

## Center for American Progress



### Think Again: The Fox Propaganda Train Rolls On



SOURCE: AP/Michael Kappeler

A ship passes by the coast of Greenland where the nearby Sermeq Kujalleq glacier has thinned in recent years. *Politico* reports that Fox News Vice President Bill Sammon sent an email to staff last December insisting that everyone at the station refrain from recognizing the global scientific consensus on man-made global warming.

By **Eric Alterman** | December 16, 2010

Another day, and another piece of incontrovertible evidence that the folks at Fox News are exclusively in the business of pushing propaganda, rather than reporting “news.”

Last week, *The Daily Beast* **reported** the existence of a memo by Fox News Vice President and Washington Managing Editor (and former *Washington Times* editor) Bill Sammon, on October 27, 2009. It advised all on-air personalities to “use the term ‘government-run health insurance,’ or, when brevity is a concern, ‘government option,’ whenever possible.”

The memo followed an on-air conversation between right-wing Republican consultant Frank Luntz and Fox News host Sean Hannity, in which the former advised, “If you call it a public option, the American people are split,” but “If you call it the government option, the public is overwhelmingly against it.” “A great point,” Hannity replied. “And from now on, I’m going to call it the government option, because that’s what it is.”

After that, Fox News hosts all marched in lockstep to the Luntz/Hannity/Sammon-scored music. For instance, anchor Neil Cavuto began an interview on the day of the memo with then-House Republican Leader John Boehner by explaining, “My next guest says name it what you want; it is still government-run.”

This week, we learned of yet another propaganda-driven order from on high. *Politico* reports that Sammon **sent an email** to staff last December insisting that everyone at the station refrain from recognizing the global scientific consensus on man-made global warming.

Sammon wrote, “We should refrain from asserting that the planet has warmed (or cooled) in any given period without IMMEDIATELY pointing out that such theories are based upon data that critics have called into question. It is not our place as journalists to assert such notions as facts, especially as this debate intensifies.”

Sammon based his argument on the so-called “Climategate controversy,” which, as *Politico* helpfully explains, “refers to the hacking of e-mails at the University of East Anglia’s Climatic Research Unit showing American and British researchers discussing how to combat climate skeptics, strategizing about whether certain data should be released and at one point calling climate change skeptics ‘idiots.’ The affair was held up as evidence by climate change skeptics that climate scientists had conspired to make the case for human involvement

in global warming stronger than it actually was.”

Sammon is once again relying on a political strategy mapped out by Luntz years ago. Back in 2002, Luntz **told** Republicans that if American “voters believe there is no consensus about global warming within the scientific community,” political action to address would remain stalled in Congress. To effect their strategy, the climate deniers needed to embrace a tactic employed for decades by tobacco companies by funding and publicizing their own “studies” and research institutes.

Historian Naomi Oreskes, co-author of a book-length study of corporate manipulation of public opinion on science, **notes**, “If the answer is to phase out fossil fuels, a different group of people are going to be making money, so we shouldn’t be surprised that they’re fighting tooth and nail.”

When President Barack Obama noted in 2008 that the science underlying man-made global warming was “beyond dispute,” the libertarian Cato Institute took out a full-page ad in *The New York Times* to attempt to undermine what was then a statement of fact—just a warning shot in a campaign that has resonated with considerable success throughout the mainstream media.

Ed Crane, the institute’s founder and president, who enjoys no credentials whatsoever as a scientist, **informed** *The New Yorker’s* Jane Mayer that “global-warming theories” needed to be resisted because they justify “giv[ing] the government more control of the economy.”

The Cato Institute was begun in 1977 with a grant from the conservative billionaires Charles and David Koch. According to the Center for Public Integrity, between 1986 and 1993 the Koch family gave \$11 million to the institute. These monies are just a small part of the nearly \$200 million the brothers and their company have given away to such causes between 1998 and 2008. And this figure excludes the \$50 million Koch Industries spent on lobbying and the nearly \$5 million more made in campaign contributions by its political action committee. (*Forbes* magazine calculates just Charles Koch’s personal fortune at \$21.5 billion.)

