



Scenes from the Climate Inquisition

By Kenneth P. Green and Steven F. Hayward

On February 2, an AEI research project on climate-change policy that we have been organizing was the target of a journalistic hit piece in Britain's largest left-wing newspaper, the Guardian. The article's allegation—that we tried to bribe scientists to criticize the work of the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)—is easy to refute. More troubling than the article is the growing worldwide effort to silence anyone with doubts about the catastrophic warming scenario that Al Gore and other climate extremists are putting forth.

“Scientists and economists have been offered \$10,000 each by a lobby group funded by one of the world’s largest oil companies to undermine a major climate change report due to be published today,” began the *Guardian* article. The byline was Ian Sample, the paper’s science correspondent, and his story ran under the headline “Scientists Offered Cash to Dispute Climate Study.”

Sample spoke to one of us for five minutes to gather a perfunctory quotation to round out his copy, but he clearly was not interested in learning the full story. He found time, however, to canvass critics for colorful denunciations of AEI as “the Bush administration’s intellectual Cosa Nostra,” with nothing but “a suitcase full of cash.”

Every claim in the story was false or grossly distorted, starting with the description of AEI as a “lobby group”—AEI engages in no lobbying—funded by the world’s largest oil company. The *Guardian* reports that “AEI has received more than \$1.6 million from ExxonMobil.” Yes, that is true—over the last seven years, a sum that represents less than 1 percent of AEI’s total revenue during that period.

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The irony of this story line is that AEI and similar right-leaning groups are often attacked for supposedly ignoring the scientific “consensus” and promoting only the views of a handful of “skeptics” from the disreputable fringe. Yet in this instance, when we sought the views of leading “mainstream” scientists, our project is said to be an attempt at bribery. In any event, it has never been true that we ignore mainstream science, and anyone who reads AEI publications closely can see that we are not “skeptics” about warming. It is possible to accept the general consensus about the existence of global warming while having valid questions about the extent of warming, the consequences of warming, and the appropriate responses. In particular, one can remain a policy skeptic, which is where we are today, along with nearly all economists.

The substantive back story, in brief, is as follows. The 2001 report of the IPCC expressed the hope that scientific progress would reduce key uncertainties in climate models, especially those having to do with clouds and aerosols. As the 2001 report stated: “The accuracy of these [temperature] estimates continues to be limited by uncertainties in estimates of internal variability, natural and anthropogenic forcing, and the climate response to external forcing.” The IPCC identified twelve key factors for climate modeling

and said that the level of scientific understanding was “very low” for seven of them. What progress have climate models made since this assessment was written, we wondered? Even people who closely follow the scientific journals are hard-pressed to tell.

In Pursuit of the Honest Truth

Last summer we decided to commission essays from scientists, economists, and public policy experts in the hope of launching a fresh round of discussion and perhaps holding a conference or publishing a book. Among the nine scholars we wrote to in July were Gerald North and Steve Schroeder of Texas A&M University, who have done scrupulous and detailed work on some key aspects of climate modeling, and we were confident that their work would be seen as authoritative by all sides. (North chaired the recent National Academy of Sciences review of the controversial “hockey stick” temperature reconstruction.) We couched our query in the context of wanting to make sure the next IPCC report received serious scrutiny and criticism.

Our offer of an honorarium of up to \$10,000 to busy scientists to review several thousand pages of material and write an original analysis in the range of 7,500–10,000 words is entirely in line with honoraria that AEI and similar organizations pay to distinguished economists and legal scholars for commissioned work. (Our letter to North and Schroeder can be found at www.aei.org/publication25586/.)

North declined our invitation on account of an already full schedule. Schroeder shared our letter with one of his Texas A&M colleagues, atmospheric scientist Andrew Dessler. Dessler posted our complete letter on his blog in late July, along with some critical but largely fair-minded comments, including: “While one might be skeptical that the AEI will give the [IPCC Fourth Assessment Report] a fair hearing, the fact that they have solicited input from a credible and mainstream scientist like Jerry North suggests to me that I should not prejudge their effort.”

