

October 15, 2007

OP-ED COLUMNIST

Gore Derangement Syndrome

By **PAUL KRUGMAN**

On the day after Al Gore shared the Nobel Peace Prize, The Wall Street Journal's editors couldn't even bring themselves to mention Mr. Gore's name. Instead, they devoted their editorial to a long list of people they thought deserved the prize more.

And at National Review Online, Iain Murray suggested that the prize should have been shared with "that well-known peace campaigner Osama bin Laden, who implicitly endorsed Gore's stance." You see, bin Laden once said something about climate change — therefore, anyone who talks about climate change is a friend of the terrorists.

What is it about Mr. Gore that drives right-wingers insane?

Partly it's a reaction to what happened in 2000, when the American people chose Mr. Gore but his opponent somehow ended up in the White House. Both the personality cult the right tried to build around President Bush and the often hysterical denigration of Mr. Gore were, I believe, largely motivated by the desire to expunge the stain of illegitimacy from the Bush administration.

And now that Mr. Bush has proved himself utterly the wrong man for the job — to be, in fact, the best president Al Qaeda's recruiters could have hoped for — the symptoms of Gore derangement syndrome have grown even more extreme.

The worst thing about Mr. Gore, from the conservative point of view, is that he keeps being right. In 1992, George H. W. Bush mocked him as the "ozone man," but three years later the scientists who discovered the threat to the ozone layer won the Nobel Prize in Chemistry. In 2002 he warned that if we invaded Iraq, "the resulting chaos could easily pose a far greater danger to the United States than we presently face from Saddam." And so it has proved.

But Gore hatred is more than personal. When National Review decided to name its anti-environmental blog Planet Gore, it was trying to discredit the message as well as the messenger. For the truth Mr. Gore has been telling about how human activities are changing the climate isn't just inconvenient. For conservatives, it's deeply threatening.

Consider the policy implications of taking climate change seriously.

"We have always known that heedless self-interest was bad morals," said F.D.R. "We know now that it is bad economics." These words apply perfectly to climate change. It's in the interest of most people (and especially their descendants) that somebody do something to reduce emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse

gases, but each individual would like that somebody to be somebody else. Leave it up to the free market, and in a few generations Florida will be underwater.

The solution to such conflicts between self-interest and the common good is to provide individuals with an incentive to do the right thing. In this case, people have to be given a reason to cut back on greenhouse gas emissions, either by requiring that they pay a tax on emissions or by requiring that they buy emission permits, which has pretty much the same effects as an emissions tax. We know that such policies work: the U.S. “cap and trade” system of emission permits on sulfur dioxide has been highly successful at reducing acid rain.

Climate change is, however, harder to deal with than acid rain, because the causes are global. The sulfuric acid in America’s lakes mainly comes from coal burned in U.S. power plants, but the carbon dioxide in America’s air comes from coal and oil burned around the planet — and a ton of coal burned in China has the same effect on the future climate as a ton of coal burned here. So dealing with climate change not only requires new taxes or their equivalent; it also requires international negotiations in which the United States will have to give as well as get.

Everything I’ve just said should be uncontroversial — but imagine the reception a Republican candidate for president would receive if he acknowledged these truths at the next debate. Today, being a good Republican means believing that taxes should always be cut, never raised. It also means believing that we should bomb and bully foreigners, not negotiate with them.

So if science says that we have a big problem that can’t be solved with tax cuts or bombs — well, the science must be rejected, and the scientists must be slimed. For example, Investor’s Business Daily recently declared that the prominence of James Hansen, the NASA researcher who first made climate change a national issue two decades ago, is actually due to the nefarious schemes of — who else? — George Soros.

Which brings us to the biggest reason the right hates Mr. Gore: in his case the smear campaign has failed. He’s taken everything they could throw at him, and emerged more respected, and more credible, than ever. And it drives them crazy.

[Copyright 2007 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)
