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## **Climate Whitewash, Blackwash and 'Mushroom Clouds'**

By [ANDREW C. REVKIN](#)

The reactions to the [Independent Climate Change Email Review](#) are flowing around the blogosphere, including — predictably — many shouts of “[whitewash](#)” by critics of climate science and proclamations of vindication by [the scientists](#) and [institution](#) thrust into the spotlight after the unauthorized release of a batch of e-mail strings and files revealed the sometimes-unseemly back story behind climate research. More cheers came from [champions of aggressive cuts](#) in greenhouse gases, as did at least one complaint about a [mistaken interpretation](#) of how the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change functions.

No inquiry of this sort will ever clear the slate given the polarization over this issue, fueled both by divergent ideologies and very large financial stakes related to energy policy. Everyone shares some blame in how this incident played out.

Many of those [promoting stasis](#) in the face of a clear need for a global energy quest have used this saga as a kind of “blackwash” that will long linger like a cloud, tainting public appreciation of even the undisputed basics of science pointing to a [rising human influence on climate](#).

The press, including me, was [excoriated for devoting too much ink](#) (and electrons) to the disclosed files in the first place. Some coverage was indeed far too focused on the sense of conflict, which is not surprising given that — as my screenwriter friends always say — conflict *is* story.

But what such critics forget is that many of the e-mail messages *enabled* the allegations that were then propounded by folks like [Anthony Watts](#) and amplified by professional anti-climate-policy campaigners like [Marc Morano](#).

I would have had no need, in [my initial print story on the affair](#) last December, to seek a comment from [Patrick J. Michaels](#) — a climatologist who speaks and writes on energy and climate policy for the Cato Institute, which fights most regulatory solutions to environmental problems — if [Benjamin Santer](#) of the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, using his government e-mail account, had not vented to colleagues on October 9, 2009, in this way:

I'm really sorry that you have to go through all this stuff, Phil. Next ☐time I see Pat

Michaels at a scientific meeting, I'll be tempted to beat □the [expletive] out of him. Very tempted.

That is how Michaels was given the platform to pronounce, "This is not a smoking gun; this is a mushroom cloud."

Overnight, I asked Michaels to consider that phrase in the wake of the series of investigations of the East Anglia files and related issues. Here's an exchange we had on this today (with some language cleaned up from e-mail shorthand; given that any e-mail messages might be exposed someday, it's vital to be accurate about adjustments):

Q. I was wondering if you still saw the e-mail lode (and documents) as "a mushroom cloud"? In essence, more than seven months after the disclosures, what — to your mind — was revealed that substantively changed what is understood about the research examining a human influence on climate? The mushroom cloud statement sure looks overblown these days by any reasonable standard when you put the e-mail messages in the broader context of global warming research, to my mind. Do you still think it's a valid metaphor?

A. I think that there is much less sentiment for massive emissions reductions now, and that climategate provided political cover for that. Also, it triggered a lot of inquiry into the details of the I.P.C.C. reports that I think would not have occurred absent climategate, and was associated with a major reduction in the public's certainty about climate science. That sounds like a rather large explosion to me!

Q. When you say "political cover," that can be interpreted as something flimsy. Was that your intent? Also, when you speak of a major reduction in the public's certainty about climate science, do you see that as a good thing?

After all, you've agreed that the basics of greenhouse theory are established and substantial human-driven warming in this century is inevitable. You have mainly criticized those glossing over uncertainties and overblowing the need for prompt emissions reductions.

I would think you'd bemoan a major reduction in public certainty about the basics. Did you mean to imply that undercutting the credibility of the field *in toto* is a good thing?

A. No, I think that most environmental policies (or non-policies) require some type of "event". Consider "Waldenstrube" (acid rain), the mis-named "Ozone Hole" (more accurately known as the early-spring Antarctic depletion) and the Montreal Protocol, or Bob Watson's completely fabricated Northern Hemisphere ozone hole (did you ever write about that?) prompting a complete phaseout by the senate, 99-0. I think our science has always been fraught with uncertainty. Look at the history of Methane concentrations in the last two decades. "Consensus" science (including myself in this one) was dead wrong

about the second most-important human-related greenhouse-gas emission! That’s a pretty big flop that the public is completely unaware of. So if they don’t trust us as they used to, that’s a good thing...at least it is the right thing!

I don’t have a problem with the public not trusting scientists. The way we do science today ([Kuhn](#) + large programmatic funding = stasis + shenanigans) certainly doesn’t inspire my trust. [*The preceding link was added by me for context.*]

I disagree with Michaels on this point. Science is still a process that moves forward, often in ugly ways. It is a process that can be trusted. “Trust but verify” is needed much more when the findings of science enter the world of decision-making.

What I’d suggest to anyone eager to get beyond the surface sound bites — including Santer’s (undoubtedly regretted) pugilistic musings about Michaels — is to read [the entire e-mail string](#) from which the line about a beating was selected. It includes a remarkably trenchant, readable explanation from Santer of why such fights — not just the physical kind — have little to do with the scientific basis for concern about the ongoing buildup of greenhouse gases.

What this all says to me is that the field of climate inquiry — from the basic science to its policy implications — needs to get back to work, chastened by its lapses in recent years. There’s a lot to do.