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NEWS ANALYSIS

In Climate Debate, Exaggeration Is a Pitfall

By [ANDREW C. REVKIN](#)

In the effort to shape the public's views on global [climate change](#), [hyperbole](#) is an ever-present temptation on all sides of the debate.

Earlier this month, former Vice President [Al Gore](#) and the Washington Post columnist George Will made strong public statements about global warning — from starkly divergent viewpoints.

Mr. Gore, [addressing a hall filled with scientists](#) in Chicago, showed a slide that illustrated a sharp spike in fires, floods and other calamities around the world and warned the audience that global warming “is creating weather-related disasters that are completely unprecedented.”

Mr. Will, in [a column](#) attacking what he said were exaggerated claims about global warming's risks, chided climate scientists for predicting an ice age three decades ago and asserted that a pause in warming in recent years and the recent expansion of polar sea ice undermined visions of calamity ahead.

Both men, experts said afterward, were guilty of inaccuracies and overstatements.

Mr. Gore [removed the slide from his presentation](#) after the Belgian research group that assembled the disaster data said he had misrepresented what was driving the upward trend. The group said a host of factors contributed to the trend, with climate change possibly being one of them. A spokeswoman for Mr. Gore said he planned to switch to using data on disasters compiled by insurance companies.

Mr. Will, peppered with [complaints from scientists](#) and environmental groups who claimed the column was riddled with errors, has yet to respond. The Post's ombudsman said Mr. Will's column had been carefully fact-checked. But the scientists whose research on ice formed the basis for Mr. Will's statements said their data showed the area of the ice shrinking, not expanding.

The events illustrate the fine line that advocates on all sides walk — and sometimes cross — in using science to bolster their arguments over what should or should not be done about global warming, the buildup of emissions of heat-trapping gases that scientists have linked to rising temperatures.

[President Obama](#) has not been immune from the lure of hype. As president-elect, Mr. Obama, making a video appearance at a California climate conference, began by saying that the science pointing to human-caused warming was beyond dispute — a statement backed by a strong consensus among scientists. But he went on to push the point, taking the same step as Mr. Gore onto shakier ground.

“We’ve seen record drought, spreading famine and storms that are growing stronger with each passing hurricane season,” Mr. Obama said, linking this to global warming.

While climate scientists foresee more intense droughts and storms, there is still uncertainty, and significant disagreement, over whether recent patterns can be attributed to global warming.

Social scientists who study the interface of climate science and public policy say that campaigners and officials who seek to curb emissions of heat-trapping gases face an uphill battle in changing people’s minds about the issue. Even with the success of “An Inconvenient Truth,” the Oscar-winning 2006 documentary featuring Mr. Gore, and widely publicized images of melting Arctic ice, surveys show that most Americans are either confused about climate change, mildly concerned about it or completely disengaged from the issue.

A variety of surveys show that roughly 20 percent of Americans are in Mr. Gore’s camp and another 20 percent in Mr. Will’s, rejecting the idea that humans could dangerously alter global climate. That division is unlikely to change any time soon, said [David Ropeik](#), a consultant on risk communication who teaches at [Harvard University](#).

Once science moves from the laboratory or ice caps into fights over policy and the economy, Mr. Ropeik said, the issues are mainly framed by polarizing figures who tailor their message to people who already strongly support their views.

“Gore and Will will rally their supporters and entrench their opponents, and we will be no closer to progress,” Mr. Ropeik said. “They are merely two leaders of their tribes waving the tribal flag.”

In a [paper](#) being published in the March-April edition of the journal Environment, Matthew C. Nisbet, a professor of communications at American University, said Mr. Gore’s approach, focusing on language of crisis and catastrophe, could actually be serving the other side

in the fight.

“There is little evidence to suggest that it is effective at building broad-based support for policy action,” Dr. Nisbet said. “Perhaps worse, his message is very easily countered by people such as Will as global-warming alarmism, shifting the focus back to their preferred emphasis on scientific uncertainty and dueling expert views.”

But Dr. Nisbet said that for Mr. Will, there was little downside in stretching the bounds of science to sow doubt.

Criticism of Mr. Will’s columns, Dr. Nisbet said, “only serves to draw attention to his claims while reinforcing a larger false narrative that liberals and the mainstream press are seeking to censor rival scientific evidence and views.”

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