Mayer noted in her profile of the Kochs that Cato presently enjoys 100 full-time employees, “and its experts and policy papers are widely quoted and respected by the mainstream media. It describes itself as nonpartisan, and its scholars have at times been critical of both parties. But it has consistently pushed for corporate tax cuts, reductions in social services, and laissez-faire environmental policies.”

The creation and sustenance of Cato, together with other right-wing think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute, and the Hoover Institute at Stanford, has populated the media with a plethora of “scholars” who claim their arguments are based on “scientific facts gathered in the past 10 years [that] do not support the notion of catastrophic human-made warming.”

The results were heartening to these merchants of misinformation, as they empowered conservatives to dismiss the entire scientific consensus as some sort of liberal conspiracy.

To take just one of literally thousands of possibilities, an **article** on November 24, 2009, in the conservative *Washington Times* bore the title, “Hiding Evidence of Global Cooling: Junk science exposed among climate-change believers.” The article referred to the “baloney practices that pass as sound science about climate change.”

In the end, Klaus Hasselmann, emeritus director of the Max Planck Institute for Meteorology, **reported** in *Nature Geoscience* in August 2010 that three separate investigations confirmed what climate scientists have never seriously doubted: “Established scientists, dependent on their credibility for their livelihood, have no motivation in purposely misleading the public and their colleagues.” These investigations were led by the U.K. House of Commons Science and Technology Committee; the Scientific Assessment Panel of the Royal Society, chaired by Lord Oxburgh; and the latest by the Independent Climate Change E-mails Review, chaired by Sir Muir Russell.

And yet thanks to climate deniers who exploited the “Climategate” story, as well as the inherent complexities of scientific research and prediction itself, in a March 2010 **Gallup poll** nearly half of those questioned said that they believe the threat of global warming to be “generally exaggerated.” This was a rise from 35 percent two years earlier. According to the same poll, a bare majority of 52 percent of Americans believe that “most scientists believe that global warming is occurring,” down from 65 percent in 2008.

When, for instance, a **Mr. Norman Dennison**, a 50-year-old Indiana electrician, tells a reporter that global warming warnings constitute “a flat-out lie,” basing his view on “the preaching of **Rush Limbaugh** and the teaching of Scripture,” he is responding in part to the multiyear, multimillion-dollar campaign to discredit normative science by those who stand to profit from climate catastrophe.

According to a **study** by the Center for American Progress Action Fund, just 13 such right-wing groups have spent more than \$68.5

million in 2010 alone on “misleading and fictitious television ads designed to shape midterm elections and advance their anti-clean energy reform agenda.” This is in addition to the nearly \$500 million that Koch Industries and its allies in oil, coal, and utility business collectively spent since the beginning of 2009 to lobby against legislation to address climate change and to defeat candidates who support it.

And guess what? According to a [survey](#) by the *National Journal*, “Of the 20 Republican Senate candidates in contested races, 19 question the science of global warming and oppose any comprehensive legislation to deal with it.”

Incidents like those described have occurred literally countless times in the decade and a half since Fox’s founding. We have actually come to the point where we would likely be surprised to learn that the station’s on-air personalities were not being ordered to slant the news and mislead their viewers. Given the unavoidable reliance of all democracies on honest news sources, this country persists in treating Fox as an honest source at its own peril.

**Author’s note:** In [last week’s column](#) we noticed that *The Washington Post* had recently added to its stable of conservative bloggers and columnists Jennifer Rubin, the paper’s second anti-Islam, pro-torture proponent. Had we shown more patience we could have included yet another *Post* hire for hate’s side.

The paper recently announced with pride, we presume, that it would be giving a blog to [Jordan Sekulow](#). He has referred to the Park 51 Islamic Center as a “[shrine to terror](#).” He actually [believes](#) that “the threat of Sharia law is real and the people of Oklahoma are ahead of the curve.”

His organization, the American Center for Law and Justice, [argued](#) on behalf of an investigation of Muslim congressional staffers based on a bogus, McCarthyite Fox News report. And ACLJ, and Jordan in particular, is [extending its reach around the world](#) to help activists in Africa, for example, ensure that homosexuality remains criminalized.

One is tempted to ask after reading this stuff: When we have a *Washington Post*, who needs Fox News?

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