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Should We Remain Silent About Climate Change?

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[Drafted with Jeremy Brecher]

To talk of climate change or not to talk of climate change -- that is the question.

For the last several years many of the biggest players in the climate movement have argued that to save the planet we need to purge the words "global warming" and "climate change" from our talking points and educational materials. Poll-oriented groups like the Breakthrough Institute and the Environmental Defense Fund argue that public opinion surveys prove Americans care most about jobs and lack the capacity to act on some distant threat.

They maintain that instead of being prophets of doom, climate protection advocates should gather around a "good news" agenda that limits our

messaging to green jobs, national pride, and reducing our dependence on foreign oil. "Forget about climate change" Jonathan Foley, director of the Institute on the Environment at the University of Minnesota, [explained to a gathering of environmentalists last year](#). Just ask people "Do you love America?"

Eerily, the "good news" strategy is heavily influenced by the Republican pollster and messaging maven Frank Luntz -- infamous for coining phrases like "death tax." In 2009 the [Environmental Defense Fund teamed up with Luntz's firm The Word Doctors to figure out](#) how to help marshal public support for a climate bill. Luntz's advice? "The least important component of climate change is climate change... You're fighting the wrong battle. What they want is an end to dependence on foreign oil."

This is the same Frank Luntz who has long been advising the Republican party on how to grind climate policy to a halt. In 2002 he authored an [influential memo](#) advising Republicans to greenwash their public image while sowing public confusion about climate change. Republicans should "continue to make the lack of scientific certainty a primary issue in the debate" because otherwise, he warned, "[s]hould the public come to believe that the scientific issues are settled, their views about global warming will change accordingly."

Both political parties took Luntz's advice. Democrats and their allies began calling their climate bill the "Clean Energy Jobs and American Power Act." They stopped highlighting the economic and environmental implications of failure to cut greenhouse gas emissions. To hear them speak there was no climate crisis, only promises of green jobs and energy independence. Meanwhile, Republicans and their forces of climate denial talked about climate change all the time. Rush Limbaugh and Glenn Beck obsessively ridiculed Al Gore during snow storms and profiled "experts" who denied the existence of climate change.

So what was the effect of climate activists' decision to stop talking about climate change? The enemies of the planet won. Climate legislation is dead. The US has not cut emissions, created millions of new climate-protecting green jobs, or reduced dependence on foreign oil. Not talking about climate change has failed to reap even modest wins for the climate movement -- let alone save the planet.

And possibly the most damning of all: [Public concern about climate has plummeted](#) in direct correlation with the "stop talking about climate change" strategy. In 1998, before Al Gore tirelessly began traveling the country with his doom and gloom slideshow, only 50% of the country considered climate change a major worry. By 2008, a year after Gore and the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change won the Nobel Peace Prize, two-thirds of Americans said they "worry a great deal or fair amount about climate change." In 2009 Frank Luntz instructed environmentalists to stop talking about climate change, and by March 2011, the number of people concerned about the climate had dropped back down to 51%.

It is time to stop trying to save the planet by silence about what threatens it. The climate movement needs to start telling the inconvenient truth again. Richard Wiles, co-founder of the Environmental Working Group, [writing recently about his own struggle with climate denial](#), observed that "what's worse" than climate denial: "the other lie I've discovered in the process. It's the lie that I'm telling. It's the lie that we all tell to our children and each other when we don't talk about climate disruption. It's the lie of us all pretending that everything will be OK."

Beyond an ethical aversion to lying, there are hard-nosed political reasons why the forces of climate protection need to keep ringing the climate alarm bell.

- Whether or not they currently believe in climate change, people are going to experience the climate catastrophe. Disasters are coming -- indeed they are already here -- and that is going to drive the agenda. It is up to us to explain why the floods, hurricanes, droughts, and other catastrophes are happening and to lay out what to do.
- Even though people may initially curse the messenger and trigger despair, history shows that bad news can spur action and social change. It was the danger of nuclear fallout in America's children's milk that spurred the movement that led to a ban on nuclear testing and ultimately to the reduction of strategic arsenals by 80 percent. It was Rachel Carson's revelation in *Silent Spring* that DDT was poisoning the songbirds that led the public to understand the ecological interaction of nature and therefore support environmental protection legislation.
- Success goes to those who change the polls, not those who follow them. Al Gore, climate scientists, and millions of climate activists reshaped public opinion on climate. A majority of Americans are still seriously concerned about climate. They -- and others -- need to know why they're right. Dreadful events -- interpreted truthfully -- are unlikely to be ignored forever. But people will have little opportunity to connect the dots between devastating floods, catastrophic storms, and lethal heat waves on the one hand and the greenhouse gasses that cause them on the other unless they are persistently and consistently presented with the facts.
- The right wing, backed by the fossil fuel industry, have spent millions of dollars promoting this story: The climate crisis is an imaginary threat invented by liberals to justify government power over individuals and companies, destroying both liberty and jobs in the process. To remain silent about the reality of the climate change threat is to maximize the credibility and effectiveness of this argument. Conversely, spelling out the facts of climate change is the way to expose the climate denialist argument for the hoax it is.

- As the climate crisis deepens, many people are likely to pass directly from denial to despair. Fear can make people hopeless and immobilized. If they don't hear realistic explanations of what the climate crisis is all about, combined with rational proposals for what to do about it, they are made vulnerable to fantasy-based explanations and irrational solutions. Climate change is indeed scary, but it is a threat that affects all of us, so it provides an opportunity to cooperate in new ways at every level from the local to the global.
- The right wing is talking about climate change all the time. They have the initiative in framing the debate. And people will make ignorant decisions in the face of a one-sided debate. Without forceful articulation of the truth, the proportion of the public who grasp the seriousness of climate change could fall even further.

The real "good news" is that there are climate activist groups like [350.org](#) and the [1Sky Campaign](#) that never bought into the Frank Luntz's school of climate politics. They kept sounding the alarm about the climate crisis. These are the folks who organized a global day of action with 5,200 rallies from Mt. Everest to the Great Barrier Reef in what CNN called "the most widespread day of political action on the planet."

Of course we should keep talking about green jobs and reduced dependence on foreign oil -- in fact we need to be presenting a robust vision for how to build a more just and sustainable future. And of course we need to avoid scaring people into despair. But that doesn't require us to be silent in the face of an existential threat. It is as true as ever that silence equals consent.



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