

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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Critical Thinking, Politics and the Environmental Agenda

Over the last several months, the advocates of environmentalism, especially those on the left wing of this important movement, have focused on the Keystone pipeline, have lauded the Obama-Xi agreement on carbon emissions, and continue to argue strongly that global warming is caused singularly by humans via carbon emissions. It is time to step back and be intellectually honest about these three issues. An honest appraisal of these three items illustrates that left-wing environmentalism is more about politics and ideology than truth.

- First, the Keystone pipeline. President Obama has cultivated the reputation as a deliberative president and the Keystone pipeline issue magnifies this cultivated quality of deliberation to the extreme. The Keystone pipeline issue has been studied for more than six years—basically his entire presidency. He said, among many other things, that he was waiting for the Nebraska Supreme Court to rule on the issue, which it has now done. So, he then declared he would veto any pipeline bill from the Congress, because the Department of State has yet to rule. The president's pronouncements on this issue defy all reasonableness when it comes to deliberation. He, with many others, argues that the Keystone pipeline issue is an environmental issue. But as columnist George Will has demonstrated, "The United States has more than 2 million miles of natural gas pipelines and approximately 175,000 miles of pipelines carrying hazardous liquids, yet we exhorted to be frightened about 1,179 miles of Keystone?" In addition, the Canadian tar sands, the source of the oil that would flow through the pipeline, is the world's third-largest proven crude oil reserve, larger than Iran's—still untapped. This Canadian oil is going into the international oil market, Keystone oil pipeline or not. There are other pipeline possibilities besides Keystone. Further, if Keystone fails, the oil will move by train, which it is estimated would take daily runs of 15 trains of about 100 tank cars each to carry the amount planned by TransCanada, the company developing the Canadian tar sands. As columnist Fareed Zakaria shows, rail traffic in this corridor is already exploding: the number of carloads of crude oil doubled from 2010 to 2011, then tripled from 2011 to 2012. And remember, moving oil by train produces much higher emissions of CO₂ (from diesel locomotives) than flowing it through a pipeline. Therefore, since this oil will make its way into the oil market no matter what Obama decides to do, and since moving it by train actually increases carbon emissions into the atmosphere, the idea that refusing to build the Keystone oil pipeline will be good for the environment is ludicrous. The Keystone oil pipeline is thus a symbol and the environmental movement is trying to shut down the production of the Alberta tar sands as a symbol. It might have symbolic value for this movement, but to argue that shutting it down will save the environment is an intellectually dishonest argument.

- Second, consider the much-publicized Obama-Xi agreement on carbon emissions announced this past November. Together, China and the US make up to 45% of the world's greenhouse-gas emissions. Thus, this agreement was offered as a key threshold in the global reduction of carbon emissions. But is it? Is it intellectually honest to see this agreement as a triumph of environmental policy? No, it is not. Its key element commits China to begin cutting carbon emissions 16 years from now. On the other hand, the US, having already cut more emissions than any other nation on earth since 2005, must now double its current rate of carbon emissions reductions to meet the new, more restrictive goal by 2025. And, as columnist Charles Krauthammer shows, "In return for which, China will keep increasing its carbon emissions year after year throughout that period—and for five years beyond." He further illustrates the vacuous nature of this agreement by citing the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, which demonstrates that China was on track to plateau its carbon emissions by 2030 anyway because of a projected slowdown in urbanization, population growth and heavy industry production. "We cut, they coast." If this agreement contained built-in reporting and independent verification, and if the cuts China made were commensurate with US cuts, this would be an agreement to champion. Instead, it mandates US cuts, while China, the world's number 1 carbon polluter, gets a 16-year pass!
- Third, there are two important historical studies that enable all of us, including the most ardent environmentalist, to put things in proper perspective. The first is by William Rosen, whose book, *The Third Horseman: Climate Change and the Great Famine of the 14th Century*, focuses on the Medieval Warm Period from the end of the 9th century to the beginning of the 14th century when the Northern Hemisphere was warmer than at any time in the past 8,000 years. The reason for this warm-up is unclear and scholars have arrived at no consensus in explaining it. It is rather clear, however, that human behavior did not cause this incredible period of climate change. Near the end of the Medieval Warm Period, the severe winters in 1309-1312 were catastrophic. Polar bears could walk from Greenland to Iceland on pack ice. Then in 1315, it rained for 150 consecutive days, causing devastating erosion of topsoil, with the result that over half of the arable land of Europe was gone.

The second book is by Geoffrey Parker, *Global Crisis: War, Climate Change and Catastrophe in the Seventeenth Century*. Among other things, Parker charts the consequences of the Little Ice Age, which occurred between the 1640s and the 1690s. Scholars are a bit more certain on what caused this period of climate change—e.g., decreased sunspot activity, seismic activity—and the devastation that resulted was staggering. Among other effects was the flight from farms, which could not function in the cold, to cities. The result was "the urban graveyard effect," which included disease, nutrition, water, sanitation, housing, fire, crime, abortion, infanticide, suicide and other calamitous problems. Parker tries to connect this devastation with the wars of the 17th century. There were more wars in that century "than in any other era before the Second World War." As George Will observes in commenting on these books, "Neither book, however, supports those who believe human behavior is the sovereign or even primary disrupter of climate normality, whatever that may

be. With the hands that today's climate Cassandras are not using to pat themselves on the back for their virtuous empiricism, they should pick up such books." These two scholarly works give us a much needed perspective and a significant dose of humility when it comes to the nearly daily pronouncements that human behavior is the singular, if not the most important cause of climate change. That the climate is undergoing a period of change is a given. These books at least should give us some caution. Because our president and others want to spend a significant amount of our national treasure and place a significant burden on business and most American citizens when it comes to reducing carbon emissions, these books provide a caveat on both the causes of and the solutions to climate change.

As citizens, we must be critical thinkers when it comes to processing what our politicians say about environmental issues. The hyperbole and downright dishonesty about the Keystone pipeline as well as overselling the Obama-Xi agreement are both a case in point. Further, history gives us a perspective that guards against assuming easy causes of and accepting elaborate and costly solutions to a problem clearly not understood. Let's all be critical thinkers when it comes to the environmental crisis and the proposed solutions to that crisis.

See George Will in the *Washington Post* (7 and 14 January 2015); Fareed Zakaria in *Time* (18 March 2013), p. 20; and Charles Krauthammer in the *Washington Post* (20 November 2014).