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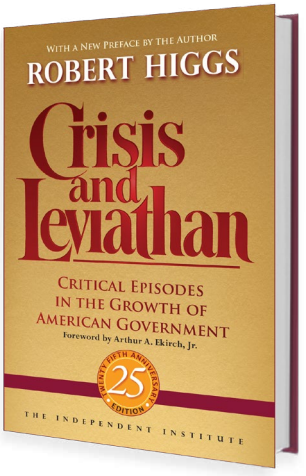

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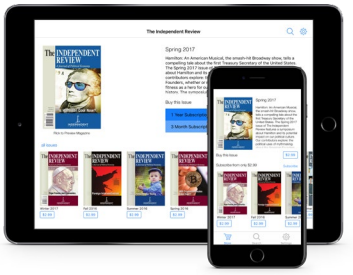

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REFLECTIONS

The Real Case against Activist Global Warming Policy

JAMES L. PAYNE

The brutal winter weather that afflicted the East Coast, including Washington, D.C., earlier this year and the failure of global temperatures to rise—as predicted by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)—since 1998 have given critics of global warming policies a point to bring up in the climate debate, but it would be a mistake for them to use these facts as their main argument. The case against activist global warming policy goes much deeper than what is happening in the weather today or even this decade. The real case is that activist policy depends on a teetering chain of improbabilities.

Climate alarmists believe the issue is simple: a warming climate threatens humanity, and government should save us from this danger. As President Obama put it in his 2014 State of the Union message, "Climate change is a fact." In the thinking of alarmists such as Obama, those who resist this "fact"—meaning both the change in weather and the array of policies designed to limit carbon dioxide levels—are "deniers," as in "Holocaust deniers," because they seem to be rejecting an obvious truth.

But the issue isn't simple. The activist position involves an extensive chain of assumptions, *every one of which has to be true in order for carbon-dioxide-limiting policies to be justified*.

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Here are the main tenets of the activist stance:

1. Global temperature over the past century has risen.
2. Temperature will continue to rise over the next century and impact climate.
3. The main cause of this continuing temperature rise is the emission of carbon dioxide due to consumption of fossil fuels.
4. The future rise in global temperature will have extremely high human costs (the *Great Net Harm* proposition).
5. The cost of governmental programs for restricting the use of fossil fuels will be significantly less than the net harm of carbon-dioxide-induced global warming (the *Benefit–Cost* proposition).
6. Governments are effective and responsible problem-solving machines and can therefore implement a robust, consistent, and worldwide policy of restricting the use of fossil fuels (the *Government Efficacy* proposition).

As the global warming debate is carried on today, almost all the attention goes to the first three propositions. The IPCC's multiple and voluminous reports, which are the foundation for the entire debate, focus on these first three propositions. They advance the carbon dioxide theory, and they report on temperature trends and related physical changes, including the extent of sea ice, the rise in sea level, and expected changes in precipitation and storm parameters.

Now there certainly is room for skepticism toward the IPCC's positions on these topics. Indeed, even the IPCC panelists admit this. They express their findings and predictions with probabilistic language—*likely, very likely, medium confidence,* and so on—and never use the term *certain*. Obviously, for example, any change in solar processes will knock all predictions about global warming into a cocked hat. And it is also true that the carbon dioxide theory is only a theory, there being no way to conduct controlled experiments on the earth's climate. Furthermore, scientists agree that there are other anthropogenic warming agents—such as methane and nitrous oxide—so that even a complete limitation of carbon dioxide emissions would not prevent all possible warming.

Skeptics of the global warming theory are understandably frustrated by activists who sweep all the IPCC's qualifiers aside and express points one through three as certainties. But this sense of frustration should not lead them to adopt the same dogmatic style by declaring—or seeming to declare—that temperatures have *not* risen or *will not* rise or that anthropogenic carbon dioxide can have *no* effect on global temperatures.

