference. But you actually praised his selection. I'm curious to know how you respond to those critics.

JOHN KERRY: Well, I understand the skepticism. And I can understand why people would raise the question. But you know the old saying, you don't judge a book by its cover. The fact is that Dr. Sultan Al-Jaber, who is the designated president, has been the leader within the United Arab Emirates for the last 20 years in helping them to build out one of the largest solar systems in the world.

They've built a city that is energy efficient and clean. He's been the CEO of that operation. The UAE has invested billions of dollars into renewable energy around the world. They've helped countries be able to install solar and other forms of renewable energy, even as they do produce gas and oil.

But they're looking at their future is not being an oil company, but being an energy company and providing clean energy as it is needed. So I think that knowing what they've been doing, when I came into this job, the UAE hosted the first ever regional climate conference in the UAE. And 11 Middle



So look, the proof will be in the pudding, as we also say. But I really believe that the UAE wants their COP to be successful. And it can only be measured as successful if it brings the industry to the table, if it helps us to be able to accelerate this transition and meet the goals. And I anticipate, you know, progress.

I think also there are three mandated outcomes already from this next COP that came out of the last one. One is that there's going to be an adaptation report that is going to advise everybody about the pace and needs for adaptation. Two, there's a stocktake, a taking stock of all of the world and where we are. And that will create greater focus and intensity. And three, there's a loss and damage provision that now has to be filled out more, which will have an impact on the less developed world on the global South in the positive way. And I think that beyond that, mitigation is going to be on the table, and finance is going to be on the table. So I look forward to an extremely broad-based engagement at this COP.

BEN ADLER: I know we're almost out of time. So I have to ask a couple quick politics questions before we wrap up. The first is just that Donald Trump called for you to be prosecuted a few years ago. Now he's facing a whole bunch of prosecutions. And I'm just wondering, what do you make of this situation, where the former president is potentially going to be under indictment while running for re-election?

JOHN KERRY: Yeah, I'm not trying to duck you, but I'm telling you that I'm trying to keep what I'm doing free and clear from the daily hurly burly of our politics. We need everybody on board. And I don't want to-- I just don't want to get into the political stuff.

BEN ADLER: Fair enough. Let me ask you something that you might be more comfortable with. You know, you were a major party nominee for president. Do you have any advice to a young person who maybe wants to go into politics, maybe even run for president themselves one day?

JOHN KERRY: Go for it. Get involved. We need you desperately. I mean, young people have historically in our country, in the United States, but true in many other parts of the world, been the agents of change. I don't herald the 1960s as the be all and end all of anything.

But I'll tell you what, it was kids at college who went down South and helped to break the back of Jim Crow. It was the civil rights movement that engaged young people all around our country, the voting rights

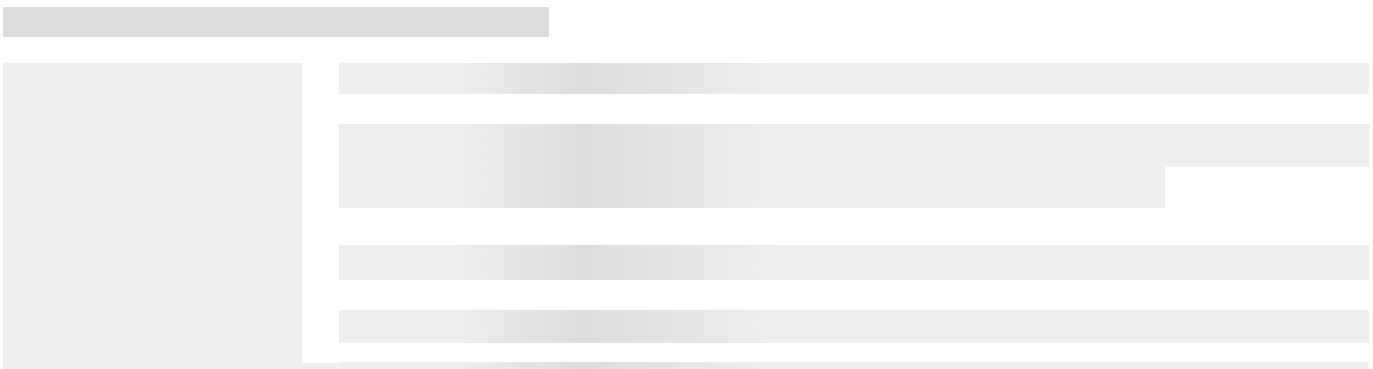
their flag and they took risks, major risks in some cases.

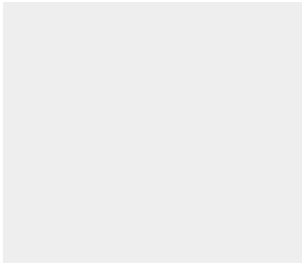
So I think that we need young people, again, to make sure they're talking to their parents, to their grandparents, and going out and acting on their beliefs. In the last election, young people made an enormous difference. And they made climate the number two voting issue that was in that election. So I just say, there are all kinds of ways to be involved in public life, but choose one.



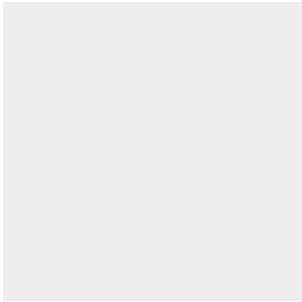
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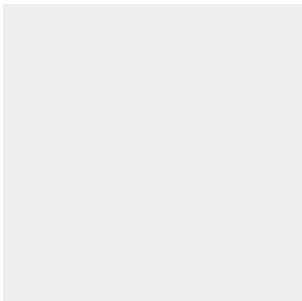




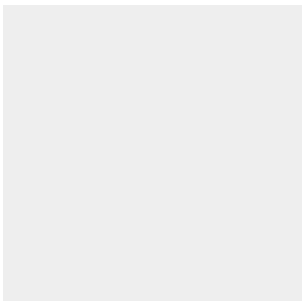
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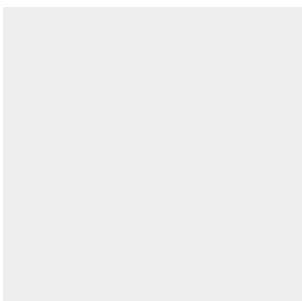
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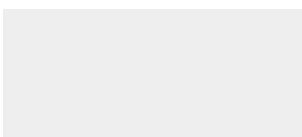
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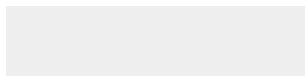
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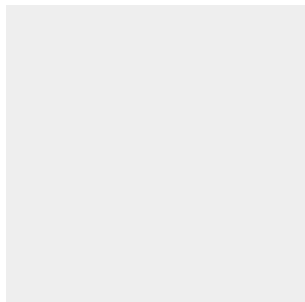
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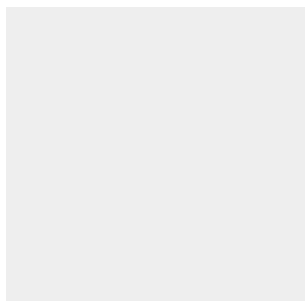


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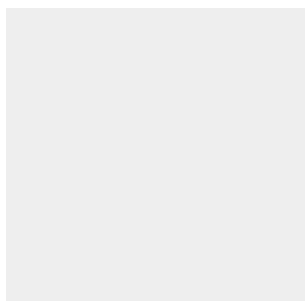


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