Pro/Con Debate:
"Does human activity affect climate?"
Seattle Times, Opinion, July 25, 2003

Yes: Carbon dioxide buildup increases risk of calamity

By J.W. Anderson
Special to The Washington Post

WASHINGTON: James Schlesinger, the former secretary of energy, wrote recently that the science of climate change and global warming is uncertain. That is quite true, as far as it goes; but it doesn't go very far.

What does that mean for national policy? Does it mean, as the Bush administration argues, that any serious decisions should be put off to a later time when the scientists have achieved greater certainty? Schlesinger seems to be leaning in that direction.

In fact, the science may never be clear. Or it may become clear only after severe and damaging change.

A president must constantly make policy in the face of scientific uncertainty. From the options on smallpox vaccination to evaluation of North Korean nuclear capability, this president has been required to come to urgent and highly consequential decisions in the face of unanswered, and unanswerable, questions. Uncertainty is a quality that climate policy has in common with most of the other subjects with which a president must deal.

Three things can be said about global climate change: (1) The world has grown measurably warmer over the past century. (2) The chief cause is probably carbon dioxide, a gas that traps heat and is generated by burning fossil fuels. The volume going into the atmosphere is rising steadily. And, (3) nobody knows what's going to happen as the concentrations of carbon dioxide keep rising.

The geological record is full of warnings that when change comes, it can come exceedingly fast. The evidence hints at hidden trigger mechanisms that, once sprung, can send whole continents into radically different climates. It could happen for purely natural reasons, having nothing to do with human activities. But the rapid buildup of carbon dioxide from power plants and cars and furnaces increases the risk. That much is not an uncertainty.

Faced with an unknown risk of a huge calamity, what should a government do?

It could spend a lot of money on further scientific research, call on industry to show voluntary restraint and postpone any serious action into the indefinite future. That's what the Bush administration is doing.

The better and, in the nonpolitical sense of the word, more conservative policy would be to start now, gently and gradually, to discourage fuel use and encourage efficiency with a small tax on fuel; and put the country on notice that in years to come, if necessary, it would rise.

It wouldn't affect consumers much immediately, but it would warn the people who build power plants and design cars that the premium on efficiency might go up substantially in the years for which they do their long-term planning. (Because it's a tax, it won't happen in this administration. But we're talking about what's best, not what's likeliest.)

A gradual beginning and a long-term perspective are important. Among the basic defects of the Kyoto treaty, which was designed to impose greenhouse-gas emission limits on all the industrial countries, are that it would have begun with a jolt, making energy suddenly a good deal more expensive, and that it didn't look beyond 2012.

President Bush was right to get the United States out of the Kyoto treaty. But he promised to develop an alternative; which, except for a little jawboning, he has never produced.

Another major shortcoming of Kyoto is that it puts no limits on emissions from developing countries. Any control regime that does not include China and India won't be worth much. To bring them in will require a lot of persuasion, including financial aid and technology transfers.

No doubt many Americans will object to the idea of foreign aid to protect the climate. Perhaps they might want to reflect that a warmer world means ice melting at the South Pole, and when the sea level rises in the Bay of Bengal it also rises in California and along the Delmarva Peninsula.

An effective plan to lower the risk of catastrophic climate change need not damage the economy, any more than buying insurance against fires and floods damages the economy.

Scientific uncertainty is a fact of life. One purpose of public policy is to address uncertainty. It's not an excuse for inaction in confronting a rising risk.

J.W. Anderson, a former editorial writer for The Washington Post, is journalist in residence at Resources for the Future.

No: Activists ignore history's cycles of warming, cooling

By Dennis T. Avery

WASHINGTON: The latest pseudo-scientific parlor game is pretending that the Little Ice Age didn't happen.

We're supposed to ignore the historic reality that the world's mean temperatures dropped sharply by 2 to 4 degrees Fahrenheit from about 1300 AD until at least 1850 AD and, in the 14th century, fell perhaps a freaky 9 degrees below today's average temperatures.

Let's pretend this well-documented spasm of freezing cold, advancing glaciers and terrible storms did not freeze the Viking settlers to death on Greenland or create Europe's "year without a summer" in 1315, when crops failed and created massive famine.

The silly game of "hide the Little Ice Age" is being played to support the greenhouse warming theory: the computer-modeled supposition that human activity is making the world seriously warmer.

The Little Ice Age and the Medieval Warming that preceded it from 950 to 1300 AD stand out in every historic temperature record as the major weather events of the past 1,000 years, and they're a hefty problem for global-warming proponents.

If the world was warmer in 1200 than today, and far colder in the year 1400, why would we blame current temperature trends on auto exhausts?

Nevertheless, the latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report says that "viewed hemispherically, the Little Ice Age can only be

considered as a modest cooling of the Northern Hemisphere during the period. Such regional variability can be understood in part as reflecting accompanying changes in atmospheric circulation."

There you have it. The Earth didn't get colder, its circulation just got a little constricted. For 500 years? How?

The U.N. report says, "The evidence for temperature changes in past centuries in the Southern Hemisphere is quite sparse. What evidence is available ... suggests markedly different behavior from the Northern Hemisphere. The only obvious similarity is the unprecedented warmth of the late 20th century."

Well, the Antarctic is in the Earth's Southern Hemisphere, and we've gotten some very interesting scientific data on the Little Ice Age in Antarctica over the past few years.

Hamilton College's Eugene Domack, for instance, analyzed ocean sediments from the continental shelf of the western Antarctic Peninsula and was able to date the Little Ice Age as starting about 700 years ago, and ending about 100 years ago.

Boo-Keun Khim at Seoul National University's Research Institute of Oceanography, analyzing geochemical data from Antarctica's northern tip, discovered both the Little Ice Age and the Medieval Warming period along with previous earthly warmings and coolings that go back thousands of years.

Contrary to the common belief that global warming will melt the polar ice caps, modest warming brings more snow so the ice caps build up.

The greenhouse theory advanced by global warming enthusiasts tells us that mankind is ruining the Earth, but the billion-dollar computer models they use to project weather patterns 100 years from now don't even agree with each other.

One says South Dakota will become a desert, another predicts it will become a swamp; which leaves people in Rapid City and Sioux Falls in a bit of a quandary.

Meanwhile, the Earth's own historic records, in the fossils, sediments and ice cores, tell us we're in another modest, natural warming cycle that will bring back the finest weather humanity can remember.

For those of us who still shiver remembering the extra-cold winter of 2002-03, that news ought to be greeted with grateful pleasure rather than breast-beating alarm.

Dennis T. Avery is a senior fellow at The Hudson Institute (www.hudsoninstitute.org). Readers may write to him at Hudson/DC, 1015 18th St. N.W., Suite 300, Washington, D.C. 20036.

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