This seems to be the approach that some skeptics have slipped into, and it may be setting them up for a big fall. For example, there appears to have been something of a "pause" in the global warming trend since 1998 (see, e.g., "Climate Science" 2013). Some skeptics are using this datum to crow, in effect, "Ha, I told you so: there is no global warming!" This response is unscientific. Any number of things can

happen within a long-term trend. For example, a change in solar activity might produce a temporary cooling effect. When this effect ends, temperatures might rise very dramatically, conforming to a longer upward trend. If that happened, the activists would claim total victory in the global warming debate, and the skeptics would look like irrational "deniers."

It is unsound, therefore, for critics of global warming policies to put the emphasis principally on points one through three—even if these assertions involve errors or distortions. These propositions are justified at some level of probability; that is, they *might* be true. The skeptics' case should be that even if they are true, there is a strong case against trying to combat global warming dangers with governmental policies.

Onrushing Walls of Water

What, exactly, are the global warming dangers? As the outline of the activists' tenets indicates, the Great Net Harm proposition is critical to the global warming position: something really, really terrible is expected to happen. The allegations of harm—great harm—have come mainly from nonscientists or from scientists who are making assertions outside their area of expertise. There's a lot of work for skeptics to do in debunking these claims and in exposing the emotional biases behind them.

To get an idea of the unscientific way global warming alarmists handle the Great Net Harm proposition, consider an assertion from an article on the National Resources Defense Council web page devoted to "global warming costs": "Despite the lengthy debate on the federal budget in Congress, climate change rarely gets mentioned as a deficit driver. Yet paying for climate disruption was one of the largest non-defense discretionary budget items in 2012. Indeed, when all federal spending on last year's droughts, storms, floods, and forest fires are added up, the U.S. Climate Disruption Budget was nearly $100 billion" (n.d.).

The drift of this sneaky semantic elision (global warming = climate change = climate disruption) is that global warming is the cause of *all* harmful weather-related events. The Environmental Defense Fund adopts a similar stance. The headline of one article on its web page on climate change is subtitled, "Catastrophe in the Making." (n.d.b). And another article says, "You've seen the devastating effects of climate change, as wrought by Hurricane Sandy and other extreme weather events" (n.d.a).

This pattern of sloppy, hysterical claims needs to be combated with systematic studies of trends and costs in weather events. To begin with, there is much uncertainty about whether global warming contributes to events such as hurricanes. But even if it does, it is not clear that the actual human harm is increasing to any noticeable degree. The two most devastating hurricanes in the United States occurred before temperatures began to rise: Galveston in 1900 (8,000 killed), and Florida in 1928 (2,500 killed). (In contrast, Hurricane Sandy is said to have been responsible for 130 deaths.)

One error that often leads to exaggeration of harm is the "static bias." This is the inability to visualize the small, incremental changes in human behavior and organization that will be rather painlessly made over a long period of time.

In December 2013, a group of eighteen distinguished academics released the document *Assessing "Dangerous Climate Change."* Under the leadership of James Hansen of Columbia (formerly at NASA), this survey purports to be an assessment of the "potentially disastrous impacts" of anthropogenic global warming. Sadly, it fails to quantify any human harm that might result from global warming. Instead, it resorts to hysterical claims rooted in the static fallacy. The following passage is typical: "The carbon from fossil fuel burning will remain in and affect the climate system for many millennia, ensuring that over time sea level rise of many meters will occur—tens of meters if most of the fossil fuels are burned. That order of sea level rise would result in the loss of hundreds of historical coastal cities worldwide with incalculable economic consequences, create hundreds of millions of global warming refugees from highly-populated low-lying areas, and thus likely cause major international conflicts" (Hansen et al. 2013, 6).

From this language, we get a picture of a wall of water sixty feet high, crashing like a tsunami into the cities of the world, with humans fleeing as they scream in fright. Once we overcome the static fallacy, we see that this image is quite ridiculous. For one thing, it assumes that human tastes, technology, and living patterns are fixed for all time, when of course these parameters are changing rapidly. In two thousand years, humans may well be living in outer space or on floating sea cities. Our ability to deal with climate problems is vastly superior to our distant ancestors' ability—and it is likely that this trend will continue as wealth levels rise and technology improves.

