



There's no denying this label packs a political punch

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The word "denial" -- meaning refusal or withholding -- entered the English language from Old French hundreds of years ago, but it gained linguistic muscle with A.A. Brill's translation of the Austrian father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, in the early 20th century.

Denial, or *Verneinung* in Freud's German, came to mean refusing to acknowledge a painful or uncomfortable truth, despite overwhelming evidence.

In politics, there was "Holocaust denial," "moon-landing denial" and "evolution denial" -- all flowing from Freud, with its implications not only of untruth but of mental illness.

And now the word's in the center ring of the global warming fight: "climate denial."

"Climate change has always been a kind of a framing war," said George Marshall, founder of the Climate Outreach Information Network in Great Britain and the author of the book "Don't Even Think About It: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Ignore Climate Change." "If you can get out there and you can get your language inserted into the discourse, it's your ideas that dominate."

Marshall and co-author Mark Lynas published the first reference to "climate denier" in the English-language press in a 2003 op-ed they wrote for the left-leaning magazine *The New Statesman*.

They wanted those words to sting.

They did -- and still do. Consider that the conservative American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) threatened to sue left-leaning Common Cause and the League of Conservation Voters last month, charging that they had falsely branded ALEC as promoting "climate denial" ([E&ENews PM](#), April 6).

Environmentalists, meanwhile, label opponents as "deniers" when they disavow not only the link between warming and human emissions but the urgency of the issue or the policies designed to address it.

An offshoot of the Obama presidential campaign, Organizing for America (OFA), ran a "Climate Change Fantasy Tournament" alongside the NCAA's March Madness brackets, asking supporters to "vote for the worst denier in America." Senate Environment and Public Works Chairman James Inhofe (R-Okla.) won for tossing a snowball on the Senate floor ([E&E Daily](#), Feb. 27).

"Deniers" also figured in recent League of Conservation Voters' pleas for funding and in Climate Action Campaign messaging about House legislation to allow states to opt out of U.S. EPA's carbon rule for power plants. The campaign wrote recently that the bill now working its way through the lower chamber is "part of a broader effort by climate deniers to eviscerate the President's Clean Power Plan."

But while environmentalists say they are making inroads with a public that is increasingly aware of climate change and impatient with those who continue to dispute it, they're a long way from what Marshall says is the endgame.

"In the end, if you win the frame war, your opponents back off and they start using your language," he said. "And then you've won."

'Mutually reinforcing'

The battle over what to call combatants in the climate wars began when global warming researchers began marching to Capitol Hill.

It started on a sweltering June day in 1988 when NASA physicist James Hansen famously told a Senate committee that global warming was underway and could produce catastrophic results; he was branded an "alarmist" by those who disagreed with him.

His opponents -- including Massachusetts Institute of Technology atmospheric physicist Richard Lindzen and climatologist Patrick Michaels, who is now at the libertarian Cato Institute -- were referred to as either "contrarians" or "skeptics" by the print media that year, according to Brigitte Nerlich of the University of Nottingham in the United Kingdom.

Nerlich, who specializes in climate linguistics, wrote in a 2013 blog post that the two sides "have travelled alongside each other for at least a quarter of a century and that the core tenets of these discourses have not changed substantially, and neither have some of [their] most visible proponents."

"In fact," she wrote, "these two discourses seem to be mutually reinforcing each other."

The term "skeptic" -- modified with "greenhouse" or "climate change" -- had been used mostly by climate change believers since the early 1980s. The first published reference was in 1981 in *The New York Times*. It gained in prominence after Hansen's testimony, and was the overwhelmingly dominant term by the time the Kyoto Protocol was adopted in 1997, for the first time limiting greenhouse gas emissions internationally.

But then "skeptics" embraced it. Marc Morano, publisher of the Climate Depot blog and a former Inhofe aide, said the term captured the essential points for his side: that there shouldn't be a rush to embrace the widely held scientific view that human emissions are leading to harmful warming, and that the public should entertain other views and other data.

"The reason 'skeptic' is so apt, I believe, is because we were told that there was a consensus and this is no longer up for debate," he said in an interview. "We're skeptical of those claims."

Then it was climate believers' turn to howl in protest.

"After the skeptics adopted that label as a kind of honorific ... the scientists started to make a fuss about that label, because they wanted it for themselves," Nerlich said in an interview. "But the skeptics wanted to keep it, because they say they are the right skeptics."

It became the task of climate activists on both sides of the Atlantic to find a term their foes would hate.

The first reference to a "denier" as someone who disputes climate change had been published in a 1997 story by a London *Guardian* reporter, Jeremy Leggett, now non-executive chairman of the Carbon Tracker Initiative.

