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Before Rubio, Before Luntz: Meet a Founding Father of Climate Change Denial

By David Halperin March 13, 2013

Republican consultant Frank Luntz, a master of words, made clear in a 2002 GOP strategy memo how conservatives would address the growing threat of climate change: They would simply deny it was happening.

According to the memo:

The scientific debate remains open. Voters believe that there is no consensus about global warming within the scientific community. Should the public come to believe that the scientific issues are settled, their views about global warming will change accordingly. Therefore, you need to continue to make the lack of scientific certainty a primary issue in the debate, and defer to scientists and other experts in the field.

The scientific debate is closing [against us] but not yet closed. There is still a window of opportunity to challenge the science.

Luntz then offered GOP candidates some "LANGUAGE THAT WORKS."

"We must not rush to judgment before all the facts are in. We need to ask more questions. We deserve more answers. And until we learn more, we should not commit America to any international document that handcuffs us either now or into the future."

Finally, Luntz provided a blueprint for best delivering this message:

You need to be even more active in recruiting experts who are sympathetic to your view, and much more active in making them part of your message. People are willing to trust scientists, engineers, and other leading research professionals, and less willing to trust politicians. If you wish to challenge the prevailing wisdom about global warming, it is more effective to have professionals making the case than politicians.

(Emphasis in original.)

Years later, Luntz seemed to admit that climate change was real, but his old memo describes well the strategy still used today by many GOP politicians, by corporations in the oil, gas, and coal industries, and by think-tanks funded by those industries: (1) Pretend the scientific evidence of danger is murky, even when it's overwhelming; (2) hire scientists, or people who seem like scientists, to promote your claims; and (3) insist that it's too risky to the economy to do anything about the problem.

A notable recent use of this strategy was from GOP star Senator Marco Rubio, who last month declined to accept the overwhelming scientific consensus that the climate change of recent decades has been caused by human activity. "Well, first of all," he said, "the climate's always changing." He added, "I know people said there's a significant scientific consensus on that issue, but I've actually seen reasonable debate on that principle." Rubio then warned that reforms aimed at curbing greenhouse gas emissions "will have a devastating impact" on the U.S. economy.

But this whole strategy was hatched long before Luntz's memo, and long before global warming became a central issue. Corporate-funded pseudo-science denial has been around for decades, with particular focus on denying the health risks of tobacco, and denying that burning fossil fuels was a major cause of dangerous acid rain, before conservatives and corporations got around to denying climate change.

One of the founding fathers of this strategy is linked to all three of those denial efforts. As President Obama calls for action on climate change, to help prevent further rises in temperature and future Katrinas and Sandys, we should study the methods of one Alan W. Katzenstein, and figure out how to overcome such obstruction of the truth.

Alan Katzenstein, according to his resume, received a bachelor of science degree from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1942. A bio he circulated claimed he had "a background in chemical and biological sciences," but his only graduate degree was an MBA from New York University. Katzenstein's resume says he worked on "product development, quality control and Navy and Air Force organizations" for a decade, and then spent 15 years working at advertising firms in New York before starting his own company, Katzenstein Associates in 1973. He described himself on his resume as a "Consultant on public affairs and issue management." Rather than a scientist, Katzenstein was a PR man.

By the early 1980's, Katzenstein was working as a consultant to the Edison Electric Institute, a trade association of power companies, most of them dependent on coal. Public concern was mounting that burning of coal and other fossil fuels was contributing to acid rain -- increased acidity of precipitation that harms waterways, soil, trees, buildings, statues, and, ultimately, human health. Clear scientific evidence from the EPA, the National Research Council, and other bodies showed that sulfur dioxide emissions from burning coal was helping cause acid rain. Katzenstein went to work to prevent new regulations,

producing a torrent of articles, op-eds, letters to the editor, and more, with titles like "The Real Facts About Acid Rain."

He was well on the way to developing his rhetorical Katzenstyle: Essentially, "We don't know for certain that my client's product causes harm, so let's not rush into doing anything about it." A November 1981 acid rain report that Katzenstein authored for Edison, "Understanding Acid Rain," read like a model for Luntz's memo; it offered questions like, "Is it possible that power plant emissions are not the primary cause of acid rain?" Well, of course, anything's possible.

Katzenstein was particularly effective at placing his acid rain denial material in the Wall Street Journal. In November 1981, a group called the "Coalition for Environmental Energy Balance" ran in the Journal a Katzensteinian paid advertisement, arguing that "[t]here is a great deal still unknown" about acid rain and that pending legislation to control it was "overreaction and overregulation" that could dramatically increase consumer electric bills. A similar ad that ran in the Journal and also the New York Times and Washington Post, this time sponsored by Edison Electric, offered readers a "free updated fact book" -- Katzenstein's acid rain report.

