

Geoengineering as a Response to Climate Change: An Urgent Problem Meets a Bad Concept

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Plan of the Talk

“[S]cientists study the world as it is; engineers create the world that has never been.”--
Theodore von Karman

- I. Introduction
- II. The Nature of the Problem
- III. The Vocabulary of Responses
- IV. Some Concerns About (What is Called)
Geoengineering
- V. The Risks of Research
- VI. The Way Forward: A Portfolio of Responses

The Vocabulary of Responses

- Prevention/Mitigation/Adaptation
- Mitigation/Adaptation/Geoengineering

A New Vocabulary

- Abatement
- Mitigation
- Adaptation

JFK 1961: “[I]propose further cooperative efforts between all nations in weather prediction and eventually in weather control.
“

PSAC 1965: “countervailing climate changes”

Why Stop Talking About Geoengineering?

- the concept is too broad.
- the category seems arbitrary
- it invites us to see an entire class of strategies as a categorical rival to those approaches to climate change that are classed as mitigation and adaptation.
- there is a tendency to exempt proposals that are classed as geoengineering from the critical evaluation we give to other proposals

The Real Problem

is not in choosing the right class of responses, but rather in selecting and implementing a portfolio of particular strategies for responding to a problem that is urgent, multidimensional, and extended in space in time.

IV. Some Concerns About (What is Called) Geoengineering

- Unintended Consequences
- Magic Bullets
- Declaring a Climate Emergency
- Moral Hazards
- Arrogance

V. The Risks of Research

VI. The Way Forward: A Portfolio of Responses

The approach that I have just begun to sketch amounts to abandoning the Promethean dream, and entering the messy world of “small ball” climate politics.

We have created a problem of climate change and we must mobilize all of our resources in addressing it. But John Wayne is dead, and there is no Colt 45 peacemaker in sight.