

Going Cheney on Climate

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In 2006, Ron Suskind published “The One Percent Doctrine,” a book about the U.S. war on terrorists after 9/11. The title was drawn from an assessment by then-Vice President Dick Cheney, who, in the face of concerns that a Pakistani scientist was offering nuclear-weapons expertise to Al Qaeda, reportedly declared: “If there’s a 1% chance that Pakistani scientists are helping Al Qaeda build or develop a nuclear weapon, we have to treat it as a certainty in terms of our response.” Cheney contended that the U.S. had to confront a very new type of threat: a “low-probability, high-impact event.”

Skip to next paragraph Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times
Thomas L. Friedman

Soon after Suskind’s book came out, the legal scholar Cass Sunstein, who then was at the University of Chicago, pointed out that Mr. Cheney seemed to be endorsing the same “precautionary principle” that also animated environmentalists. Sunstein wrote in his blog: “According to the Precautionary Principle, it is appropriate to respond aggressively to low-probability, high-impact events — such as climate change. Indeed, another vice president — Al Gore — can be understood to be arguing for a precautionary principle for climate change (though he believes that the chance of disaster is well over 1 percent).”

Of course, Mr. Cheney would never accept that analogy. Indeed, many of the same people who defend Mr. Cheney’s One Percent Doctrine on nukes tell us not to worry at all about catastrophic global warming, where the odds are, in fact, a lot higher than 1 percent, if we stick to business as usual. That is unfortunate, because Cheney’s instinct is precisely the right framework with which to think about the climate issue — and this whole “climategate” controversy as well.

“Climategate” was triggered on Nov. 17 when an unidentified person hacked into the e-mails and data files of the University of East Anglia’s Climatic Research Unit, one of the leading climate science centers in the world — and then posted them on the Internet. In a few instances, they revealed some leading climatologists seemingly massaging data to show more global warming and excluding contradictory research.

Frankly, I found it very disappointing to read a leading climate scientist writing that he used a “trick” to “hide” a putative decline in temperatures or was keeping contradictory research from getting a proper hearing. Yes, the climate-denier community, funded by big oil, has published all sorts of bogus science for years — and the world never made a fuss. That, though, is no excuse for serious climatologists not adhering to the highest scientific standards at all times.

That said, be serious: The evidence that our planet, since the Industrial Revolution, has been on a broad warming trend outside the normal variation patterns — with periodic micro-cooling phases — has been documented by a variety of independent research centers.

As this paper just reported : “Despite recent fluctuations in global temperature year to year, which fueled claims of global cooling, a sustained global warming trend shows no signs of ending, according to new analysis by the World Meteorological Organization made public on Tuesday. The decade of the 2000s is very likely the warmest decade in the modern record.”

This is not complicated. We know that our planet is enveloped in a blanket of greenhouse gases that keep the Earth at a comfortable temperature. As we pump more carbon-dioxide and other greenhouse gases into that blanket from cars, buildings, agriculture, forests and industry, more heat gets trapped.

What we don't know, because the climate system is so complex, is what other factors might over time compensate for that man-driven warming, or how rapidly temperatures might rise, melt more ice and raise sea levels. It's all a game of odds. We've never been here before. We just know two things: one, the CO₂ we put into the atmosphere stays there for many years, so it is "irreversible" in real-time (barring some feat of geo-engineering); and two, that CO₂ buildup has the potential to unleash "catastrophic" warming.

When I see a problem that has even a 1 percent probability of occurring and is "irreversible" and potentially "catastrophic," I buy insurance. That is what taking climate change seriously is all about.

If we prepare for climate change by building a clean-power economy, but climate change turns out to be a hoax, what would be the result? Well, during a transition period, we would have higher energy prices. But gradually we would be driving battery-powered electric cars and powering more and more of our homes and factories with wind, solar, nuclear and second-generation biofuels. We would be much less dependent on oil dictators who have drawn a bull's-eye on our backs; our trade deficit would improve; the dollar would strengthen; and the air we breathe would be cleaner. In short, as a country, we would be stronger, more innovative and more energy independent.

But if we don't prepare, and climate change turns out to be real, life on this planet could become a living hell. And that's why I'm for doing the Cheney-thing on climate — preparing for 1 percent.