In any case, over such a long period of time, humans can adapt very easily to the fact that land in some places is no longer suitable for building on. Cities will decline in population, as they do all the time with no noticeable emergency. Cleveland, for example, lost 57 percent of its population between 1950 and 2010—about two hundred times the rate of population decline that this two-thousand-year city-loss scenario would imply. Nobody saw any "refugees" from Cleveland fleeing to Canada with pajamas trailing out of half-closed suitcases or any "international conflicts" either.

Good Intentions Do Not Imply Good Policy

The typical approach to public policy is to point to a problem or danger and say, "Do something!" If a forest fire is burning, most people assume you should send a crew to put it out. Economists patiently try to point out that this approach is irrational because every effort to fix a problem has costs. Sometimes these costs are greater than the expected benefit of treating the problem. It may be, for example, that the cost of sending the fire crew—including possible loss of life—exceeds the value of the timber that might be saved from fire.

The global warming issue presents a staggeringly complex problem in benefit–cost analysis. After all, carbon-dioxide-limiting policies, as currently proposed and partially implemented, involve huge costs on consumers, workers, and investors, and these costs may equal or exceed any expected benefits of slowing down global warming.

The activists have been negligent about making serious benefit–cost analyses of their proposed policies. Their style has been to point to the most recent hurricane or to conjure up a vision of global warming "refugees" two thousand years from now and say, "Do something!"

Economists have vainly attempted to use more sophisticated models in their cost–benefit analyses of carbon policies. In the 2013 article "Climate Change Policy: What Do the Models Tell Us?" MIT scholar Robert Pindyck's answer to the title question is: "Very little." He concludes that the complexity of climate and the economy have overwhelmed economists' integrated-assessment models, which have "crucial flaws that make them close to useless as tools for policy analysis." Key inputs into these models are "arbitrary," and even the most advanced models' "descriptions of the impact of climate change are completely ad hoc, with no theoretical or empirical foundation" (860). Ironically, these same models generally project that the economic effects of rising greenhouse gases have been *positive* so far—due to the fertilization effect of atmospheric carbon dioxide, longer growing seasons, reduced heating costs and fewer cold-related health problems (Tol 2009).

Is Government a Good Problem-Solving Machine?

Faith in government is, as our outline indicates, an essential pillar of the global warming activist case. Even if all the other points are correct, the activist global warming position makes no sense unless one further assumes that the governments expected to carry out the policies are effective and responsible.

For most activists, the assumption of government efficacy is not an explicit, carefully defended belief. Rather, it tends to be an unexamined bias, perhaps left over from childhood when authority figures, including government officials, are idealized. Strangely, this faith in government clashes with their own knowledge of repeated government failure. For example, Ruth Marcus, columnist for the *Washington Post,* is committed to "the enterprise of activist government." Yet she began her glum 2013 year-end column declaring that "Washington, which never fails to disappoint, managed to disappoint more than usual this year." This kind of inconsistency puzzles conservatives and libertarians, of course: Why are people who say that government *never* fails to disappoint so eager to turn to it again and again?

Skeptics can make use of this mental disconnect in the climate debate. They need to keep pointing out that governments are highly complex agglomerations of rather self-interested, emotional, and shortsighted human beings. Is it rational—the skeptic can say—to expect this entity to save us from global warming, even if we do need

saving? Won't the policies putatively adopted to cure global warming really be cover for self-dealing and rent seeking?

Indeed, one would think there is already enough evidence to persuade alarmists that putting their hopes in government is a fool's errand. After more than two decades of urging and agitation, the carbon dioxide concentration in the atmosphere still marches steadily upward, and all the American political system has delivered are trivial, pinching regulations and boondoggles: Solyndra and the death of incandescent light bulbs.

For the activist position to succeed, it is not just Washington ("which never fails to disappoint") that has to work right. The effort has to be international. All the major governments of the world have to enact drastic carbon-dioxide-limiting policies and maintain those policies decade after decade, unaffected by special interests, shifting opinions, demagogy, scandals, and corruption.

The spirit of scientific openness prevents us from saying that such an effective, responsible government accomplishment is "impossible." We can simply suggest that it is, as the IPCC might put it, "highly unlikely."

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