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Forget Paris

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President Donald Trump announced the U.S. withdrawal from the [Paris Climate Accord](#) last week, setting off a firestorm of criticism. For instance, a *New York Daily News* headlined: “Trump to World: Drop Dead.” The withdrawal raises questions about global warming policies and their formulation.

President Barack Obama and other world leaders signed the Paris Accord in December 2015. The U.S. and other developed nations promised greenhouse gas emissions cuts in the Accord. The [Clean Power Plan](#), which significantly restricts the use of coal, counts towards our promised efforts.

Peoples’ responses to the withdrawal seem to depend largely on whether they believe that global warming will prove catastrophic. Warming due to greenhouse gases is not really in doubt; relevant questions involve how much warming will occur, the impacts of warming, and the viability of climate engineering to avoid or reverse warming.

Despite the invective hurled at President Trump, the Paris Accord would have done very little to prevent catastrophic global warming. If every nation had delivered as promised (a big if), the Accord would have prevented about 0.2 degrees Celsius warming by 2100 according to leading climate models. The math of atmospheric carbon dioxide concentrations is pretty clear: achieving the recommended targets will take a lot more than driving electric cars. Basically, we would need to stop using fossil fuels by mid-century, bringing almost unimaginable changes to our economy and lives.

On the other hand, people who don’t see global warming as a dire threat look forward to Mr. Trump soon voiding the Clean Power Plan. Such a celebration might be premature.

The [Environmental Protection Agency](#) (EPA) might be committed to the Plan despite the Paris exit.

Why? In 2007, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Massachusetts v. E.P.A.* that the Clean Air Act provided legal authority to regulate carbon dioxide emissions, if the EPA determined that greenhouse gases endangered the environment. In 2009, President Obama’s EPA issued this endangerment finding. As Cato Institute’s Patrick Michaels argued at the recent

12th International Conference on Climate Change, the endangerment finding likely compels implementation of the Clean Power Plan.

The process behind imposing these policies is, I think, highly troubling. A lawsuit by environmental groups and sympathetic state attorneys general yielded the 2007 Supreme Court decision. Regulatory actions by the EPA produced the endangerment finding and Clean Power Plan. And finally, we had an international agreement never ratified by the Senate.

The process further relied on technicalities and a limitation of the Clean Air Act. The Act requires reduction of pollution to safe levels regardless of cost, and without considering whether we might more easily live with pollution. And yet adaption to a warmer climate is a potential response to global warming. The Clean Air Act gives the EPA authority to regulate “any air pollutant” endangering human well-being. Calling carbon dioxide, which is necessary for life, pollution stretches the plain meaning of the word.

Limited government undertakes only those tasks citizens authorize. Meaningful limits require narrowly authorized tasks. Air pollution caused by cars and factories differs markedly from global warming. Action to address global warming should require explicit authorization by citizens.

The cap-and-trade proposal of 2010 sought such approval, but failed in the Senate. The Paris Accord was never submitted to the Senate. Enacting the costliest environmental program ever contemplated without approval by our elected representatives is inconsistent with democracy and limited government.

Global warming activists interpreted cap-and-trade’s failure as evidence of special interests choking the democratic process. Yet evidence weighs against this interpretation. A 2015 Gallup poll, for instance, found that only 32 percent of Americans worried a great deal about climate change, the same percentage as in 1989. If you doubt such polls, then ask if you or people you know would be willing to give up cars, airplanes, air conditioning and computers over global warming.

Our system trusts that Americans have the intelligence and character to determine what is in our best interests. Many Americans are not willing to spend trillions of dollars combatting global warming. We may be wrong, but imposing incredibly costly policies against our wishes is un-American.