



Too Hot to Handle

Jordan R. Raney

Climate policy debates are impassioned—and understandably so. If you believe that man-made carbon dioxide emissions will make the world uninhabitable, then you might naturally conclude that halting emissions is an imperative to be pursued at almost any cost. If, on the other hand, you believe that global warming is a myth, then you might naturally oppose with vigor all proposals for reducing emissions, deeming them unnecessary and costly burdens on the productive sectors of society. Of course, these particular views—that our emissions are an imminent threat to our planet’s habitability or, alternatively, that they are of no concern at all—are in the extreme and each is held by a minority. But because these extremes have a disproportionate influence on public debates about climate policy, those debates often degenerate into sniping and sound bites and oversimplified depictions of the facts.

Making no attempt to conceal where he stands, Christopher Horner adds his shouts to the din with *Red*

Hot Lies. An attorney and senior fellow with the Competitive Enterprise Institute, Horner published *The Politically Incorrect Guide to Global Warming* in 2007. He takes pride in his role as *bête noire* of environmental activists; his official homepage claims that Greenpeace has raided his gar-

bage “on a weekly basis.” In *Red Hot Lies*, he presents cases of climate alarmists lying, cheating, misrepresenting data, and attempting to

muzzle their opponents. Although Horner does not succeed in what seems to be the ultimate goal of his work—to prove systematic conspiracy among governments, special interests, and scientists—he provides an invaluable service in exposing the dishonesty of a discouragingly large number of people involved in the climate-policy debates.

Horner is at his most engaging and enlightening when taking whacks at the most hysterical propagators of alarmism—such as Al Gore and James Hansen, both of whose exploits he covers extensively—and their credulous enablers in the media. We learn of Richard Stengel, an editor

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Threats, Fraud, and Deception to
Keep You Misinformed*
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at *Time* who justified his magazine's sensational coverage of climate issues this way:

I have felt that one of the things that's needed in journalism is that you have to have a point of view about things. You can't always just say "on the one hand, on the other" and you decide. People trust us to make decisions. We're experts in what we do. So I thought, you know what, if we really feel strongly about something let's just say so.

Horner shows quite convincingly that climate research that can be spun to suggest a crisis is covered much more intensely than research that would seem to lessen concern, even when the latter is published in more prestigious journals. For example, Horner compares the media coverage of two scientific papers published within six months of each other, one suggesting that global warming would have a negligible impact on the severity of hurricanes and the other suggesting the opposite. The former was published in *Nature*, one of the most prestigious scientific journals, yet covered in the mainstream media just three times. The latter was published in a far less prestigious journal but covered 79 times. This is no surprise, given the media's interest in hyping crisis to boost ratings. As Horner quips about a CNN special called *Planet in Peril*, "who would watch *Planet OK?*"

Horner shines when he's exposing the hysterics and tactics of the media and activists. But when he strays into the territory of scientific pronouncement, he usually botches the facts. For instance, at one point he makes the baffling claim that "science informs us that each subsequent carbon dioxide molecule has half of the warming potential of the one before it." This is nonsense. If it were true, the first molecule of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere would supply one unit of heating (by definition), the second would supply half an additional unit, the third a quarter unit, and so on, which mathematically is the sum $1 + \frac{1}{2} + (\frac{1}{2})^2 + (\frac{1}{2})^3 + \dots + (\frac{1}{2})^n$. Even if you take n to infinity this sum only evaluates to 2. This means that, following Horner's claim, even if our planet's atmosphere were made up *entirely* of densely-packed carbon dioxide, it would have only twice the heating potential it would have if there were just one carbon dioxide molecule floating around in the entire atmosphere.

And there is a dash of hypocrisy even in the way Horner worded that claim, beginning as it does with "science informs us"—the same kind of phrasing that he criticizes alarmists for using. It goes without saying that his "scientific" claim is left without citation, as are many of the more interesting assertions he makes throughout. He claims that the globe was warmer around the time of Jesus Christ (during a "Roman warming")

but again declines to provide citation. Was it warmer? Maybe—our knowledge of past climate becomes hazier the further back we go due to uncertainties associated with proxy climate indicators. But skeptics continue to try to argue both that present warming is no cause for concern since there are many documented cases of higher global temperatures in the distant past, *and* that records of past climate suggesting that present warming is worrisome cannot be trusted since such records contain too many uncertainties.

Horner commits another of the skeptics' fundamental mistakes by insisting that because there are uncertainties there is nothing to worry about at all. But even if paleoclimatological data, with their substantial error bars, don't yet make it possible for us to clearly understand the past relationships between climate and atmospheric concentrations of carbon dioxide, the basic physics of the greenhouse effect are not in dispute. Moreover, even if all our temperature data had to be thrown out, we have very accurate measurements of carbon dioxide concentrations for the last fifty years, and they are increasing at a rate consistent with human emissions. Given what we know about how carbon dioxide absorbs and scatters certain wavelengths of radiation, that increase warrants careful study—both of the potential impact it could have on climate and of how we might reasonably reduce our emissions.

