

## The Truth is Inconvenient: Evaluating Gore's Claims About the Political Dimensions of the Climate Change Debate

By Jeff Kueter, President

The science and politics of climate change are highly polarized and politicized. The issues involved are global, complex, and costly. To assume that there are clear cut answers and obvious paths for policy is to look at the set of questions with one's mind already made up about the answers being sought. What makes matters worse is that today some are rewriting that history and in the process, not surprisingly, are rewriting it to suit their particular agendas. The most obvious examples are contained in former Vice President Al Gore's picture book, *An Inconvenient Truth*. Unfortunately, Mr. Gore's interpretations parrot charges and accusations that are simply wrong and conveniently misleading.

The former Vice President makes a number of accusations about the Bush Administration's handling of climate science and scientists, obviously disagrees with the U.S.'s current positions internationally, and laments the attention paid to those disagreeing with his interpretation of the state of science. Despite the book's title, none of these arguments constitutes *the truth*. Rather, they are what they are, statements of his opinion or beliefs, nothing more. We are all entitled to our opinions but not our own set of facts. Facts can be validated and facts should be the basis for judging climate change issues.

### Evaluating the Truth

#### *U.S. Policy Holds that Climate Change is Not a Problem*

Mr. Gore asserts that "... all of America's policies related to global warming have been changed to reflect the unscientific view—the administration's view—that global warming is not a problem" (pg. 286). These are widely held and completely baseless claims. The book fails to detail what policies have changed; after all, Mr. Gore's administration failed to implement a global warming policy of any kind. Under Mr. Bush, U.S. support for climate science research has grown, the U.S. has entered tangible international partnerships to address emissions growth, and the U.S. remains an active participant in international arenas. Domestically, there are numerous initiatives and undertakings that one can point to as evidence of an administration that stands in stark contrast to that characterization—<http://www.whitehouse.gov/ceq/global-change.html#1>.

As the simplest of proofs, take the President's own words as evidence:

"Last month, I announced the fundamental principles to guide a scientifically sound and effective global effort to reduce the buildup of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. As I said then, my Administration's climate change policy will be science-based, encourage research breakthroughs that lead to technological innovation, and take advantage of the power of markets. It will

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encourage global participation and will pursue actions that will help ensure continued economic growth and prosperity for our citizens and for citizens throughout the world.”<sup>1</sup>

“America and the world share this common goal: we must foster economic growth in ways that protect our environment. We must encourage growth that will provide a better life for citizens, while protecting the land, the water, and the air that sustain life. In pursuit of this goal, my government has set two priorities: we must clean our air, and we must address the issue of global climate change. We must also act in a serious and responsible way, given the scientific uncertainties. While these uncertainties remain, we can begin now to address the human factors that contribute to climate change. Wise action now is an insurance policy against future risks.”<sup>2</sup>

The United States has joined with Australia, China, India, Japan, and South Korea to create a new Asia-Pacific partnership on clean development, energy security, and climate change. This new results-oriented partnership will allow our nations to develop and accelerate deployment of cleaner, more efficient energy technologies to meet national pollution reduction, energy security, and climate change concerns in ways that reduce poverty and promote economic development.<sup>3</sup>

What has happened is the rejection of the failed global strategy strongly endorsed by Mr. Gore in Kyoto, Japan. That agreement is failing to curtail emissions growth in the countries that ratified it, as it was predicted to do when it was first proposed. Mr. Gore’s administration could not convince the U.S. Senate to adopt it and this Administration crafted a different approach, one that reflects the principles espoused in the quotes above.

### *Censoring Scientists*

Mr. Gore asserts that the Administration is silencing climate scientists and ironically cites the well publicized case of NASA’s James Hansen as proof of it (see page 264). On face, the proof undercuts the asserted claim. Hansen is one of the most outspoken and well publicized scientists in the history of the climate change debate. He frequently makes public appearances where he unabashedly issues policy statements interwoven with his assessment of science.<sup>4</sup> In the waning days before the 2004 presidential election, for example, Dr. Hansen traveled to Iowa City, Iowa to receive an award from his alma mater for his accomplishments as a physicist of international renown, while there he delivered a partisan speech in which he endorsed John Kerry’s presidential bid and sharply criticized the Administration he worked for. The speech drew front page coverage in the *New York Times* and propelled Hansen forward as a spokesperson for the Administration’s alleged abuse of scientists.

