

The Slot

Possible Trump Science Advisor Compares Climate Science to ISIS, Tells Us Jezebel 'Is Well Named'

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Dr. William Happer, a retired Princeton physicist and trusted [Breitbart expert](#), met with then president-elect Donald Trump in early January, reportedly to discuss the role of science advisor; he [told](#) *The Guardian* last month that if offered the post he would accept it. On inauguration day, in a colorful demonstration of his personal brand of expertise, Happer sent a combative email to a Jezebel reader informing her that the “demonization of CO2” “really differs little from the Nazi persecution of the Jews, the Soviet extermination of class enemies or ISIL slaughter of infidels.”

For those familiar with Happer, ⁷⁷ these claims aren't hugely surprising—Happer, who is not a climate scientist, has compared established climate science to Nazi persecution multiple times before, a seemingly odd choice for the former Cyrus Fogg Brackett Professor of Physics at Princeton and former director of the DOE's Department of Science under George H.W. Bush. The ISIL and Soviet references appear to be a new flourish. During a CNBC interview in 2014, Happer [yelled](#) at Andrew Ross Sorkin to “shut up!” after Sorkin questioned a previous [comparison](#) he'd made between climate science and Nazi propaganda; he then repeated it. “The comment I made was just that the demonization of carbon dioxide is just like the demonization of the poor Jews under Hitler,” he clarified to Sorkin. “Carbon dioxide is actually a benefit to the world, and so were the Jews.”

This is a point Dr. Happer has apparently continued to defend, somehow, amid the unusually heavy monsoon of irony raining down on his head. Anna, a Jezebel reader from Colorado, had been enmeshed in a disagreement with a Republican relative over climate change, one of many stressful political clashes that [heated up](#) in families across the US after Trump's election. They had begun arguing about their views over the holidays, and continued in an email exchange.

“We went back and forth on, you know, what sources [my relative] is using as the basis for decision-making around climate change,” Anna said, describing it as a frustrating process. “It's the two sides of the spectrum not understanding each other, and me trying to understand why there's such a gap in knowledge base between the two of us.”

Well, for one, her relative had been listening to William Happer. He copied and pasted Anna's arguments against Happer (which noted Happer's work for organizations associated with the

fossil fuel industry) into an email to the scientist himself, writing: “We’ve exchanged a couple of emails. You helped my understanding of the role that CO₂ and water vapor play as greenhouse gasses... Would you have any interest in addressing her comments?”

Happer responded:

(In the [linked interview](#), Happer claimed that “the world is almost always warming or cooling,” and, in response to a [Greenpeace sting](#) that found Happer willing to secretly work on behalf of fossil fuel interests, said: “I have used every avenue possible to spread the good news about the benefits of CO₂”.)

After Anna joined the email exchange, directly questioning Happer’s integrity and noting his previous comments comparing the “demonization of CO₂” to the Holocaust, Happer wrote the following:

(The expletive-laden voicemail in reference here claims it is “truly disgusting that William Happer used his credentials in the name of Princeton University to go out there propagating *bulllll*-shit.”)

Gavin Schmidt, a climate scientist at Columbia University and the director of the NASA Goddard Institute for space studies, rebutted Happer’s claims in an email to Jezebel, noting that “sea level was ‘typically’ 100’s of feet higher during the Phanerozoic,” and CO₂ levels are “nowhere near ‘famine levels’ for many plants,” considering many plants survived during the 180ppm CO₂ levels that defined the last ice age. As for the rest:

The second point is also partly true, there is a growth of vegetation around the world which is where a fraction of the emitted CO₂ is ending up - but half of it is still in the atmosphere (increasing global warming), and the rest is (slowly) going into the ocean (increasing ocean acidification). Regardless of his ancillary claim, plants still don’t grow without water. His third point is wrong - or at least is only a cherry pick. For surface temperatures, model predictions have been very in line with what has happened, for sea ice, the observations are showing bigger changes than predicted, and for expansion of the tropics, again, observations show more impacts than predicted. His ‘observations’ are with a single data set that has a substantial structural uncertainty and while trends are lower than predicted, it is unclear why that is (it may be problems with the models or the simulations, but it may be related to systemic biases in the data set as well).

“This is one of the most offensive things I have ever read,” Penn State climate scientist Michael E. Mann wrote to Jezebel after seeing Happer’s email, dismissing his points as “the usual litany of shopworn climate change denier talking points.” Mann, who recently co-authored a [study](#) demonstrating the “fingerprint” of human-caused climate change on extreme global weather events, became a [major target](#) of the climate denial movement after his famous “hockey stick” graph [indicated](#) an unprecedented rise in global temperatures. Mann has received death threats, and at one point an [envelope filled with white powder](#). At the invitation of Democratic lawmakers, on Wednesday, Mann will participate in yet another [bonkers House Science Committee hearing](#) on climate change designed to question scientific consensus on the issue.

A Princeton University representative declined to comment on the email exchange, citing Happer's 2014 retirement. (He's still closely associated with the school—it's worth noting that in 2015, Happer did an interview with Canadian video series Conversations That Matter explicitly labeled as "Professor of Physics, Princeton University.")

With or without Happer's help, the Trump administration, like the Republican party, is already steeped in climate denial; the Mercer family, Trump's biggest financial backers, recently spent two days at a Heartland Institute conference, the theme of which was, essentially, "more CO2 in the atmosphere is actually great." Happer, one of several climate skeptic scientists who have been linked to fossil fuel interests, has spent years legitimizing this notion.

