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The Great Fear Among American Conservatives

By Carl Pope - 10/31/2012

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Two weeks ago David Brooks wrote an op-ed fable [entitled "A Sad Green story"](#) in which he argued that after a golden spring in 2003 Democrats -- notably Al Gore -- had poisoned the bi-partisan opportunity for action on climate change, and that a saga of "overreach, misjudgments and disappointment" had unraveled the hopes of that moment. The piece has been [widely](#), savagely excoriated [for blame-shifting](#) -- those who selfishly resisted action on climate are pardoned, while those who struggled to overcome this resistance are found wanting.

But there is a deeper problem than Brooks' treatment of 2003-2012. As a conservative Republican who deplores the takeover of his party and his movement by hostility to knowledge and addiction to ["heresy trials"](#), an overwrought [hyper-individualism](#) and its suspicion of ideas, Brooks is unforgivably reluctant to trace the connections between the degradation of the Republican party he deplores and fossil fuel resistance to action on climate.

Advocacy of climate action by Democratic elected officials did open the door for fossil fuel interests to turn the issue into a wedge that the hard libertarian right leveraged against mainstream Republicans -- but not in 2003. The partisan split on climate showed up as early as 1997, when the Clinton-Gore Administration went to Kyoto and laid down the template for a global framework convention on climate. Libertarian advocates were quite explicit in that period: climate science was not the issue, but a stalking horse -- the real problem, as Cato's Jerry Taylor said debating me at the University of Wisconsin in 2005, "If global warming is a serious problem requiring effective action, its solutions are governmental, global and majoritarian - and conservatism exists to oppose those outcomes." The debate was not over the reality of the climate threat -- it was over the inadequacy of libertarian solutions to that threat. As CEI's Fred Smith said at a Transpartisan dialogue shortly before *An Inconvenient Truth hit the theaters* -- with Gore and Grover Norquist both in attendance -- "the planet is robust, economic freedom is fragile." The world was to be sacrificed for a political theory.

Not all conservatives suffered from this blindness. Traditionalists easily tucked climate protection into their broader cloak of "caring for god's creation." As late as 2008 Mike Huckabee famously finessed the climate wars [by campaigning on the quip](#) if God sends a flood, it's up to man to put up the sandbags. And security

conservatives -- John McCain most prominent among them -- found action on climate simply another example of the duty of a strong national government to act against anything that threatened American safety.

Indeed, in 2000 George W. Bush campaigned against Al Gore promising that he too would act against carbon pollution and climate change, with the simple expedient of cleaning up "grandfathered" coal-fired power plants, and charged his first Administrator of EPA, Christy Todd Whitman, to sell this conservative solution to global warming to the rest of the world.

But while Whitman was making her sale in Europe, the fossil hard right drew its first blood. Columnist Robert Novak [blasted](#) Bush for daring to regulate carbon pollution, and making it clear that Bush's right-flank would take his Presidency down if he persisted. The President caved; Whitman's promises to the world of US action were voided, along with the President's campaign pledge. Bush himself became the first victim -- [the Zinoviev](#) -- of the new party line. In a move Michael Suslov, the chief ideologist of the Soviet Union, would have applauded, the words "global warming" were banned from Administration lexicon. Indeed, the infamous Obama "war on coal" is, substantively, nothing more ambitious than the fulfilling -- ten years late -- of George Bush's 2000 campaign pledge.

So long before *An Inconvenient Truth* allegedly poisoned the bipartisan well, the fossil fuel lobby combined with the libertarian right had made climate denial the Nicene Creed of conservatism. But how? This was not a grass-roots rebellion -- [it was the conservative leadership](#) that persuaded its followers that behind every wind-turbine lurked a Soviet. And it was not driven by genuine doubt of the science -- whatever public noises were made. Not only Governor Romney and Senator McCain, but Republicans as diverse as Newt Gingrich, Jhn Huntsman, Tim Pawlenty, Arnold Schwarzenegger, [Rupert Murdoch](#) and yes, George Bush, have all conceded that global warming is real, serious and manmade. And all, except Schwarzenegger, recanted to some degree or another. Those who did not, [like Congressman Bob Inglis](#), were driven from office or purged from the party.

But mass recanting usually requires an Inquisition, waves of public confessions. What created the Great Fear among American conservatives? What are they running from? The evidence strongly suggests that conservatives who knew climate was a serious risk and wanted a conservative solution were bullied and whipped into line by the disciplined application of money from coal and oil interests. Republicans who spoke out for science and prudence found their primary opponents flush with carbon contributions. Those who returned to orthodoxy were spared this risk. Bush was rewarded for his recantation -- the Swift Boat funders who rescued him in 2004 [were largely oil and gas](#). McCain found his inner-oil man at a biker rally in Sturgis South Dakota, stamping on the ground and proclaiming, "*Drill here, drill now.*" (North America's shale oil revolution, sadly, has bypassed Sturgis.) By 2012 Pawlenty, Huckabee and

Gingrich were back on the oil patch reservation. [Murdoch](#) saw fossil money as the Republican path to victory, and after 2005 fell silent.

The purges did not stop with politicians. Even the founder and head of the Cato Institute, Ed Crane, was stripped of his job in a [Koch-led coup](#), because Crane put libertarian ideology ahead of the Koch bottom line.

There were carrots as well as sticks. In the 2012 election cycle fossil fuel interests poured over \$150 million into ads supporting their candidates by Labor Day -- with two months left to go.

British traditionalist John Grey had warned of this trend, saying "conservatism can no longer conserve, because any conservative who tried would be not be funded." Instead of standing for a different social contract, the conservative movement became the property of a special set of economic interests -- those representing the old, extractive industries and commodity producers, particularly coal and oil. While most manufacturing executives remained in the Republican Party, their influence diminished sharply between the two Bush Administrations, and is only vestigial in the Tea Party wing of the GOP.

Many conservative operatives viewed economic innovators, like businesses in the clean tech hubs of Route 128 or Silicon Valley, as the enemy. Their efforts to create level playing fields and increase their market share and success were throttled by Republican politicians acting at the behest of Koch Industries and other fossil fuel interests. Oil and coal subsidies were labeled "essential to national security"; equivalent support for wind and solar were "government picking winners and losers," "unconstitutional cronyism" or even "socialism."

Brooks knows these facts. He deplores, genuinely, the destruction that reliance on oil and coal money has wreaked on the intelligence and integrity of his movement, conservatism, and his party, the GOP. But even he seems afraid to point out the obvious: the path to today's wildly unmoored, extreme and embittered Republican Party began not with Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*, but with the partnership between big carbon and libertarians to make climate change, and then energy, partisan litmus tests even at the cost of breaking with George's Bush's compassionate conservatism.

That decision was, in its rawest sense, special interest pleading by one set of economic interests -- coal, oil and gas. They have, for the moment, purchased a monolithic, unbending hostility to energy innovation and climate action by any Republican who wants to a viable national career. They have sowed the wind. What is genuinely sad is that we may all, conservatives and liberals alike, reap their whirlwind.

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along with Paul Rauber -- of Strategic Ignorance: Why the Bush Administration Is Recklessly Destroying a Century of Environmental Progress, which the New York Review of Books called "a splendidly fierce book."