Dessler’s story was linked on the popular environmental blog Grist, after which someone in the environmental advocacy community (the *Washington Post* suggests it

was Greenpeace and the Public Interest Research Group) picked up the story and tried to plant it, with a sinister spin, somewhere in the media. Several reporters looked into it—including one from a major broadcast network who spent half a day talking with us in November about the substance of our climate views—but reached the conclusion that there was no story here. In particular, Lee Lane’s recent AEI’s Press book *Strategic*

Options for Bush Administration Climate Policy, advocating a carbon tax and criticizing the current Bush administration’s climate policy, clearly did not fit the “Big Oil lobby corrupts science” story line.

Instead, the story was taken overseas and peddled to the *Guardian*, which, like some of its British competitors, has a history of publishing environmentalist hype as news. (In December, *Guardian* columnist George Monbiot offered the view that “every time someone dies as a result of floods in Bangladesh, an airline executive should be dragged out of his office and drowned.”) Add a Matt Drudge link and a credulous recycling of the story by NPR’s *Morning Edition*, and a full-scale media frenzy was on. Even Al Gore

jumped on the bandwagon, calling us “unethical” in an appearance in Silicon Valley and on a CNN interview.

We were deluged with calls, but unlike the reporters who had looked at the story last fall, none of our interrogators in early February evinced any interest in the substance of our views on climate change science or policy, nor did any news story that we have seen accurately report the figures we supplied regarding ExxonMobil’s share of AEI’s funding.

The *Guardian* story, it should be noted, appeared the very day the IPCC released its new summary on the science of climate change. This was a transparent attempt to discredit an anticipated AEI blast at the IPCC. But no such blast was ever in the offing. As our letter to Schroeder makes clear, our project was not expected to produce any published results until some time in 2008, long after the headlines about the IPCC report would have faded.

Meanwhile, the IPCC’s release of a twenty-one-page summary of its work a full three months before the complete 1,400-page report is due to be published is exactly the kind of maneuver that raises questions about the politicization of the IPCC process. Why the delay? In

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the past, official summaries of IPCC reports have sometimes overstated the consensus of scientific opinion revealed later in fine print. (Though, to be fair, it is more often the media and advocacy groups that misrepresent findings or omit the IPCC's caveats and declarations of uncertainty on key points.) Is the full report going to be rewritten to square more closely with the summary? The Scientific Alliance in Cambridge, England, noted that it is "an unusual step to publish the summary of a document that has not yet been finalized and released into the public domain."

One possible reason for the timing is that there appear to be some significant retreats from the 2001 IPCC report. The IPCC has actually lowered its estimate of the magnitude of human influence on warming, though we will have to wait for the full report in May to understand how and why. Only readers with detailed knowledge of the 2001 report would notice these changes, which is why most news accounts failed to report them.

This reining-in has led some climate pessimists to express disappointment with the new summary. Environmental writer Joseph Romm, for example, complained about "the conservative edge to the final product." Which returns us to our starting point.

Convenient Timing

The rollout of the IPCC report and the *Guardian* story attacking us coincide with the climax of what can be aptly described as a climate inquisition intended to stifle debate about climate science and policy. Anyone who does not sign up 100 percent behind the catastrophic scenario is deemed a climate change denier. Distinguished climatologist Ellen Goodman spelled out the implication in her widely syndicated newspaper column in early February: "Let's just say that global warming deniers are now on a par with Holocaust deniers." One environmental writer suggested last fall that there should someday be Nuremberg Trials—or at the very least a South African-style Truth and Reconciliation Commission—for climate skeptics who have blocked the planet's salvation.