Happer is an "adjunct scholar" at the Koch-founded Cato Institute and served on the board of the Exxon-funded George C. Marshall Institute. In 2015, the Marshall Institute morphed into the CO2 Coalition under the leadership of Happer and Bill O'Keefe, a former Exxon Mobile lobbyist who was serving as executive Vice President/COO at the American Petroleum Institute when the trade organization formulated a plan to undermine established climate science. The tagline of the CO2 Coalition is "carbon dioxide is essential for life," and its "facts" page looks like this:

Happer told *The Guardian* in a February interview that climate scientists are a "glassy-eyed cult," and claimed that federal government employees are "more motivated" than fossil fuel companies because "you can't rise in the American bureaucracy without some threat to address." He's written multiple *Wall Street Journal* op-eds urging people not to worry about climate change. At the invitation of Sen. James Inhofe (R-Oklahoma), who has received around \$1.8 million from the oil and gas industry and famously threw a snowball on the Senate floor to prove that climate change isn't real, Happer gave Senate testimony in 2009 comparing the movement to stop climate change with the temperance movement of the early twentieth century. He also falsely claimed that "we are really in a CO2 famine," a statement he repeated at a December 2016 conference helmed by a chemtrails conspiracy theorist.

In the email to her relative explaining why she distrusted Happer's scientific claims, Anna mentioned a 2015 Greenpeace sting that ensnared Happer and Frank Clemente, a professor emeritus of sociology at Penn State. Emails revealed that Happer agreed to receive and conceal payment from two employees of a Middle Eastern oil and gas company (who were actually Greenpeace employees) in exchange for a report on the supposed benefits of carbon emissions. Happer's CO2 Coalition colleague Bill O'Keefe suggested secretly funneling the funds to the CO2 coalition via Donors Trust, spotlighting an organization *Mother Jones* has called the "dark money ATM of the conservative movement." Greenpeace also reported that Happer disclosed receiving \$8,000 from Peabody Energy to testify in a Minnesota State hearing on the impacts of carbon dioxide. ("I don't think I have anything to be embarrassed about," he told the *New York Times* in response to the sting report.)

When reached for comment on the email exchange and his willingness to work on behalf of fossil fuel interests, Happer responded with the link he sent to Anna's relative. He also said this:

If I understand the thrust of the article you are writing, your organization is well named. The original Queen Jezebel had an innocent man, Naboth, smeared and stoned to death so her husband, King Ahab, could steal his vineyard [sic]. You can smear me, as the original Jezebel did, but if you want to physically destroy me, you may find it bit harder. If you have the courage, quote this paragraph in full, and my message below, with the link to the BestSchools interview as my response.

(By “message below,” I believe he’s referring to the original email he sent to Anna, pictured above.)

I’d like to emphasize that I did not threaten to physically destroy William Happer, nor did I express interest in stealing his vineyard. (Out of curiosity, I’d also asked if he had any comment on the recent death of large portions of the Great Barrier Reef. He responded with a link to this article, which cited anonymous “local divers” who claimed that actually, less than 5 percent of the reef is dead.)

Happer is by no means the only scientist lending his credentials to this jaw-dropping counter-narrative, but he provides a good entry point into the newly-emboldened parallel universe of climate denial. As reporter Jane Mayer sharply underlines in *Dark Money*, a methodical exploration of the billionaires covertly funding the far-right, the oil and gas industry has had an outsize influence on public perception of the scientific facts that could impact their bottom line. As late as the 2008 presidential campaign, Mayer notes that candidates from both parties pledged to work to fight climate change; today, opinions on the matter are sharply divided on partisan lines. In particular, Koch Industries was found by Greenpeace to have funneled \$25 million between 2005 and 2008 alone into various organizations propagating climate denial. Mayer also highlights a study by Drexel University professor Robert Brulle, which found that between 2003 and 2010, around 140 conservative foundations—many affiliated with the Koch and Scaife families, whose fortunes are based partly in oil—distributed \$558 million to think tanks, advocacy groups, legal programs, etc. with the goal of undermining the established science on climate change.

Following the Greenpeace findings, Democratic senators Barbara Boxer, Edward Markey and Sheldon Whitehouse sent letters to 100 fossil fuel companies and think tanks to determine whether they had funded scientific studies “designed to confuse the public.” In response, Koch Industries general counsel Mark Holden refused to comply with the investigation, writing: “The activity efforts about which you inquire, and Koch’s involvement, if any, in them, are at the core of the fundamental liberties protected by the first amendment to the United States constitution.” In 2016, Charles Koch told ABC News that he believes the earth is warming, but in a “mild, manageable way.”

The White House has not responded to multiple requests for clarification on who’s currently under consideration for the post of science advisor—or whether they even plan to fill it, considering their generally hostile stance on science. Dr. Happer also did not respond to requests for clarification on this. Another candidate reportedly in the running for the Trump administration post is Yale professor David Gelernter, who is somehow both a computer scientist and an anti-intellectual. Gelernter, like Happer, has a record of climate change denial.

Today, the Trump administration initiated a terrifying, wide-ranging rollback of the Obama administration's work to combat climate change, including a 2013 order instructing the federal government to prepare for its impacts. On a call with reporters on Monday night to discuss the executive order and its supposed goals of strengthening the economy, an unnamed White House official was asked about the adverse economic impacts of climate change.

"I'm not familiar with what you're talking about," the official responded.