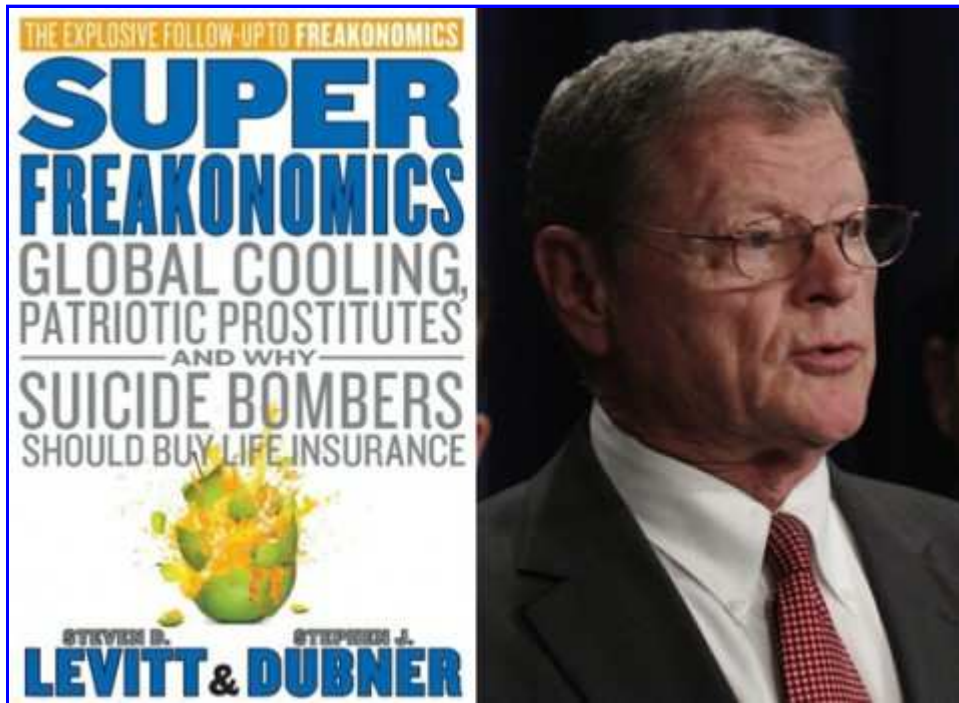


# Climate Skeptics Embrace 'Freakonomics' Sequel

Global Warming Chapter Attracts Criticism From Environmental Journalists

  By [David Weigel](#) 10/23/09 6:00 AM



Superfreakonomics and Sen. James Inhofe (R-Okla.) (HarperCollins, WDCpix)

The early reviews for "SuperFreakonomics" have been harsh. The book, wrote Brad Johnson in The Guardian, is a "[super freaking mess.](#)" According to environmental journalist Joe Romm, it contains "[many, many pieces of outright nonsense](#)" and "[major howlers.](#)" In The New Republic, Brad Plumer attacked the book for "[garden variety ignorance.](#)" And all of those pans appeared before the book actually hit the shelves this week.



Image by: Matt Mahurin

Authors Steven Levitt and Stephen Dubner didn't face anything like this three years ago when they published "Freakonomics," a surprise smash that sold 4 million copies. Unlike that book, which was based entirely on Levitt's economic research from the University of Chicago, "SuperFreakonomics" is a guided tour of other peoples' contrarian research and ideas. The final chapter deals with global warming, characterizing the beliefs of pessimistic environmentalists as "religious fervor," and arguing that the climate change solutions proposed by Al Gore and many Democrats are ineffective and unworkable. It repeats claims that environmental journalists have debated or debunked for years. As a result, the authors are getting some early support from climate change skeptics who feel that attitudes toward their stances are getting brighter.

"It reminds me of what happened when Michael Crichton wrote 'State of Fear,'" said Myron Ebell, director of energy and global warming policy at the libertarian Competitive Enterprise Institute, which gets some of its funding from the energy industry. "The problem for the left is that there are still some people who don't toe the party line who have megaphones. And anyone who has a megaphone, they're going to go after."

Ebell's reference to "State of Fear" demonstrated just how meaningful "Freakonomics" could be to people who challenge conventional wisdom about climate change. The late author's novel, published in 2004, cast as villains environmentalists and eco-terrorists who were perpetrating hoaxes to maintain their power. Coming after Crichton had made some well-publicized and much-maligned remarks skeptical of climate change science, the book was pilloried by environmentalists. It sold more than 1.5 million copies anyway.

In the years since, many climate change skeptics feel that the environmental movement has lost ground culturally and politically. A [Pew Research poll](#) released on Thursday found that the number of Americans who believed that man-made global warming was occurring, or that a hotter planet was a serious problem, had fallen precipitously. In April 2008, 71 percent of Americans said that global warming was happening, and 47 percent said it was man-made. In the new poll, only 57 percent of Americans said any global warming was happening, and 36 percent said it was man-made. Many skeptics are taking that poll as a sign that their message is getting through.

