

Thank you, Rush.

And thank you, Larry. It's such an honor for me to be accepting this award that bears your name.

Your dedication and effectiveness in your long service as Chairman of the Center's Board of Trustees was remarkable, and your support and friendship in the period when I was President and Director of the Center were immensely important to me and critical to whatever success I achieved.

I'm just delighted that you and a number of your kids and grandkids could be here this evening.

I also can't let this occasion pass without expressing my gratitude to George and Katharine Woodwell. As most of you here know, George founded the Woods Hole Research Center in 1985, with Katharine's energetic managerial and substantive engagement, and he remained its President and Director for 20 years, until with his blessing and the Board's I succeeded him in 2005.

As you know, the Center's magnificent main building—for which George and Larry led the fund-raising--is named for George, and its spectacular central staircase is named for Katharine, in honor of her having lifted all who worked here.

But I also need to note that my wife Cheri and I barely avoided having the new building's septic system named for us. You see, the practice had been to match the size of people's contributions to specific naming opportunities, and by chance Cheri and I gave just enough to cover the septic system. While the idea of the "John and Cheryl Holdren Memorial Septic System" had a certain cachet, we chickened out and got them to put our name on one of the second-floor offices.

You may wonder how somebody who started professional life as a rocket scientist and theoretical plasma physicist (like my friend Rush Holt) ended up succeeding the great ecologist George Woodwell as the leader of a research and policy center focused on forests, soils, the carbon cycle, and global climate change. The short answer would be that I was incredibly lucky. I will give you a slightly longer one.

I had been interested in the complex of societal challenges around population, energy, environment, development, and international security—ever since reading a book called "The Challenge of Man's Future" when I was a junior in high school. That book, by the geochemist and international scientific statesman Harrison Brown, argued that those problems were all interconnected and would need to be tackled together using tools and insights from both the natural and social sciences and from engineering.

I studied aerospace engineering and plasma physics in college because they were interesting, had applications that were related to some of those big societal challenges, and would provide me with tools that I knew would be broadly useful.

In late 1968, while working on a plasma physics PhD at Stanford, I met the Stanford population biologist and ecologist Paul Ehrlich, and we started to collaborate on papers (and later books) on population, resources, and environment. (Cheri, who had urged me to get in touch with Paul, later did her own PhD in ecology with him.) Anyway, it was through Paul that I met George Woodwell, who was then doing pioneering work at the Brookhaven National Laboratory on the effects of ionizing radiation on forest ecosystems and on the movement of pesticides through estuarine food webs. That was at the end of the 1960s or very beginning of the 1970s.

Anyway, George and I kept in touch, and after a career that pretty quickly careened away from rocket science and plasma physics, and into studies of energy technology and the causes and consequences of global environmental change, I accepted George's invitation to spend a sabbatical at WHRC in the winter of 1992. From then on my fate was sealed. By that summer, Cheri and I had bought a house in Falmouth, we started spending every summer here, I joined the Center's Board of Trustees, and in 1996 we moved here permanently with me splitting my time between Harvard and WHRC and Cheri becoming active in local politics and NGOs, working with a number of you who are here tonight.

When George decided that 20 years of leading the Center was long enough, he and the Board decided that I would do as a successor, and that's how it came about.

As it turned out, I only lasted three and a half years in the job, because in December 2008 President Obama decided I would do as his Science Advisor and the Director of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy.

Related to my 8-year stint in the Obama White House, which ended this past January, I want to close with a couple of observations on the intersection of science and politics. That intersection is of course at the heart of what the Woods Hole Research Center does, namely first-class environmental science that bears on policy questions of great practical importance, which Center scientists themselves then carry into the arenas of policy and practice in every country where they work.

There are, though, some scientists (none here) and other observers who think that scientists should stay out of the policy arena, that engaging with policy makers and planners and villagers trying to make a sustainable living is either something they're not qualified to do or will end up inappropriately "politicizing" science,

blurring the boundaries between science and advocacy and causing scientists to be viewed as “just another interest group”.

While I understand the source of these concerns, I believe they are fundamentally wrong.

Not qualified?

While it is important that natural scientists entering these domains work with and benefit from the insights of social scientists, lawyers, and practiced political players, if scientists do not engage in the process of actually applying scientific insights to the betterment of the human condition, the full potential of that intersection cannot possibly be realized.

Just another interest group?

They are an interest group—interested in increasing understanding of ourselves, our world, & our universe, and in use of those understandings to improve economy, health, environment, security...

Politicizing science?

Science is already politicized. Government’s decisions about how to fund, assist, encourage, & use science are made in USA through a political process (Exec Branch, Congress, interest groups, public). Scientists have no less right & responsibility than any other group to ensure their voices are heard in this process...and generally more to contribute.

I am proud of what Woods Hole Research Center scientists have achieved over the past 32 years at the intersection of great science with sound policy and beneficial applications on the ground.

And I am very proud, tonight, that my own efforts at that intersection are being recognized by the Huntington Prize.

Thank you all very much.