The two extremes in the global warming debate are surprisingly similar in their paranoid outlook. One asserts the tired old conspiracy that the oil companies control the reins of power and that the only way to stop them is to willfully return to the Stone Age and to quit having children. The other extreme asserts that there is a systematic conspiracy among scientists, governments, and special interest groups (the “unholy alliance of activists, Big Science, and other vested interests,” as Horner puts it), that scientists lie for immediate grant funding, and that governments seek worldwide socialism under the guise of environmental concerns. Some of Horner's conspiracy claims border on lunacy, including the assertion that there is a secret “back door” for environmentalists to become members of the National Academy of Sciences, and that academic departments the world over are being systematically infiltrated by environmentalists and climate alarmists. The culprits are different, but the reflex is the same: a tendency to imagine conspiracies where there are none.

The great thing about scientific results, however, is that they do not long tolerate conspiracy theories. Horner offers a few anecdotes about researchers who have had papers delayed or rejected by scientific journals, implying that “Big Science” is keeping skeptics from getting a fair hearing—as though rejected or delayed papers were rare in scientific

publishing. He doesn't seem to recognize just how competitive academic science is. If a scientist lies, he is permanently damaged. If he makes a mistake, his competitors will leap to discredit him, as it is in their interest (for prestige, funding, and so forth) to catch it.

In addition to sharing a conspiracy mindset, proponents of both climate extremes share a brazen arrogance. Both absurdly oversimplify the complex climate system, and almost never admit that the basic claims of the other side could be even partially correct. Both groups write partly-true books that require the reader to check the references as he goes. In alarmist books this is because they usually claim certainty to a higher degree than the scientific results allow; in the case of books by skeptics, it is because they assert the nonexistence of the problem on the grounds of scientific uncertainty. Horner protests the inflammatory language alarmists sometimes use to describe their opponents—comparisons to Hitler and the like. Some alarmists odiously use the terms “denier” and “denialist” to imply a relation between climate-change skeptics and Holocaust deniers; Horner is justly offended by this, and further aggrieved that alarmists apply the phrase “climate-change denier” to “describe a mixed bag of people—from those who think the planet is getting hotter but argue that we will be able to deal with it, to those who deny outright that any

warming is taking place (who are in a tiny minority).” But for all his just outrage, Horner himself uses inflammatory language throughout the book in describing his opponents. Indeed, immediately after lamenting the fact that alarmists “have shown no compunction about measuring the words they use,” Horner begins a section titled “What to Call a Name-Caller,” an exercise reminiscent of the schoolyard taunt about rubber and glue. Elsewhere in the book he describes how to pick his climate-skeptic friends out of the crowd when they attend gatherings of environmentalists: “We’re the hygienic ones unburdened by the telltale split ends or, to borrow a phrase from P.J. O’Rourke, the kind of ugliness that is the result of years of ill temper, pique, and petty malice.” To be sure, Horner’s jest doesn’t rank alongside comparisons to Nazis, but his book is hardly a paragon of elevated and measured discourse.

Still, despite his lapses into hyperbole and hypocrisy, as well as his egregious scientific errors, Horner roundly indicts a fair number of people who seem to have made it their full-time job to try to spread unwarranted panic. He bears witness to the rise of a contingent of activist-scientists who have deemed that the ends justify the means when it comes to convincing people that we must intervene in our climate—men like Hansen, who believe it permissible

to make exaggerated claims in the service of what they consider a moral cause. It is hard to consider someone a dispassionate scientific seeker after truth when he is waving a placard.

Alarmists have such great faith in science that they believe their current results demand sudden and extraordinary policy changes, significantly altering our way of life. Yet somehow these same alarmists have insufficient faith in science to believe that it can produce technological advances that will in coming decades solve the problem of carbon emissions and climate change.

Skepticism is the badge of the modern scientist; every scientist and scientifically-minded amateur must be skeptical. Scientists are not permitted to demand belief from their audiences—rather, they must give evidence. It is enormously disconcerting that some scientists, in effect, shout down skeptical voices with angry cries of “*Consensus!*” But it is also disconcerting that others—especially conservatives—study the issue of climate change only so far as is necessary to find consolation in uncertainty (which exists in every field of scientific inquiry).

To be sure, there do remain real pockets of uncertainty in climate

research; scientists are trying to understand and make predictions about a very complex system—our planet, its oceans and teeming life, its atmosphere, the sun. This uncertainty is the reason that sweeping policy proposals are at this time ill-advised; climate policy proposals should be small, gradual, and based in humility, the result of the deliberative democratic process of a free people grappling with complicated uncertainties.

It is irresponsible—and not conservative—to participate in uncontrolled emissions of potentially harmful substances without making an effort to clean up after ourselves. But time and again we have seen that it is exactly the economic freedom and technological advancement that environmentalists often attack that afford people the luxury of such cares, after prosperity has so abundantly met their basic needs. There is good reason to believe that the same scientific ingenuity that brought us that prosperity, and with it the problem of carbon dioxide emissions, can solve the problem without destroying the prosperity.

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