The irony of Hansen’s highly visible public profile in the context of his claims about the heavy hand of the Bush Administration censoring his ability to speak should be lost on no one. Further, the actions of the President’s science adviser, the Administrator of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), and several other R&D-sponsoring federal agencies in the climate science debate to further clarify their already open rules on the communication of scientific results shows plainly no coordinated effort exists to restrict scientists from publishing their work or discussing their findings.

Nevertheless, letters and accusations from scientists, the news media, and now even members of Congress persist in perpetuating the view that scientists are being silenced.<sup>5</sup>

But, the stringent regime of censorship merely asks that scientists’ discussions with the media “focus on science and fact, not speculation” and that scientists “[l]imit discus-

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sions to matters for which you are responsible and of which you have direct knowledge.”<sup>6</sup> The guidance from NASA is even more expansive:

“(c) NASA employees may speak to the media and the public about their work. When doing so, employees shall notify their immediate supervisor and coordinate with their public affairs office in advance of interviews whenever possible, or immediately thereafter, and are encouraged, to the maximum extent practicable, to have a public affairs officer present during interviews. If public affairs officers are present, their role will be to attest to the content of the interview, support the interviewee, and provide post-interview follow up with the media as necessary.

(d) NASA, as an Agency, does not take a position on any scientific conclusions. That is the role of the broad scientific community and the nature of the scientific process. NASA scientists may draw conclusions and may, consistent with this policy, communicate those conclusions to the media. However, NASA employees who present personal views outside their official area of expertise or responsibility must make clear that they are presenting their individual views—not the views of the Agency—and ask that they be sourced as such.”<sup>7</sup>

Further, those who believe Mr. Gore’s criticisms should make themselves familiar with the story of Dr. Will Happer. As told by Happer in *Politicizing Science: The Alchemy of Policymaking* and widely reported at the time of its occurrence, the early months of the Clinton-Gore Administration, Dr. Happer, then head of the Department of Energy’s Office of Science, dared to question the Vice President’s views on climate change and ozone depletion. Despite his scientific credentials, he was summarily dismissed at Gore’s direction.<sup>8</sup> In 1993 appar-

ently it was fine to fire a scientist who spoke his mind, but in 2006 it is wrong to insist that scientists follow the rules governing all federal employees.

### *Editing Documents*

The book then regales the reader with a supposed scandal wherein a non-scientifically trained Administration official was “empowered by the president to edit and censor” government reports on climate science, as revealed by a so-called whistleblower and the *New York Times*.

As the President’s Science Adviser and the Commerce Department’s Assistant Secretary for Oceans and Atmosphere, both scientists, made perfectly clear in the aftermath of the *Times* report, the edits were one set of inputs, and not the final input, and the documents were approved by them.<sup>9</sup> Further, it is unreasonable to expect that any President would agree to have reports that speak for the policy of his administration released without review or comment by senior staff.

Of course, what was lost in the reporting of the episode is any sense of whether the edits themselves had any effect on policy or scientific research or were inconsistent with scientific information being used by the Administration in the policy process.

### *Appointing Skeptics to Government Posts*

Another criticism raised by Mr. Gore is that “skeptical” scientists and policy advisors have assumed high level government posts and advisory positions. Setting aside the pejorative use of the term skeptic, as Mr. Gore knows full well, it is perfectly appropriate for a President to appoint whomever he wishes to positions in his administration. To the extent those positions are subject to congressional scrutiny through the approval process, then those individuals have secured congressional consent in order to hold the posts they do. If they are not subject to congressional scrutiny, then they serve at the President’s discretion much as

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thousands of others have before. Undoubtedly, Mr. Gore recommended many individuals to positions of authority within the U.S. Government during his tenure as Vice President who held views that were controversial or objectionable to large swaths of the American public. Yet, no one can question his right to have done so. If Mr. Gore is seeking to circumscribe a President's ability to select his advisors, he will considerably weaken presidencies of either party or political persuasion to the detriment of the American people.

