Dark Green Doomsayers





**Sunday, February 15, 2009; Page B07**

A corollary of Murphy's Law ("If something can go wrong, it will") is: "Things are worse than they can possibly be." Energy Secretary Steven Chu, an atomic physicist, seems to embrace that corollary but ignores Gregg Easterbrook's "Law of Doomsaying": Predict catastrophe no sooner than five years hence but no later than 10 years away, soon enough to terrify but distant enough that people will forget if you are wrong.

Chu recently told the Los Angeles Times that global warming might melt 90 percent of California's snowpack, which stores much of the water needed for agriculture. This, Chu said, would mean "no more agriculture in California," the nation's leading food producer. Chu added: "I don't actually see how they can keep their cities going."

No more lettuce or Los Angeles? Chu likes predictions, so here is another: Nine decades hence, our great-great-grandchildren will add the disappearance of California artichokes to the list of predicted planetary calamities that did not happen. Global cooling recently joined that lengthening list.

In the 1970s, "a major cooling of the planet" was "widely considered inevitable" because it was "well established" that the Northern Hemisphere's climate "has been getting cooler since about 1950" (New York Times, May 21, 1975). Although some disputed that the "cooling trend" could result in "a return to another ice age" (the Times, Sept. 14, 1975), others anticipated "a full-blown 10,000-year ice age" involving "extensive Northern Hemisphere glaciation" (Science News, March 1, 1975, and Science magazine, Dec. 10, 1976, respectively). The "continued rapid cooling of the Earth" (Global Ecology, 1971) meant that "a new ice age must now stand alongside nuclear war as a likely source of wholesale death and misery" (International Wildlife, July 1975). "The world's climatologists are agreed" that we must "prepare for the next ice age" (Science Digest, February 1973). Because of "ominous signs" that "the Earth's climate seems to be cooling down," meteorologists were "almost unanimous" that "the trend will reduce agricultural productivity for the rest of the century," perhaps triggering catastrophic famines (Newsweek cover story, "The Cooling World," April 28, 1975). Armadillos were fleeing south from Nebraska, heat-seeking snails were retreating from Central European forests, the North Atlantic was "cooling down about as fast as an ocean can cool," glaciers had "begun to advance" and "growing seasons in England and Scandinavia are getting shorter" (Christian Science Monitor, Aug. 27, 1974).

Speaking of experts, in 1980 Paul Ehrlich, a Stanford scientist and environmental Cassandra who predicted calamitous food shortages by 1990, accepted a bet with economist Julian Simon. When Ehrlich predicted the imminent exhaustion of many nonrenewable natural resources, Simon challenged him: Pick a "basket" of any five such commodities, and I will wager that in a decade the price of the basket will decline, indicating decreased scarcity. Ehrlich picked five metals -- chrome, copper, nickel, tin and tungsten -- that he predicted would become more expensive. Not only did the price of the basket decline, the price of *all five* declined.

An expert Ehrlich consulted in picking the five was John Holdren, who today is President Obama's science adviser. Credentialed intellectuals, too -- actually, *especially* -- illustrate Montaigne's axiom: "Nothing is so firmly believed as what we least know."

As global levels of sea ice declined last year, many experts said this was evidence of man-made global warming. Since September, however, the increase in sea ice has been the fastest change, either up or down, since 1979, when satellite record-keeping began. According to the University of Illinois' Arctic Climate Research Center, global sea ice levels now equal those of 1979.

An unstated premise of eco-pessimism is that environmental conditions are, or recently were, optimal. The proclaimed faith of eco-pessimists is weirdly optimistic: These optimal conditions must and can be preserved or restored if government will make us minimize our carbon footprints and if government will "remake" the economy.

Because of today's economy, another law -- call it the Law of Clarifying Calamities -- is being (redundantly) confirmed. On graphs tracking public opinion, two lines are moving in tandem and inversely: The sharply rising line charts public concern about the economy, the plunging line follows concern about the environment. A recent Pew Research Center poll asked which of 20 issues should be the government's top priorities. Climate change ranked 20th.

