

Global Warming.org

President Obama's Inaugural Speech: New Heat on Warming?

By: Marlo Lewis – January 23, 2013

President Obama's second inaugural speech featured climate change more prominently than did his first inaugural address. As *Greenwire* (subscription required) observed:

Gone was Obama's roundabout reference to climate change through "the specter of a warming planet" from four years ago. This time, the president put the issue front and center.

Will that make any difference legislatively? Probably not. In the House, Republicans opposed to cap-and-trade, EPA regulation of greenhouse gases (GHGs), and carbon taxes are still in charge.

Is the President's renewed emphasis on climate change just a sop to his environmentalist base? Doubtful. As a second term, Obama has less reason politically to restrain his 'progressive' impulses. Several regulatory options are now in play:

The Department of Interior could list more species as threatened or endangered based on climate change concerns.

The President could finally veto the Keystone XL pipeline — a key objective of the climate alarm movement.

The EPA could issue GHG performance standards for existing (as distinct from new or modified) coal power plants, as well as GHG performance standards for other industrial categories (refineries, cement production facilities, steel mills, paper mills, etc.).

The EPA could finally act on petitions pending from the Bush administration to set GHG emission standards for marine vessels, aircraft, and non-road vehicles.

The EPA could finally act on a December 2009 petition by the Center for Biological Diversity and 350.Org to establish national ambient air quality standards (NAAQS) for carbon dioxide (CO₂) and other GHGs.

I'll make one prediction: If Obama does not veto the Keystone XL Pipeline after talking the talk on climate change, green groups will go ballistic (even though, as Cato Institute scholar Chip Knappenberger shows, full-throttle operation of the Keystone XL Pipeline would add an inconsequential 0.0001°C/yr to global temperatures). My colleague Myron Ebell reasonably speculates that Obama's tough talk on climate was a signal to green groups to organize the biggest anti-Keystone protest ever.

Now let's examine the climate change segment of Obama's inaugural speech:

We, the people, still believe that our obligations as Americans are not just to ourselves, but to all posterity. We will respond to the threat of climate change, knowing that the failure to do so would betray our children and future generations. Some may still deny the overwhelming judgment of science, but none can avoid the devastating impact of raging fires, and crippling drought, and more powerful storms. The path towards sustainable energy sources will be long and sometimes difficult. But America cannot resist this transition; we must lead it. We cannot cede to other nations the technology that will power new jobs and new industries – we must claim its promise. That is how we will maintain our economic vitality and our national treasure – our forests and waterways; our croplands and snowcapped peaks. That is how we will preserve our planet, commanded to our care by God. That’s what will lend meaning to the creed our fathers once declared.

Taking these statements one at a time, yes, of course, “We, the people” acknowledge obligations to posterity. Among those obligations is to secure the blessings of liberty. Liberty is endangered when non-elected officials like those at the EPA enact climate policy and erode the separation of powers.

Another obligation to posterity is not to kill the goose that lays the golden eggs. Federal monetary and housing policies destabilized financial markets in 2008, entitlement spending imperils America’s very solvency, carbon taxes or their regulatory equivalent could inflict huge job and GDP losses by making affordable energy costly and scarce, and the green crusade against coal mining, hydraulic fracturing, unconventional oil, and energy exports threatens one of the few bright spots in the economy today. Posterity will not thank us if policymakers foolishly try to tax, spend, and regulate America back to prosperity.

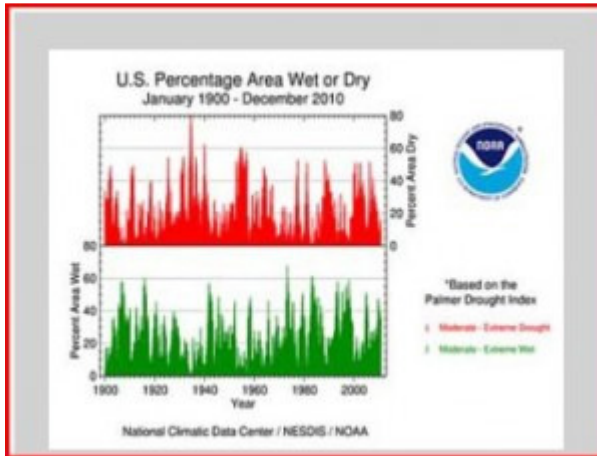
The U.S. contribution to global warming over the 21st century is projected to be small – about 0.2°C, according to the UN IPCC. Even an aggressive de-carbonization program costing hundreds of billions would theoretically avert only about 0.1°C by 2100. Posterity will not thank us for consuming vast resources with so little benefit to public health and welfare.

“Some may still deny the overwhelming judgment of science, but none can avoid the devastating impact of raging fires, and crippling drought, and more powerful storms,” the President says. But even assuming the President is right about the science, since even aggressive emission controls would at best avert only a tiny amount of warming, such policies would afford no protection from fires, drought, or storms.

And what does the President mean by the “overwhelming judgment of science” anyway? Mr. Obama implies that recent fires, drought, and storms would not have occurred but for anthropogenic climate change. That is ideology talking, not science.

That a warmer, drier climate will spawn more frequent forest fires and fires of longer duration is almost a tautology. Nonetheless, some studies find *no change in global fire activity* over the past century and more. Ocean cycles and forestry practices also influence the frequency and extent of wildfires. Whether recent U.S. wildfires are primarily due to *global* climate change or other factors is neither obvious nor easily determined.