Al Gore has proposed that the media stop covering climate skeptics, and Britain's environment minister said

that just as the media should give no platform to terrorists, they should also exclude climate-change skeptics from the airwaves and the news pages. Heidi Cullen, a climate expert with the Weather Channel, made headlines with a recent call for weather broadcasters with impure climate opinions to be "decertified" by the American Meteorological Society. In mid-February politicians in Oregon and Delaware stepped up calls for the dismissal of their state's official climatologists, George Taylor and David Legates, solely on the grounds

of their public dissent from climate orthodoxy. And as we were completing this article, a letter arrived from senators Bernard Sanders (I-Vt.), Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.), Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.), and John Kerry (D-Mass.) expressing "very serious concerns" about our alleged "attempt to undermine science." Show trial hearing to follow? Stay tuned.

Intimidation, Demonization, and Inquisition

Desperation is the chief cause for this campaign of intimidation. The Kyoto accords are failing to curtail greenhouse-gas emissions, and although it is convenient to blame President Bush, anyone

who follows the Europeans' Kyoto evasions knows better. China will soon eclipse the United States as the world's largest greenhouse-gas emitter, depriving the gas-rationers of one of their favorite sticks for beating up Americans. The economics of steep, near-term emissions cuts are forbidding—though that is one consensus the climate crusaders ignore. Robert Samuelson nailed it in his syndicated column in early February: "Don't be fooled. The dirty secret about global warming is this: We have no solution."

The relentless demonization of anyone who does not fall in behind the Gore version of the issue—manmade climate catastrophe necessitating draconian cuts in emissions—has been effective. Steve Schroeder practically admitted as much when he told the *Washington Post* that although he did not think AEI would distort his work, he feared it could be "misused" or placed alongside "off-the-wall ideas" questioning the existence of global warming. In other words, Schroeder was afraid of the company he might have to keep. For the record, AEI extended an invitation to participate in this project

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to only one so-called skeptic (who declined, on grounds that reviewing the next IPCC report is not worth the effort). The other scientists and economists we contacted are from the “mainstream,” and we were happy to share with them the names of other prospective participants if they asked. Over the last four years, AEI has repeatedly invited senior IPCC figures—including Susan Solomon, Robert Watson, Richard Moss, and Nebojsa Nakicenovic—to speak at AEI panels and seminars, always with an offer to pay honoraria. Full schedules prevented all four from accepting our invitations; a few more junior IPCC members have spoken at AEI.

But the climate inquisition may prompt a backlash. One straw in the wind was the bracing statement made by Mike Hulme, director of the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research and one of Britain’s leading climate scientists. “I have found myself increasingly chastised by climate change campaigners when my public statements and lectures on climate change have not satisfied their thirst for environmental drama and exaggerated rhetoric,” Hulme told the BBC in November. “It seems that it is we, the professional climate scientists, who are now the skeptics. How the wheel turns. . . . Why is it not just campaigners, but politicians and scientists, too, who are openly confusing the language of fear, terror, and disaster with the observable physical reality of climate change, actively ignoring the careful hedging

which surrounds science’s predictions? . . . To state that climate change will be ‘catastrophic’ hides a cascade of value-laden assumptions which do not emerge from empirical or theoretical science.”

Then, in December, Kevin Vranes of the University

of Colorado, by no means a climate skeptic, commented on a widely read science blog about the mood of the most recent meeting of the American Geophysical Union, at which Al Gore made his standard climate presentation. “To sum up the state of the [climate science] world in one word, as I see it right now, it is this: tension,” Vranes wrote. “What I am starting to hear is internal backlash. . . . None of this is to say that the risk of climate change is being questioned or downplayed by our community; it’s

not. It is to say that I think some people feel that we’ve created a monster by limiting the ability of people in our community to question results that say ‘climate change is right here!’”

The climate inquisition is eliminating any space for sensible criticism of the climate science process or moderate deliberation about policy. Greenpeace and its friends may be celebrating their ability to gin up a phony scandal story and feed it to the left-wing press, but if people who are serious about climate change hunker down in their fortifications and stay silent, that bodes ill for both the future of climate policy and science.

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