

Hot About Global Warming

In his Sept. 3 op-ed column "Al Gore's Green Guilt," George Will said, "Gore is marching with many people who not long ago were marching in the opposite direction. New York magazine's Christopher Byron notes that Stephen Schneider of the National Center for Atmospheric Research in Boulder [Colo.], is an 'environmentalist for all temperatures.' Today Schneider is hot about global warming; 16 years ago he was exercised about global cooling. There are a lot like him among today's panic mongers."

This is both false and possibly malicious, because I have repeatedly noted that 16 years ago in my book "The Genesis Strategy," I was relatively neutral about whether warming or cooling was the more likely outcome from continued growth in population, affluence and polluting technologies. Rather, I warned that any rapid climatic changes (of more than a few degrees in a century) could threaten agriculture and natural ecosystems.

That warming or cooling of this rate is likely to pose potentially serious risks is repeatedly endorsed by all official assessments of scientifically balanced groups. Moreover, even if I had forecast cooling 16 years ago, it would hardly be a source of pride for a scientist to keep repeating a forecast for 16 years regardless of new evidence. Back then we didn't know much about the heat trapping implications of gases like chlorofluorocarbons, methane or nitrous oxide. Now, we know that these greenhouse gases (with carbon dioxide) are more likely on a global scale to dominate climatic change than cooling pollutants like sulfur dioxide. Two decades ago my main point then, which is still valid today, is that we insult the environment at a faster rate than we can foresee the consequences and that, in my value system, a prudent response is to slow down our impact on the environment to buy time for scientists to assess the seriousness and nature to adapt to whatever changes eventually unfold.

I am proud, not ashamed, of my small role in helping stimulate and contribute to knowledge of climatic change during the past 20 years (my recent views are detailed in my book "Global Warming: Are We Entering the Greenhouse Century?"). What doctor would be in practice if he or she doggedly stuck to a preliminary diagnosis after all lab tests and X-rays the physician responsibly ordered pointed to a different disease? That is how science works—by hypothesis, testing and new hypothesis.

But in the cases of global warming, acid rain, species loss or ozone depletion, the consequences are more than academic exercises. These experiments are being performed on "laboratory Earth," and I for one appreciate the unprecedented (for a politician) dedication of Al Gore to understand the science and then search for least-cost solutions.

—Stephen H. Schneider

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