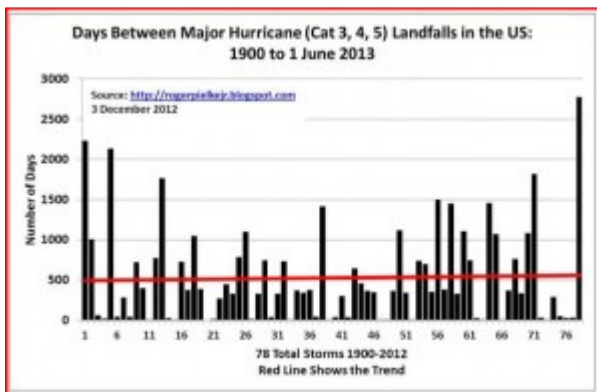
As for drought, there is no long-term trend in U.S. soil moisture such as might be correlated with the increase in atmospheric GHG concentrations.



Regarding storms, studies find no long-term increase in the strength and frequency of land-falling hurricanes globally over the past 50-70 years and no trend in Atlantic tropical cyclone behavior over the past 370 years.

Hurricane Sandy was a 'super storm' not because it was an intense hurricane (Sandy was a category 1 before making landfall), but because it was massive in area and merged with a winter frontal storm. The combined storm system contained more integrated kinetic energy (IKE) than Hurricane Katrina. Scientists simply do not know how global climate change affects the formation of such "hybrid" storms.

Inconvenient fact: The USA is currently enjoying the "longest streak ever recorded without an intense [category 3-5] hurricane landfall."



Explains University of Colorado Prof. Roger Pielke, Jr.: "When the Atlantic hurricane season starts next June 1, it will have been 2,777 days since the last time an intense (that is a Category 3, 4 or 5) hurricane made landfall along the US coast (Wilma in 2005). Such a prolonged period without an intense hurricane landfall has not been observed since 1900."

If, as the President seems to assume, all weather anomalies are due to global climate change, then how would he explain the extraordinary 7-year “drought” of intense landfalling U.S. hurricanes?

Mr. Obama says that, “The path towards sustainable energy sources will be long and sometimes difficult.” Indeed. In the famous “Crisis of Confidence” speech of July 15, 1979, President Jimmy Carter proposed a plan to obtain 20% of America’s energy from solar power by the year 2000. More than three decades later, solar provides 0.25% of U.S. energy (solar contributes 2.5% of all forms of renewable energy combined, which in turn provide 10% of total U.S. energy). Moreover, the piddling contributions of wind, solar power, and biofuels depend on a panoply of government favors: mandates, direct subsidies, and special tax breaks.

The allegedly “sustainable” energy sources championed by the President are not self-sustaining. The main reason is that they are inferior to fossil fuels in terms of energy density (bang for buck) and — in the case of wind and solar power — reliability and dispatchability.

Solyndra, the Obama administration’s mascot solar company that burned through \$535 million of the taxpayers’ money before going broke, is not the only failure in the President’s green investment portfolio. The Institute for Energy Research provides information on eight other “stimulosers” that also “failed, laid off workers, or have a bleak financial outlook.”

Because politicians get to play with other people’s money, hope continually triumphs over experience, and they never learn what three MIT scholars learned from the Carter administration’s energy programs:

If an energy technology is commercially viable, no government support is needed; if it is not commercially viable, no amount of government support can make it so.

The President says that, “America cannot resist this transition; we must lead it. We cannot cede to other nations the technology that will power new jobs and new industries — we must claim its promise.” But that’s just it — how does he know, despite the Solyndra and other failures, the tiny market shares of politically-correct renewables, and the intractable dependence of renewables on policy privileges — that wind and solar power are the future? What information does he have that tens of thousands of savvy investors don’t?

The President alludes to the great clean energy ‘race’ that America supposedly cannot afford to lose. But as my colleague William Yeatman points out, the race is itself a creature of mandate and subsidy. China subsidizes its solar panel manufacturers, for example, because U.S. states establish Soviet-style production quota for renewable energy and EU countries subsidize renewable electricity via feed-in tariffs (FITs). China’s subsidies, in turn, are the official justification for the Stimulus loans to companies like Solyndra. But Beijing is flush with cash; Washington, deep in debt. We cannot outspend China in a subsidy war.

Throwing good money after bad makes even less sense given the global financial crisis and the cutbacks Spain, Germany, France, Greece, Italy, and Ontario (Canada) have been forced to make in their FITs. The renewable market increasingly resembles a bubble (over-investment relative to actual market demand). Yeatman cautions:

When the renewable energy bubble bursts, the global industry leader will be the biggest loser. With that in mind, the supposed race with China for green technological supremacy is one the U.S. would be wise to forfeit.

The climate segment of Mr. Obama's speech concludes with a theological flourish:

That [investing in clean tech] is how we will preserve our planet, commanded to our care by God. That's what will lend meaning to the creed our fathers once declared.

A lot may be implied in those words. Obama refers to the creed — the philosophy of rights and government — articulated in the Declaration of Independence. He seems to suggest that its meaning for our times lies in the doctrine of 'creation care,' a green variant of progressive theology. But whereas the Declaration articulated a philosophy of limited government, green theology aims to expand the reach and scope of government. Al Gore gave voice to similar views in his 1992 book on "ecology and the human spirit," *Earth in the Balance*. He famously declared that the time had come to "make rescue of the environment the central organizing principle of civilization."

Where does Mr. Obama stand on creation care theology and Gore's central organizing principle? I don't know but will loudly applaud any journalist who, interviewing the President, has the curiosity and moxie to pursue this line of inquiry.