Mr. Gore does not tell the reader that the Bush Administration has submitted numerous requests to consider highly controversial aspects of the climate science debate to the National Academies of Science, and their related body the National Research Council, for review and scrutiny. Additionally, the government's Climate Change Science Program has launched its own synthesis and assessment effort to consider key elements of the scientific discourse. Mr. Gore also does not tell the reader that, in the past six years, federal spending on climate science has averaged \$1.7 billion per year. Those efforts are intended to clarify the meaning of contemporary scientific debates and remaining uncertainties for the policy community in order to have the future direction of U.S. policy based on the facts, not our perception of the facts. That the Administration has chosen a deliberative process may stand in conflict with the alarmist view propagated by Mr. Gore's writings, but it can not be said to be ignorant of or ignoring the science.

### *Scientific Consensus on Climate Change*

The crux of Mr. Gore's comments on the politics of climate science is that the majority of climate scientists believe that human activities are the dominant cause of recent changes in the climate and that drastic action is required now to address it. The notion of the existence of a consensus is intended to close off debate and silence critics. The irony of such a push within the scientific community should be lost on

none. The foundation of the scientific method suggests that no principle is sacred and all things are subject to test and validation. What Mr. Gore and proponents of this argument are trying to do is close off research and silence the public discourse, forcing the acceptance of a monolithic recitation of the "facts."

In the beginning of his book, Mr. Gore tells the reader about Roger Revelle, whom he credits with first exposing him to the problems caused by CO<sub>2</sub> emissions (pg. 30-41). What he doesn't tell the reader is how he and his staff attacked a scientist who had published a paper in 1991 with Revelle questioning whether the state of knowledge about climate was sufficient to justify drastic action. The article precipitated political machinations designed to discredit those involved, generated a lawsuit, and ultimately a segment on *Nightline*. The story is retold powerfully by Dr. Fred Singer in *Politicizing Science*.<sup>10</sup>

The key point to draw from the story and from considerations of consensus is this—the seriousness of climate change (both from an environmental and economic perspective) demands a full consideration of the issues and uncertainties. Reliance on the claim that "the consensus says it is so" shouldn't be enough to close off consideration of the questions and uncertainties.

### **Conclusion**

Mr. Gore's book should be recognized for what it is—a summation of a particular perspective on climate science, its implications, and the meaning for policy. They are undoubtedly his views and are shared by others. They are not *the truth*. They are Mr. Gore's version of the *truth* and the facts, in many cases, are to be found elsewhere.

### **Notes**

1. President's Statement on Climate Change, July 13, 2001 (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/07/20010713-2.html>)

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2. President Announces Clear Skies & Global Climate Change Initiatives, February 14, 2002 (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/02/20020214-5.html>)
  3. President's Statement on U.S. Joining New Asia-Pacific Partnership, July 27, 2005 (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/07/20050727-9.html>)
  4. See, for instance, "Dangerous Anthropogenic Influence" a speech delivered by Hansen at the University of Iowa on October 26, 2004.
  5. For example, Sen. Lieberman's recent correspondence with the President's Science Adviser ([http://hsgac.senate.gov/\\_files/Dem\\_Files/060613Marburger.pdf](http://hsgac.senate.gov/_files/Dem_Files/060613Marburger.pdf)) and Rep. Wu's request to the Government Accountability Office ([http://www.house.gov/apps/list/press/or01\\_wu/pr05022006\\_GAO.html](http://www.house.gov/apps/list/press/or01_wu/pr05022006_GAO.html)).
  6. NOAA media policy (NAO 219-6), [http://www.corporateservices.noaa.gov/%7Eames/NAOs/Chap\\_219/naos\\_219\\_6.html](http://www.corporateservices.noaa.gov/%7Eames/NAOs/Chap_219/naos_219_6.html).
  7. NASA Policy on the Release of Information to News and Information Media, [http://www.nasa.gov/pdf/145687main\\_information\\_policy.pdf](http://www.nasa.gov/pdf/145687main_information_policy.pdf).
  8. Happer, William (2003). "Harmful Politicization of Science" in *Politicizing Science: The Alchemy of Policymaking*, Gough (ed.). (Hoover Institution Press: Stanford, CA): 45-56; and Jenkins, Holman (1993). "Al Gore Leads a Purge." *Wall Street Journal*, May 25.
  9. Revkin, Andrew. (2006). "White House Calls Editing Climate Files Part of Usual Review." *New York Times*, June 9.
  10. Singer, Fred (2003). "The Revelle-Gore Story: Attempted Political Suppression of Science" in *Politicizing Science: The Alchemy of Policymaking*, Gough (ed.). (Hoover Institution Press: Stanford, CA): 283-297.