Real calamities take our minds off hypothetical ones. Besides, according to the U.N. World Meteorological Organization, there has been no recorded global warming for more than a decade, or one-third of the span since the global cooling scare.

**Climate Science in A Tornado**



**Friday, February 27, 2009; Page A17**

Few phenomena generate as much heat as disputes about current orthodoxies concerning global warming. This column recently reported and commented on some developments pertinent to the debate about whether global warming is occurring and what can and should be done. That column, which expressed skepticism about some emphatic proclamations by the alarmed, took a stroll down memory lane, through the debris of 1970s predictions about the near certainty of calamitous global cooling.

Concerning those predictions, the New York Times was -- as it is today in a contrary crusade -- a megaphone for the alarmed, as when (May 21, 1975) it reported that "a major cooling of the climate" was "widely considered inevitable" because it was "well established" that the Northern Hemisphere's climate "has been getting cooler since about 1950." Now the Times, a trumpet that never sounds retreat in today's war against warming, has afforded this column an opportunity to revisit another facet of this subject -- meretricious journalism in the service of dubious certitudes.

On Wednesday, the Times carried a "news analysis" -- a story in the paper's news section, but one that was not just reporting news -- accusing Al Gore and this columnist of inaccuracies. Gore can speak for himself. So can this columnist.

Reporter Andrew Revkin's story was headlined: "In Debate on Climate Change, Exaggeration Is a Common Pitfall." Regarding exaggeration, the Times knows whereof it speaks, especially when it revisits, if it ever does, its reporting on the global cooling scare of the 1970s, and its reporting and editorializing -- sometimes a distinction without a difference -- concerning today's climate controversies.

Which returns us to Revkin. In a story ostensibly about journalism, he simply asserts -- how does he know this? -- that the last decade, which passed without warming, was just "a pause in warming." His attempt to contact this writer was an e-mail sent at 5:47 p.m., a few hours before the Times began printing his story, which was not so time-sensitive -- it concerned controversies already many days running -- that it had to appear the next day. But Revkin reported that "experts said" this columnist's intervention in the climate debate was "riddled with" inaccuracies. Revkin's supposed experts might exist and might have expertise but they do not have names that Revkin wished to divulge.

As for the anonymous scientists' unspecified claims about the column's supposedly myriad inaccuracies: The column contained many factual assertions but only one has been challenged. The challenge is mistaken.

Citing data from the University of Illinois' Arctic Climate Research Center, as interpreted on Jan. 1 by Daily Tech, a technology and science news blog, the column said that since September "the increase in sea ice has been the fastest change, either up or down, since 1979, when satellite record-keeping began." According to the center, global sea ice levels at the end of 2008 were "near or slightly lower than" those of 1979. The center generally does not make its statistics available, but in a Jan. 12 statement the center confirmed that global sea ice levels were within a difference of less than 3 percent of the 1980 level.

So the column accurately reported what the center had reported. But on Feb. 15, the Sunday the column appeared, the center, then receiving many e-mail inquiries, issued a statement saying "we do not know where George Will is getting his information." The answer was: From the center, via Daily Tech. Consult the center's Web site where, on Jan. 12, the center posted the confirmation of the data that this column subsequently reported accurately.

The scientists at the Illinois center offer their statistics with responsible caveats germane to margins of error in measurements and precise seasonal comparisons of year-on-year estimates of global sea ice. Nowadays, however, scientists often find themselves enveloped in furies triggered by any expression of skepticism about the global warming consensus (which will prevail until a diametrically different consensus comes along; see the 1970s) in the media-environmental complex. Concerning which:

On Feb. 18 the U.S. National Snow and Ice Data Center reported that from early January until the middle of this month, a defective performance by satellite monitors that measure sea ice caused an underestimation of the extent of Arctic sea ice by 193,000 square miles, which is approximately the size of California. The Times ("All the news that's fit to print"), which as of this writing had not printed that story, should unleash Revkin and his unnamed experts.

**In Climate Debate, Exaggeration Is a Pitfall**

By **ANDREW C. REVKIN**



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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.