Marshall and Lynas in their 2003 *Statesman* article added the modifier "climate." Marshall said it was no accident that so much of the climate vernacular came from Britain.

"We're a nation of wordsmiths," Marshall said. "That's what we do. We don't make much anymore, but we talk and write a lot."

'A final push'?

In 2009, when carbon legislation was moving through Congress and the world was preparing for a high-stakes round of U.N. climate talks in Copenhagen, Denmark, that aimed to produce an emissions treaty, "skeptic" was nearly twice as prevalent as "denier" in the English-language press, according to Nerlich's analysis.

But in 2013, "denier" pulled ahead of "skeptic" in news references, and it is still on the ascendant.

In 2000, "denier" was referenced 10 times in the English-language press.

In 2014, it appeared 3,183 times.

"Ultimately, this is all about having an upper hand in the war of words," said Kert Davies of Greenpeace U.S. "And it's proven out now that it actually does hurt to be called a denier."

ALEC's lawsuit over the "denier" label comes after it has seen an exodus of former corporate backers, including Google CEO Eric Schmidt, who said during an interview with NPR's "The

Diane Rehm Show" last September that the group was "just literally lying" about climate science.

Davies applauds green advocacy groups like OFA and the ones being sued by ALEC for not only helping the word gain traction but also expanding its scope to include public officials who oppose carbon reduction policies, not just those who dispute the science.

"Denial is not just denying that there is a problem, but denying that we need to move quickly to address it," Davies said. Policies like U.S. EPA's Clean Power Plan are dictated by science, he said, and it is appropriate to brand their opponents as deniers.

But Morano says the Obama administration and its allies are deliberately using the "denier" label to "intimidate and silence" their political opponents while they drive through their agenda.

The term is being used more frequently, he said, because greens know the last years of the Obama administration are their best chance to win carbon regulations at home and a climate agreement abroad, he said.

"They want a final push to just totally smear and discredit skeptics," he said. "The reins of power right now are on their side."

But "denier" effectively means "liar," and that's a risky message, Morano said.

"I don't like to say someone's a liar in political discourse, because it takes away from your case. You become the issue, and whatever language you use to say it," he said.

To be sure, Morano's own rhetoric is anything but shy. *The Daily Climate* quoted him during the "Climategate" controversy saying the climate scientists involved "deserve to be publicly flogged." And he's credited with coining the term "warmist," a moniker climate change disputers sometimes use among themselves to describe the opposition.

Morano has made a specialty out of staging elaborate stunts at U.N. climate conferences. He was recently threatened with eviction from a Vatican summit for asserting that U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and others were deliberately misleading the pontiff on warming science.

But Morano said he is still careful about making his messaging too personal. He prefers, he said, multi-word descriptions -- "global warming fear promoters," for example -- that focus more on what his political opponents are doing than on what they are.

Lindzen, the now-retired MIT atmospheric physicist, said "denier" can sometimes be preferable to "skeptic." It depends on what the question is, he said.

If the question is whether or not fossil fuels use will invite catastrophe, skepticism leaves room for that possibility, while denial appropriately slams the door, he said.

"There is no basis for catastrophism," he said.

Judith Curry, a Georgia Institute of Technology climate scientist, said she sees no need for a label to explain her beliefs about climate change.

"All scientists are skeptics, but trying to label someone as a skeptic or a believer, to me, this is pointless," she said. "It's done in political discussion and has no meaning to me personally."

But scientists who hold the consensus view that human emissions are driving climate change say it's time journalists stopped applying the term "skeptic" to those who cling to a view that is not supported by scientific evidence.

The Committee for Skeptical Inquiry (CSI), a group made up of scientists and science journalists, argued in an open [letter](#) to news outlets in December that "by perpetrating this misnomer, journalists have granted undeserved credibility to those who reject science and scientific inquiry."

"Please stop using the word 'skeptic' to describe deniers," they wrote.

Many who use "denier" say they don't mean to equate those who dispute climate change with those who don't believe in the Holocaust. Climate "deniers" push that narrative as a diversionary tactic, they say, and as a way to tar mainstream scientists.

"For you to believe that there's somehow a taint being created, you have to believe that Holocaust deniers are somehow a lot worse than climate science deniers," said Joe Romm, a climate communicator and fellow at the Center for American Progress. "I don't believe that."

Romm, who is Jewish, notes that Holocaust deniers are both rare and marginalized. But those who dispute climate change, he said, are still consulted by the mainstream media and elected officials and thus constitute a threat that could affect future generations.

"If people who deny climate science continue to be successful in thwarting climate action," Romm said, "then it's going to be a catastrophe beyond imagining."