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## Sen. Whitehouse Fumes at ‘Climate Deniers’

By Marlo Lewis - 12/6/2012

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In a fiery [speech](#) yesterday, Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse (D-R.I.) "calls out" "climate deniers." In the first half of the speech he goes ad hominem, attacking opponents as "front groups" who take payola from "polluters" to "confuse" the public by selling "doubt" as their product.

First a bit of free advice for the good Senator:

Your team has been playing nasty from day one. It didn't get you cap-and-trade, it didn't get you Senate ratification of the Kyoto Protocol, and it's not going to get you a carbon tax.

Vilification doesn't work because biomass, wind turbines, and solar panels are not up to the challenge of powering a modern economy, and most Americans are too practical to believe otherwise.

So by all means, keep talking trash about your opponents. The shriller your rhetoric, the more skeptical the public will become about your bona fides as an honest broker of "the science."

Okay, let's examine Sen. Whitehouse's argument. He accuses skeptics of peddling "straw man arguments," such as that "the earth's climate always changes; it's been warmer in the past." Well, it does, and it has! [Many studies](#) indicate the Medieval Warm Period (MWP) was warmer than the current warm period (CWP). A study published in July in [Nature Climate Change](#) concludes the Roman Warm Period (RWP) was warmer than both the MWP and CWP. The Northern Hemisphere was substantially warmer than the present for thousands of years during the [Holocene Climate Optimum](#) (~5,000-

9,000 years ago). Arctic summer air temperatures were 4-5°C above present temperatures for millennia during the [previous interglacial period](#).

None of this is evidence man-made global warming is not occurring, but Sen. Whitehouse sets up his own straw man by making that the main issue in dispute. What the paleoclimate information does indicate is that the warmth of the past 50 years is not outside the range of natural variability and is no cause for alarm. The greater-than-present warmth of the Holocene Optimum, RWP, and MWP contributed to [improvements in human health and welfare](#).

Sen. Whitehouse says skeptics also knock down a straw man when they deny extreme weather events prove the reality of climate change. “No credible source is arguing that extreme weather events are proof of climate change,” he states. Again, it’s Sen. Whitehouse who whacks a man of straw. The problem for skeptics is not that people like [Al Gore](#) or the editors of [Bloomberg](#) cite Hurricanes Katrina or Sandy as “proof” of global warming, it’s that they blame global warming (hence “polluters”) for Katrina and Sandy. They insinuate or even assert that were it not for climate change, such events would not occur or would be much less deadly. As the Senator does when he says climate change “loads the dice” in favor of events like Sandy and is “associated with” such events.

I freely grant that heat waves will become more frequent and severe in a warmer world (just as cold spells will become less frequent and milder). However, there is no persuasive evidence global warming caused or contributed significantly to the [European heat wave of 2003](#), the [Russian heat wave of 2010](#), the [Texas drought of 2011](#), or the [U.S. midwest drought of 2012](#). [Aslew of scientific papers](#) finds no long-term trend in Atlantic hurricane behavior, including a recent study based on [370 years of tropical cyclone data](#). Similarly, a [U.S. Geological Survey study finds no correlation](#) between flood magnitudes and atmospheric carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) concentrations in any region of the continental U.S. over the past 85 years.

More importantly, despite long-term increases in both CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations and global temperatures since the 1920s, global deaths and death rates related to extreme weather declined by [93% and 98% respectively](#). The 93% reduction in annual weather-related deaths is particularly noteworthy because global population increased [more than 300%](#) since the 1920s.

Although weather-related damages are much bigger today, that is because there's tons more stuff and lots more people in harm's way. For example, [more people live in just two Florida counties](#), Dade and Broward, than lived in all 109 coastal counties stretching from Texas to Virginia in the 1930s. When weather-related damages are adjusted ("normalized") to account for changes in population, wealth, and inflation, [there is no long-term trend](#). So although a "greenhouse signal" may some day emerge from weather-related mortality and economic loss data, at this point global warming's influence, if any, is undetectable.

Sen. Whitehouse dismisses as a "gimmick" skeptics' observation that there has been "no warming trend in the last ten years" (actually, [the last 16 years](#)). He contends that the "20 warmest years [in the instrumental record] having occurred since 1981 . . . with all 10 of the warmest years occurring in the past 12 years." That may be correct, but it is beside the point. A decade and a half of no net warming [continues](#) the plodding [0.14°C per decade warming trend](#) of the past 33 years. These data [call into question the climate sensitivity assumptions](#) underpinning the big scary warming projections popularized by NASA scientist [James Hansen](#), the UN IPCC, and the UK Government's [Stern Review](#) report.

Sen. Whitehouse says "deniers tend to ignore facts they can't explain away." He continues: "For example. the increasing acidification of the oceans is simple to measure and undeniably, chemically linked to carbon concentrations in the atmosphere. So we hear nothing about ocean acidification from the deniers." Not so. CO2Science.Org, a leading skeptical Web site, has an extensive (and growing) [ocean acidification database](#). Almost every week the CO2Science folks [review](#) another study on the subject. Cato Institute scholars Patrick Michaels and Chip Knappenberger [also addressed the issue](#) on their old Web site, World Climate Report. They don't share Sen. Whitehouse's alarm about ocean acidification, but they do not ignore it. The Senator should check his facts before casting aspersions.

Sen. Whitehouse quotes NOAA stating that the rate of global sea level rise in the last decade "was nearly double" the 20th century rate. That is debatable. [Colorado State University researchers find](#) no warming-related acceleration in sea-level rise in recent decades.

Here's the big picture. Scary projections of rapid sea-level rise assume rapid increases in ice loss from Greenland. In a study just published in [Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences](#), scientists used satellite gravity data to measure changes in Greenland's ice mass balance from April 2002 to August 2011. The researchers estimate Greenland is losing almost 200 gigatons of ice per year. It takes [300 gigatons of water to raise sea levels by 1 millimeter](#), so Greenland is currently contributing about 0.66 mm of sea-level rise per year. At that rate, Greenland will contribute 6.6 centimeters of sea level rise over the 21st century, or less than 3 inches. Apocalypse not.

Sen. Whitehouse concludes by castigating Republicans for inveighing against unchecked entitlement spending and the fiscal burdens it imposes on "our children and grandchildren" while turning a blind eye to the perils climate change inflicts on future generations. But such behavior is not contradictory if the risk of fiscal chaos is both (a) more real and imminent than Al Gore's "planetary emergency" and (b) more fixable within the policy-relevant future.

Here are two facts Sen. Whitehouse should contemplate. First, even if the U.S. were to stop emitting all CO<sub>2</sub> tomorrow, the impact on global temperatures would be a reduction of "approximately 0.08°C by the year 2050 and 0.17°C by the year 2100 — amounts that are, for all intents and purposes, negligible," notes [Chip Knappenberger](#), whose calculations are based on IPCC climate sensitivity assumptions. Similarly, a study in [Nature Climate Change](#) concludes that aggressive climate change "mitigation measures, even an abrupt switch to zero emissions, have practically no effect on sea level over the coming 50 years and only a moderate effect on sea level by 2100."

Whether under a carbon tax, cap-and-trade, or EPA regulation, the U.S. would keep emitting billions of tons of CO<sub>2</sub> annually for a long time. So whatever climate policies Sen. Whitehouse thinks Republicans should support would have no discernible impact on climate change risk. The costs of such policies would vastly exceed the benefits. Rejecting policies that are all pain for no gain is exactly what the custodians of America's economic future are supposed to do.