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Sound, Fury And The Policy Of Climate Change

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Last week, in fulfillment of a 2008 Act of Congress, our National Academies of Science published “America’s Climate Choices” [ACC], another in a numbing succession of groupthink reports predicting the end of the world unless the U.S. dramatically reduces its emissions of carbon dioxide. Pronto.

Documents like this aren’t really intended to change anyone’s mind. Rather, they are designed to be used by unelected regulators as scientific cover for what our legislature refuses to do, which is to enact expensive and intrusive restrictions on emissions of carbon dioxide. The penultimate iteration of this was something called the “Synthesis Report” of the U.S. Global Change Research Program, a 2009 screed that the Environmental Protection Agency used as a scientific cover for new rules on fuel economy and regulation of power plants.

ACC is by far the most blatantly political of these documents. Several authors are environmental activists, and the National Academies’ President, Ralph Cicerone, has been on a mission to demonize carbon dioxide for decades.

He is very influential and capable. He was instrumental in getting chlorofluorocarbon (CFC) refrigerant production banned because they accelerated the destruction of stratospheric ozone over and near Antarctica in early spring. This was an easy thing to do, as chemical giant DuPont was eager to replace its patent-expired CFC Freon, once it patented a substitute hydrochlorofluorocarbon.

Carbon dioxide, thought to be a significant cause of the warming of surface temperature since the mid-1970s, is currently the respiration of the world’s economic civilization. Getting rid of it isn’t as simple as banning CFCs and switching to another refrigerant.

Some big-time scientists are alarmed at the Academies' activism. MIT atmospheric physicist (and member of the National Academies) Richard Lindzen says that Cicerone, as president of the Academies, feels that "regardless of the evidence the answer is predetermined. If the government wants carbon control, that is the answer that the Academies will provide. Nothing could better epitomize the notion of science in the service of politics – something that, unfortunately, has characterized so-called climate science."

The strident rhetoric in ACC could further divide the electorate and the government on climate change. Pollsters tell us — I think rightly — that the best way to characterize the majority of public sentiment is that people indeed believe that global warming is real (correct), that humans have something to do with it (correct), and that scientists are exaggerating its effects (thank you for listening).

A corollary has also been noted: the more shrill the rhetoric, the more people turn off. They are just tired of being hectored by scientists proclaiming certain apocalypses that never pan out: Examples include acid rain and the death of the forest, asteroids, the population bomb, and a catastrophic extinction of species that has eluded detection.

While again calling down hell and brimstone, this time if we don't immediately reduce our carbon dioxide emissions, ACC never gets to the most inconvenient truth: We are the rapidly shrinking into irrelevance on this issue.

Here's a fact that is curiously absent. If, by 2050, the U.S. reduces its per-capita emission of carbon dioxide to what it was at the end of the Civil War, and the rest of the developed world does similarly, prospective global warming would drop by a grand total of 7%, 100 years from now. This assumes that the "sensitivity" of surface temperature to a doubling of atmospheric CO-2 is 5.4 degrees, a commonly used value that may be way too high (see below).

This is a vital piece of information for any policymaker or regulator. Why is it not in the report?

To its credit, ACC does note two "main sources of uncertainty in projecting climate change impacts." (There are actually plenty more, but these two are quite important.)

The first is the uncertainty related to future emissions because of changes in technology, policy, and "other factors that are impossible to fully predict."

Example: In 1982 the Academy (it only has recently become the Academies) produced "Energy in Transition, 1985-2010," a document that, like ACC, received headline recognition and was cited as gospel by the policy community that it intended to influence. It predicted a general decline in domestic production of natural gas through 2010, with the ultimate possibility of its phase-out as a significant fuel. Since then, we discovered huge reservoirs that can be coaxed from common shale formations

worldwide. The amount of shale gas now being burned is responsible (along with our economic miasma) for the record reduction in U.S. carbon dioxide emissions in 2009.

The second uncertainty is over the true value of the climate “sensitivity” to carbon dioxide. There are now multiple and independent strands of evidence — from the oceans, from clouds, and from thermometers — that our climate models assume a sensitivity that is about twice as large as it is in reality. Nonetheless, if evidence continues to accrue, there will be major resistance to accepting this for obvious scientific and behavioral reasons. “We goofed” doesn’t go down easy when trying to re-engineer the world’s energy economy.

Make no mistake, though. The new National Academies report is significant. It is the sound and the fury, signifying policy.