"There's just so much ... skepticism now," said Matt Dempsey, a spokesman for Sen. James Inhofe (R-Okla.), the ranking member of the Environmental and Public Works Committee and one of the most prominent skeptics of climate change in Washington. In making the case that Americans are growing more skeptical, Dempsey said, "the Pew poll is one data point. This book is another data point."

Levitt and Dubner have [engaged their critics](#) in the environmental movement, accusing them of "smears" for suggesting that the climate change chapter of "SuperFreakonomics" makes them "global warming denialists."

"I think anyone who actually reads that chapter will come away with a better fact-based understanding of the actual issues surrounding global warming," Levitt told TWI. "That said, I also think that partisans love to cherry-pick, regardless of what side of the aisle they sit on."

Indeed, the climate change skeptics who are excited about "SuperFreakonomics" and the environmentalists who are criticizing the book are focusing on some of the same material. The controversial chapter opens with ironic quotes from Newsweek and New York Times articles

from the 1970s that published frightening, if slapdash, research about “global cooling.” That phony scare is a favorite of climate change skeptics, who have attempted to bring it back from obscurity in books and in films like the just-released “Not Evil Just Wrong.”

“The man who came up with that theory, Stephen Snyder, is now one of the people scaring everyone about global warming,” said [Martin Hertzberg](#). The retired meteorologist, who lives in Colorado, has been skeptical of man-made global warming for decades. He has [converted](#) the liberal journalist Alexander Cockburn to the belief that, as Cockburn quoted him saying, “the greenhouse global warming theory has it ass backwards,” while getting into scraps with environmental journalists like George Monbiot.

“The idea of man-made global warming is fear-mongering and hysteria,” said Hertzberg. “There are a large number of know-nothing journalists and environmental lobbyists working hard on this, and they’re completely wrong. Al Gore is not a meteorologist. He knows nothing about science.”

Levitt and Dubner do not challenge all of Gore’s arguments about climate change science. What they do challenge is the idea that man’s use of carbon is speeding along a major catastrophe, and that something like cap-and-trade could be the answer. “It’s illogical,” they write, “to believe in a carbon-induced warming apocalypse and believe that such an apocalypse can be averted simply by curtailing new carbon emissions.” Prominent skeptics told TWI that such an argument, from such high-placed experts is long overdue.

“They’re absolutely right,” said Patrick Michaels, a senior fellow in environmental studies at the libertarian Cato Institute. “Look at the numbers. If every nation that has obligations under the Kyoto Protocols adopted the restrictions of Waxman-Markey [cap-and-trade legislation], you’d see a 7 percent drop in warming by 2100, about 0.4 degrees Fahrenheit.”

Michaels, who has not read the book but is planning to pick it up, saluted Levitt and Dubner for tackling an issue that few popular economists touch. “It’s about time that people who do popular economics tell people the truth,” he said. “Fortunately, the planet is not warming.”

While Levitt and Dubner do not actually argue that the planet is not getting warmer, some skeptics are hopeful that the book could direct people to studies that suggest that. “I think it is very important to question the [environmentalist] true believers,” said Patrick Moore, an early member of Greenpeace. Now, as the chairman of Greenspirit Strategies, [he does some work](#) for energy companies and supports new nuclear power. “[It’s important] as they display all the qualities of doomsday fanatics. There is ample reason to be skeptical, including the fact that the world has been warmer than today for most of the history of life, and the fact that CO2 has been much higher than today through most of the history of life.”

The controversial phrasing and criticism in “SuperFreakonomics” is in the book to make another point. Levitt and Dubner present research into geoengineering, a Gordian Knot solution to a warming planet that, for example, would replicate the effect that a massive eruption of volcano ash can have in making the planet cooler. It’s not a popular idea among some skeptics, who argue that bogus data is responsible for much of the global warming panic. One of those skeptics is Ross McKittrick, a professor at Canada’s University of Guelph [whose research suggests](#) that numbers suggesting a spike in global temperature are out of whack. He was hopeful that “SuperFreakonomics” could cut through the “groupthink and political correctness” and expose environmental journalists such as Joe Romm as dishonest activists who can’t accept criticism.

“He’s a former Clinton staffer who runs an attack blog funded by Soros money,” said McKittrick of Romm, whose ClimateProgress blog is a project of the Center for American Progress. “He’s only respected by people who approve of his inflammatory tactics and relentless politicization of the issue.”

Climate change skeptics are excited by the prospect of the general public reading Levitt and Dubner, but they’re expecting the authors to remain targets of an active and desperate green movement. “It will make people think and say, yeah, that’s right, it doesn’t make sense to do this,” said Ebell. “But that will just make the environmentalists even angrier.”

Phelim McAleer, the director of “Not Evil Just Wrong,” said his movie had begun to inspire protests and interruptions. His advice for the authors: Develop tough skin.

“Be prepared for it to get worse before it’s going to better,” said McEleer. “They don’t like questions, as Al Gore showed. Environmentalist journalists are environmentalists, and they will always side with the environmental establishment. Don’t expect fairness from journalists.”