



Asked and Answered

We want you to join the fight against climate change

by Heidi Kyser | posted June 16, 2014



Generals Norman Seip, left, and Stephen Cheney; behind, advisor Andrew Holland.

I'm riding in the back of a dark SUV with former top-ranked military brass, retired Marine Corps Brigadier General Stephen Cheney and retired Air Force Lieutenant General Norman Seip. In the front are energy policy wonk Andrew Holland and our driver. Having gathered provisions, we're heading into the desert, toward a national landmark, where we'll rendezvous with other U.S. officials.

Okay, we're actually eating Einstein Bagels our way to Hoover Dam for a guided tour with some Bureau of Reclamation executives. Still, I feel important. And humbled. To my left on the first of two tan leather bench seats is Seip, a man who, until recently, was in charge of seven active-duty "wings" (400 aircraft and 33,000 staff), plus

reserves and National Guard. Behind Seip and me, in the rumble seat, is Cheney, who offhandedly refers to conversations he's had with Secretary of State John Kerry and Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel.

My awe figures into the American Security Project's plan. The nonpartisan, nonprofit Washington, D.C., think-tank leverages the clout of retired admirals, generals and other high-level government officials, such as Cheney and Seip, to spread its message about national security, which it tackles from several perspectives: American competitiveness, energy, public diplomacy, the oceans, space and — the subject of ASP's Las Vegas visit — [climate change](#).

"Not only is it real," says Cheney, who's been on the board of American Security Project since 2006 and CEO since 2011, "but it's also a threat to our security, and we know how to fix it."

For some, the awe stops there. Far-right conservatives, who tend to harbor great admiration for the military, often draw the line at climate change. But Cheney says that's okay. He's used to talking to conspiracy theorists, deniers and skeptics, such as the one who asked a question ("Doesn't increased carbon dioxide in the environment mean more plant growth?") at the World Affairs Council meeting in Las Vegas on Wednesday evening, June 12.

"We want to hear what people have to say," Cheney says. "Then, we share what we have experienced."

This is where ASP gets its chance, however slim, of opening a door most other climate-change groups have slammed in their faces. Like these other groups, the generals have irrefutable climate data on their side. But they also have the things they've seen with their own eyes — from airplanes and ships and command posts around the world. In 2013, for instance, the Navy sent an aircraft carrier strike group that was stationed in Japan to the Philippines to offer disaster relief and humanitarian aid following typhoon Haiyan. Extreme weather events, along with drought, floods and wildfires, will only increase as the globe warms, Cheney says. These events — and their corollaries, such as decreased crop production — lead to global instability; and instability is a factor in national and international security.

With this in mind, we arrive at Hoover Dam, where Seip is stunned by the bathtub ring around Lake Mead. Reclamation engineer Mark Cook shows us the spillway, which hasn't been needed since 1983, then leads us 500 feet down into the bowels of the dam, where the power-generating station hums away. The floor vibrates as a release of water rushes under our feet; gigantic red turbines spin electrons into a commodifiable fury. As we emerge, Seip notes that we live in a great country, capable of such technological marvels as the dam. The implication, obviously: We could muster this capability to reduce CO2 emissions, if only there were enough political will.

But how to make people care? That's the goal of the grassroots road tour, on which Las Vegas was the last stop before a summer break. It helps, Cheney adds, that civilians are beginning to see and feel the effects of climate change first-hand. While Las Vegans watch the water level drop at Lake Mead, residents of Norfolk, Va. — who live in a zone designated by the U.S. Geological Survey as a "sea-level rise hotspot" — are [fighting to keep the Atlantic from permanently engulfing their back yards and churches](#).

"The temperature in Las Vegas, as tracked at McCarran Airport, has risen 4 degrees since 1970," Cheney says. "That's a fact. Explain that away."

The generals describe the military as the country's 9-1-1 force, the first responders in world emergencies. Defense dollars, American tax dollars, pay for that service. And sometimes there's more than money at stake. Las Vegas is home to servicemen and women from Creech and Nellis Air Force, like those who provide air cover for convoys delivering fossil fuel to ground bases in combat zones.

For some, it's still going to be a tough sell, I realize, as we get out of the car, back at Caesars Palace valet. But these guys have faced worse odds. We step into the lobby to shake hands and part ways, and I notice something Cheney had pointed out to me earlier: "You walk in this place, as I did this morning at 6:15, and every slot machine is lit up, every TV is on, the music is playing. I guess that's the entertainment business. It's a cost they're willing to absorb or you're willing to pay. Back home, I'm telling my guys, 'When you leave, turn out the lights, will you?'"