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Scientists who favor ideology over fact

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Scientists, it has long been assumed, are merchandisers of cold hard fact derived from careful reasoning and scrupulous inquiry. In "Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming," **Naomi Oreskes** and **Erik M. Conway** reveal that sometimes something else comes into play: politics. Instead of clarifying the physical world for us, a cadre of scientists have worked to confuse the public in order to promote their own ideological beliefs, the authors write. The result is a merchandising of scientific doubt.

By Naomi Oreskes and Erik M Conway

A new article by eight scientists from seven different institutions has announced still [more evidence](#) for "robust warming in the global upper ocean." Published in Nature, the English language's top scientific journal, their work extends and improves upon research dating back to 2000 that found that anthropogenic greenhouse gases have been forcing the world's oceans to warm since the 1960s. Yet a variety of polls show that a near-majority of Americans think that either global warming isn't happening, or that it isn't man-made. Why is it that so many people don't believe well-established scientific facts? Why are so many of us confused?

The simple answer is that there has been a deliberate effort to confuse us. Much attention has been already been given to the role of oil and coal companies in financing this campaign of confusion. But hardly any has been given to the role played by scientists in constructing this network of doubt, and, crucially, in lending credibility to it.

A handful of highly respected physicists led the way in fighting the facts of global warming. [Frederick Seitz](#), [S. Fred Singer](#), William Nierenberg, and [Robert Jastrow](#). They became involved with global warming denial through a circuitous route. Some of them helped the tobacco industry cast doubt on the linkage between smoking and cancer; in the mid-1980s, they branched out, challenging the science behind acid rain, ozone depletion, and finally global warming.

One way they undermined science was through the creation of a scientific Potemkin Village: the [George C. Marshall Institute](#), which generated and marketed "white papers" that had the trappings of science -- footnotes, graphs, charts, etc. -- but without its substance. Cherry-picked facts, claims made out of context, and physical incoherency are hallmarks of their publications. In turn, a variety of other ideologically committed "think tanks" parroted and promoted this simulacrum of science. [The Competitive Enterprise Institute](#), the [American Enterprise Institute](#), [the Heartland Institute](#), the [CATO Institute](#), and several others have formed a politically potent network.

Most people assume that behind this story must be the driving force of

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money, but the think-tank network suggests a different driving force: ideology. These think tanks all have one thing in common: a commitment to free markets. The physicists shared that conviction, too. Old Cold warriors, when the Cold War ended, they found a new enemy: environmentalists who they viewed as "watermelons"-- green on the outside, red on the inside.

As Cold warriors, they believed that fighting subversion at home was as important as fighting Reds abroad. And as free market fundamentalists, they opposed all environmental and business regulation, seeing them as the slippery slope to socialism. This view was perhaps most clearly articulated by Fred Singer, in a 1991 article, where he argued that global warming was being manufactured by environmentalists to support a "hidden political agenda" against "business, the free market, and the capitalistic system."

Global warming was not manufactured by environmentalists; it was made by the diverse set of human activities that have increased CO2 in the atmosphere and decreased the planetary forests that remove CO2 from it. Global warming is also, in the words of [Lord Nicholas Stern](#), the "the greatest and widest-ranging market failure ever seen". It is a market failure because carbon pollution carries no price, and markets can only regulate things by price signals. Fixing it means some form of government intervention, either to impose a price on carbon (by emissions trading or carbon taxes), or via regulation.

The goal of global warming denial is to prevent such government action. It has nothing to do with the quality of the science, or the competence of climate scientists. It is purely politics. Our actors allowed their political views to overwhelm their respect for scientific evidence, scientific results, indeed, respect for the activity to which they had originally dedicated their lives.

By Steven E. Levinaston | May 28, 2010: 5:30 AM ET

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