In June 1984, the Journal published an op-ed by Katzenstein entitled "Acidity is Not the Major Factor" in which he pressed the argument that most of the acidity in lakes occurred naturally, rather than being caused by fossil fuels. His piece prompted a letter to the editor from a forest ecologist who said Katzenstein "made several assertions" about research findings in which the ecologist had played a role and "all of them are incorrect!" The ecologist wrote: "These results have been published widely. It is apparent that Mr. Katzenstein's sole purpose is to confuse the acid rain issue." That same year, a forest ranger wrote to the magazine *The Rotarian* asserting that Katzenstein, in an article in that magazine, mischaracterized the ranger's remarks, citing him for the proposition that DDT was destroying the food supply for wildlife in the Adirondack region of New York, when in fact the ranger blamed acid rain.

The Wall Street Journal, though, soon published its own editorial, expressly endorsing "a 49-page booklet, 'Understanding Acid Rain,' by Alan W. Katzenstein, a technical consultant to the Edison Electric Institute." The Journal backed Katzenstein's claim that the main source of acid in lakes was decaying organic matter, and it recommended that the EPA read the document and defer action on acid rain for "say, the next 20 to 200 years."

Katzenstein's propaganda effort may have helped delay policy changes to address acid rain for almost a decade. Fortunately, industry opposition ultimately failed. In 1990, Congress passed legislation to contain these emissions. And it worked, significantly cutting emissions in a highly cost effective manner. The *Economist* in 2002 wrote that the legislation was probably "[t]he greatest green success story of the past

decade." Even the Journal by then had admitted that the acid rain legislation was "fabulously successful." (The law reduced acid rain by heavily decreasing emissions of sulfur dioxide and oxides of nitrogen. Unfortunately, carbon dioxide emissions from burning of fossil fuels, a key cause of global warming, also continue to acidify the world's oceans and threaten marine life and fishing.)

While in the midst of the fight to delay solutions to acid rain, Katzenstein sold his expert denial skills to another troubled industry whose products had been causing immense harm: tobacco.

In 1987, with Congress on the verge of banning smoking on shorter U.S. flights, because of concerns about the health dangers for non-smokers, Katzenstein went to work. In February 1987, the New York Times published a letter from Katzenstein questioning the link between second-hand smoke and lung cancer. In April, the Tobacco Institute, a non-profit group funded by cigarette makers, circulated to media a report, "Environmental Tobacco Smoke (TES) and the Risk of Lung Cancer -- How Convincing is the Evidence?" The Institute described the report's author, Katzenstein, as a graduate of MIT and "a consultant in technical analysis and communication." The report concluded, "Based on the evidence to date, the concern about the risk of lung cancer for nonsmoking Americans appears to be overstated and unsupported."

Katzenstein then embarked on a nationwide media tour, giving scores of interviews to local newspapers, TV, and radio to deny that smoking on airplanes endangered non-smokers. You can watch him do a TV appearance in Milwaukee, telling a reporter, "There's no credible evidence -- no convincing evidence that your health is in jeopardy because people are smoking around you." He's described in the TV report as "a consultant to the Tobacco Institute" who had "reviewed all the studies" on second-hand smoke. At a stop in Greenville, SC, Katzenstein went as far as to claim that second-hand smoke was good for you: "an early warning signal that ventilation is inadequate." The Greenville TV reporter referred to Katzenstein as a "scientist."

All of this was nonsense. The scientific evidence was clear, and only became clearer, that second-hand smoke contributes to health problems including asthma, respiratory infections, sudden infant death syndrome, heart disease, and, yes, lung cancer. Undeterred, by 1990, Katzenstein was preparing to deliver a paper "on environmental tobacco smoke" at a conference sponsored by the libertarian Cato Institute; corporate-funded Cato offered a \$1000 honorarium.

Again, fortunately, the truth about smoking and health won out, and common sense protections against second-hand smoke have advanced to this day. But Katzenstein's campaign of denial and delay may have contributed to smoke-related health problems for large numbers of people in the meantime.

Undeterred, Katzenstein at last turned his denial skills to an even more powerful global menace -- climate change. In 1994, the Journal published a letter to the editor from Katzenstein asserting that there "are increasing doubts among scientists that global warming is a real threat to our planet" and also questioning whether fossil fuels were contributing to the planet's hotter temperatures. The letter, as published, listed no affiliation for Katzenstein, and it's unclear whether he was still working for Edison or another industry client, auditioning for new work, or simply determined as a matter of compulsion to deny every serious threat facing humanity.

I would have loved to pursue all these issues by speaking with Alan Katzenstein, but it turns out he died in 1997. He left quite a legacy, though -- one that supporters of public health and safety must learn how to counter, before even more harm is done. For starters, when you hear a politician like Marco Rubio say that the scientific evidence about global warming is inconclusive, but that the economic dangers of addressing the problem are manifest, go find the real facts.