

CLIMATE CHANGE: IS IT WORSE THAN YOU THINK?

by Ed O'Rourke

There is a lot to be said for Joseph Romm's *Hell and High Water: Global Warming – The Solution and the Politics – And What We Should Do* (William Morrow & Co., 2007, 240 pages). Most of us have read several books about global warming. How is this book different or distinguishable from the rest? Romm's description showing that things are worse than we think and his explanation of the reasons for the low acceptance of the global warming message are two outstanding contributions.

The reports from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and other such statements are consensus documents. They soften the worse scenarios to achieve support for a statement that everyone can live with. As an individual, Romm needed no one else's agreement. He projects that if emissions rise under existing trends, more than half of European summers will be hotter than 2003 within the next four decades. Since the 1970s, the number of "very dry areas", as defined by the Palmer Drought Severity Index, has more than doubled to about 30% of the earth's surface. Wildfires have been on the rise worldwide for half a century. The average temperature for the continental United States in 2006 were the hottest since readings began in 1895. On a global basis, every single year since 1993 has been in the top 20 warmest years on record.

The droughts and high temperatures do more than increase the number of wildfires. The heat and lack of water weakens trees' resistance to pests.

Carbon dioxide levels are higher than they have been for millions of years. In 2005, atmospheric concentrations of carbon dioxide were 380 parts per million (ppm), about a third higher than preindustrial levels of about 280 ppm. Under one possible scenario, the atmospheric

concentrations will be 500 ppm by 2050. When the concentrations get much past 500 ppm, the complete melting of the Greenland ice sheet and consequent 20 foot ocean rise is all but certain. The Amazon rain forest will be lost. This generation and the next will ruin civilization for the next 50 generations.

Increased warming will set off a chain reaction, causing the soil, tundra (permafrost) and oceans to release carbon dioxide and methane. Ice surfaces reflect heat back into the atmosphere. When the ice in the Arctic and glaciers melt, the ground or the ocean absorbs heat, making things worse. According to some models, the Arctic lost one-third of its ice volume in the 1997-2002 period.

The first few feet of ocean rise will displace more than 100 million people world wide and submerge parts of our major Gulf and Atlantic coast cities making them sitting ducks for super hurricanes.

If there is any hope, humankind will have to stop building traditional coal plants. Those projected as being built in the 2005 to 2030 period will release as much carbon dioxide as all the coal burned since the Industrial Revolution. If that happens, we are doomed.

Under crises like this only Big Government can relocate millions of citizens, build massive levees, ration critical resources such as water and arable land, mandate harsh and rapid reductions in fossil fuel energy. No one wants this, especially conservatives. If there is no action now, there will be no choice.

To avoid such a grim fate, Romm like all risk managers knows that prevention is cheaper than repair. He calls for "... a desperate effort to cut global emissions by 75% in less than three decades - a massive, sustained government intervention into every aspect of our lives on a scale that far surpasses what this country did during World War II."

I hope that he and others in future books and articles go into detail about the mobilization that will have to take place now to allow some flexibility 20 to 30 years from now. I call for looking at our entire life style and see what has to be changed and what has to be thrown overboard. Our country spends about as much on defense as the rest of the world combined. Who are we afraid of? Our country has more people in prison per capita than any other country. Our country spends billions to prohibit the use of drugs that were perfectly legal before the Harrison Narcotics Act of 1914. Our income inequality is worse than it was during the Gilded Age.

My solutions are to cut the defense budget by half, institute some punishments other than incarceration, take most drugs off the enforcement list and to set 100% tax on income exceeding \$10,000,000 per year per individual. That would free up resources for more worthwhile projects.

Romm's second great contribution is explaining why the environmental message is not clearly projected. The scientific community does not excel in persuasive speech nor do they hire Madison Avenue organizations to present their case. Scientists are reticent about making plain statements and climatologists are even worse. They do not like to repeat themselves and concentrate on what they do not know. That is why they do research.

The media, on the other hand, is good at glib and dramatic statements, like those made by politicians but that scientists avoid. Scientists like the late Carl Sagan who did a top notch job communicating with the public discovered that the scientific community frowns on flamboyance. In a special vote, the National Academy of Sciences rejected his application for membership. Scientists as a group criticize those making a fuss over climate change as having a political agenda.

The usual tactic of global warming deniers and the Bush administration is to do little or nothing "before all the facts are in." In science, all the facts are never in. If public officials were to wait until all the facts were in to formulate policy, there would never be any action to avoid any potential problem. The Bush White House's demands for more research are a smokescreen.

When the Bush White House sees a draft of a government report on global warming that they do not like, they change the report to reflect their ideology. The White House heavily edited a 2003 Environmental Protection Agency report about the threat of rising temperatures and gutted every substantial conclusion. They even removed the sentence, "Climate change has global consequences for human health and the environment."

Thomas Friedman in his March 28, 2007 column spoke of a House committee that released documents showing "hundreds of instances in which a White House official, who was previously an oil company lobbyist, edited government climate reports to play up uncertainty of a human role in global warming or play down evidence of such a role." The official was Philip A. Cooney, who left the government after the New York Times exposed this conflict of interest. It was no surprise that Exxon/Mobil hired Mr. Cooney after his departure from government.

The media covers scientific issues more like a political debate giving equal time to “both sides”. They ignore the climate change consensus that is rare in scientific circles. Given this type of logic or the lack of it, they would interview Holocaust deniers and flat earthers.

At the same time, global change deniers like Exxon/Mobil heavily funded scientists to present their case to minimize the threat. These scientists never had their case presented in a peer reviewed journal. They prepared talking points for their clients. They argued that fuel efficiency standards, pollution reducers and the like would be job killers for Americans and that companies would lose market share. These scientists never referred to companies like Toyota whose capitalization and market share have increased world wide.

Far from being job killers, green efforts have improved our standard of living by making the same goods and services with fewer resources. From the mid-1970s until today refrigerator electricity use has dropped by three-quarters. Electrical consumption per capita in California was flat from 1976 to 1995 while it grew by 60% in the rest of the country.

The United States spends \$250 billion annually for foreign oil. By reducing greenhouse gas emissions through alternative fuels, tripling the efficiency of our cars and going green, “...we could achieve genuine energy security, sharply reduce our trade deficit, revitalize our domestic auto industry, create countless jobs, and increase our national security, because we would no longer be beholden to undemocratic governments in the Middle East or have our economy repeatedly subject to price shocks from political instability or terrorist attacks.” This is the smart move.

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