

## ‘The Power of Big Oil’ Exposes Corporate Climate Change Deniers and Doubters

A new PBS docuseries explores the campaign of lies that’s blocked efforts to protect the planet.

BY ED RAMPELL

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The first episode of *Frontline*’s three-part miniseries “The Power of Big Oil” probes how the purveyors of fossil fuels have dealt with the issue of climate change over the decades. As early as the 1970s, it notes, Exxon set up and funded an elite unit of experts to study how human-made activities were generating carbon dioxide, and thereby heating up the planet.

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ExxonMobil hired scientists, including NASA’s Martin Hoffert, to serve as consultants. Hoffert, who was learning groundbreaking information from NASA’s cutting-edge galactic exploration, studied models revealing that “greenhouse gas warming was caused by high concentrations of carbon dioxide” at a time when 85 percent of the nation’s energy was being generated by fossil fuels. Hoffert, a physicist, posited the existential inquiry: “What are we going to do?”

The miniseries, directed and co-produced by Jane McMullen, exposes Big Oil’s offensive against scientists, politicians, and activists who were sounding an alarm about climate change. Key among its targets was NASA’s Dr. James Hansen, who dared try to generate public support for reducing or eliminating global greenhouse gas emissions.

“The Power of Big Oil” also chronicles how fossil fuel companies have countered mounting concerns about climate change by lavishly funding industry lobbyists including the American Petroleum Institute and think tanks like the Cato Institute. These bought-and-paid-for “independent experts” lobby legislators and appear at conferences and on television and radio news programs. Their purpose is to sow doubt about the climate emergency and to condemn calls for action to prevent climate impacts.

“The Power of Big Oil” also showcases the efforts of billionaires Charles and the late David Koch, among others, to influence members of Congress.

Among them is former Republican Senator Chuck Hagel, Republican of Nebraska, who along with Democratic Senator Robert Byrd from the coal-producing state of West Virginia, sponsored a 1997 resolution that prevented the United States from ratifying the Kyoto Protocols, a widely supported international agreement to collectively reduce greenhouse emissions.

Hagel, who went on to become President Barack Obama's Secretary of Defense, confessed to Frontline: "What we now know about some of these large oil companies' positions, and what they did know and they didn't tell us or they didn't recognize, they lied. And yes, I was misled."

Had the warnings of scientists been heeded and not dismissed, Hagel says, "It would have put the United States and the world on a whole different track. And today we would have been so much further ahead than we are. It's cost this country, and it cost the world."

Such expressions of regret are a recurring theme in "The Power of Big Oil."

"I wish I weren't a part of that, looking back," laments Paul Bernstein, a former economic consultant for a company that worked for the American Petroleum Institute. "I wish I weren't a part of . . . delaying action. You know, clearly on the wrong side of history."

"I'm eighty-three years old," ruminates Martin Hoffert, the ex-NASA physicist who served as an Exxon consultant. "Three or four decades ago, we predicted it. To have those predictions come true, that's sort of the golden icon that you look for as a scientist. However, as a human being, and as an inhabitant of planet Earth, I'm horrified to watch the lack of response" to the climate crisis he accurately forecasted decades earlier.

This powerful documentary is essential viewing for anyone concerned with the climate crisis—and how efforts to take appropriate action were corrupted by behind-the-scenes big money interests.