

Having heard from the two certified scientists of my family on global warming, it seems only fair that the family's certified philosopher should weigh in.

The junior scientist started his treatise on the scientific method by attempting to impugn the credibility of Al Gore through repetition of the old lie, spread by GOP politicians and talk show hosts in the smear campaign of 2000, namely that Al Gore had claimed to be the inventor of the internet. I'm afraid that my nephew's credibility has taken a bigger hit here than Al Gore's.

He goes on to say that "nobody is disputing global warming" and again "Why by the way, is it axiomatically bad if the earth is warming?" I'm encouraged by the first admission but the second suggests that he hasn't been paying attention. There have been a large number of people other than Al Gore, and most of them scientists, saying that as the polar ice melts, the oceans will absorb more heat and the process will be accelerated. Other predicted events are a major rise in sea level and increased major storm activity. My nephew didn't make it clear whether he regards such events as unlikely, impossible or insignificant.

As for the senior scientist's comments, I admit that I have done no studies or measurements myself. For most of the information we rely upon in areas such as this, we turn to the scientific community. While our senior scientist has disparaged American public opinion, something I'm not above doing myself, from all the information I've found, it seems that there is far greater consensus among scientists in the field about man's impact on global warming than there is in the media or the general American public.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was established in 1988 by the World Meteorological Organization and UNEP, and bases its assessments mainly on published peer-reviewed scientific studies. I suggest you check out its most recent report.

I concur that we ultimately must arrive at a belief after examining the evidence, not the other way around, and that the consequences of a wrong belief could be disastrous. The debate with our family scientists appears to be not over whether the world is getting warmer or not, but rather what is causing it. If we all agree that the world is getting warmer, and the evidence is convincing, we are confronted with three hypotheses:

1. The world is warming due to sunspot activity.
2. Human activity is modifying the atmosphere in such a way as to cause global warming.
3. Both of these factors may be combining to create this phenomenon.

We shouldn't exclude the latter but for the sake of brevity and simplicity we'll just leave it out of the discussion. The Monckton crowd, those who would deny man's impact, say that we can go right on burning up the world's resources until they're exhausted and it won't make much difference, but changing our habits would be expensive and detrimental to the economy. If the Gore crowd is correct, we can and should change our habits and limit ecological disasters that would result from continuing business as usual.

A friend of the family scientists raises the interesting question of why the opinions about global warming seem to divide along political lines. I would suggest that the conservative mind-set, by definition, is resistant to change, whether it be imposed or self-generated change. (I do realize that this argument has a big hole in it, inasmuch as many Americans calling themselves conservatives today are actually radical right-wing reactionaries seeking an abrupt return to an idealized past circa 1880-1920.) Clearly, another major reason for the political divide is the large number of well-funded right-wing foundations, dedicated to preserving and extending the interests of the people and corporations who fund them. Just as there were "scientists", funded by foundations representing tobacco interests, who reliably produced findings that smoking was not really dangerous, we can reasonably assume that most "scientists", "journalists" and other pundits proclaiming global warming a hoax are on the payroll, one way or another, of some of these foundations.

Rejection of the Gore hypothesis that we can do something about global warming posits the alternative hypothesis that we can do nothing about it. While the Gore call to action has been attacked as hysteria by some on the right, it would seem that their alternative scenario should be generating an even greater hysteria and call to yet more drastic action, which we're not seeing. It's true that in the medieval warm period, when the planet was populated by 1/15th the number of its current inhabitants (many of whom travel by car and plane), temperatures were similar to those we experienced in the mid-twentieth century, but recently the temperatures have turned dramatically and swiftly warmer. If we are just passive victims of a change happening due to sunspot activity, how can responsible people not be preparing to defend our world from the coming disasters by evacuating coastal areas, preparing for the migration of hundreds of millions of people, and building dikes worldwide on the model of the Netherlands?

Global warming is happening and the scientific community can argue about whether we can limit it or not (see the IPCC report). Either way, we can bury our heads in the sand and wait for the end, or we can take radical measures to conserve our civilization. Newt Gingrich warns that we must face up to terrorism before we lose an American city, and repealing the Bill of Rights is not too big a price to pay, but he fails to note that we've already lost a major American city, without any terrorist help, simply by not doing what everyone knew needed to be done. Thus far, the right side of the political spectrum seems to prefer the New Orleans approach. Lots of Bush sponsors have gotten remarkably rich in New Orleans and even more of them have profited from the Iraq disaster, so why not go global? There will always be safe havens for the rich and powerful, won't there?

Did someone mention the consequences of being wrong? Who among you believed that the Iraqis would welcome our invading Army as liberators?