

Climate deniers, like Big Tobacco, thrive behind smokes screen of doubt

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It has been just over 50 years since U.S. Surgeon General Luther Terry released the groundbreaking report "Smoking and Health." The report concluded, "Cigarette smoking is a health hazard of sufficient importance in the United States to warrant appropriate remedial action." The tobacco industry intensified its campaign to defend smoking, funding bogus groups and junk science. Now, a similar war on the truth is being waged by the fossil-fuel industry to deny the science of climate change.

"Doubt is our product," states a 1969 memo from the tobacco giant Brown and Williamson, "since it is the best means of competing with the 'body of fact' that exists in the mind of the general public." Brown and Williamson was a member of "Big Tobacco," along with Philip Morris USA, R.J. Reynolds, Lorillard Tobacco Company, U.S. Tobacco, Liggett Group, and American Tobacco. In 1994, the CEOs of these seven companies lied before Congress, claiming that nicotine was not addictive -- even though secret research conducted by their corporations proved they knew otherwise. The image of the seven executives with their right hands in the air, swearing an oath to tell the truth, became an iconic image of a deceitful, deadly industry.

By the mid-1990s, states began suing tobacco companies to recover the billions of dollars they were spending to care for smoking-related illnesses. By November 1998, the cases had been settled under the "Tobacco Master Settlement Agreement," in which the companies agreed to pay to the states \$206 billion over 25 years. They also agreed, importantly, to stop marketing tobacco products to children. Much of the settlement has been spent to educate the public, especially children, about the life-threatening impacts of smoking.

In 1999, the federal government filed a lawsuit against Big Tobacco under RICO, the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act. The Justice Department alleged that "defendants have engaged in and executed -- and continue to engage in and execute -- a massive 50-year scheme to defraud the public, including consumers of cigarettes." Despite these domestic legal losses, Big Tobacco still thrives globally, using mechanisms like the World Trade Organization to defeat anti-smoking measures in other countries as impediments to "free trade." And they are still researching ways to hook new smokers on nicotine, most recently with e-cigarettes.

Today, the fossil-fuel industry creates a smoke screen of doubt, just like Big Tobacco. Greenpeace USA published a report in 2013, "Dealing in Doubt," that maps out the history of the climate-denial industry, with its key participants and its funders. Interestingly, there is a direct link between Big Tobacco and the climate deniers. Many of the older climate science denialists got their start as hired guns for Big Tobacco, arguing against the threats posed by secondhand smoke.

These climate "skeptics" are scattered throughout an assortment of so-called free-market think tanks, including Americans for Prosperity, the Cato Institute, the American Petroleum Institute, the Competitive Enterprise Institute and The Heartland Institute. Guided by global public-relations firms like Hill and Knowlton, these groups mount media campaigns to challenge respected climate-change reports, with little or no scientific backing to their claims. While fossil-fuel giants like ExxonMobil traditionally funded these denial groups, negative publicity has driven the funders into the shadows. For example, the Koch brothers, Charles and David, who make their billions of dollars from fossil fuel and aggressively fund efforts to block regulation, in addition to directly funding groups, also mask donations. They and others make charitable contributions to a nonprofit shell called Donors Trust and its partner organization, Donors Capital Fund, which then pass the funds on to the denial groups, giving anonymity to the original donors.

The Kochs and other fossil-fuel interests also pour money into our elections, which is one reason why the U.S. Senate shifted to Republican control last November. Consequently, one key Senate committee that deals directly with climate change will now be chaired by Oklahoma Republican Sen. James Inhofe. Inhofe claims human-induced climate change is a hoax, and has compared the Environmental Protection Agency to the Gestapo.

Like tobacco's impacts on health, climate science is settled. Close to 2,000 scientists who sit on the U.N.'s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change have produced volumes documenting the grave threat to the climate from the current rate of human-generated carbon emissions. The world's leaders will gather in Paris next December, hoping to commit to a binding agreement that will lower emissions and limit the average global temperature increase to 2 degrees Celsius (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit).

The climate-denial industry will be working full speed to derail any progress, marketing its primary product: doubt. Denialists were just blowing smoke back then for Big Tobacco, as they are now for Big Oil and Coal. This time, the consequences of their professional lying on climate could easily spell death and disaster for billions of us here on planet Earth.