

The Secret Campaign of President Bush's Administration To Deny Global Warming

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"That's a big no. The president believes . . . that it should be the goal of policymakers to protect the American way of life. The American way of life is a blessed one."

- Ari Fleischer, White House Press Secretary responding in May 2001 to whether Bush would ask Americans to curb their first-in-the-world energy consumption

Earlier this year, the world's top climate scientists released a definitive report on global warming. It is now "unequivocal," they concluded, that the planet is heating up. Humans are directly responsible for the planetary heat wave, and only by taking immediate action can the world avert a climate catastrophe. Megadroughts, raging wildfires, decimated forests, dengue fever, legions of Katrinas - unless humans act now to curb our climate-warming pollution, warned the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, "we are in deep trouble."

You would think, in the wake of such stark and conclusive findings, that the White House would at least offer some small gesture to signal its concern about the impending crisis. It's not every day, after all, that the leading scientists from 120 nations come together and agree that the entire planet is about to go to hell. But the Bush administration has never felt bound by the reality-based nature of science - especially when it comes from *international* experts. So after the report became public in February, Vice President Dick Cheney took to the airwaves to offer his own, competing assessment of global warming.

"We're going to see a big debate on it going forward," Cheney told ABC News, about "the extent to which it is part of a normal cycle versus the extent to which it's caused by man." What we know today, he added, is "not enough to just sort of run out and try to slap together some policy that's going to 'solve' the problem."

Even former White House insiders were shocked by the vice president's see-no-evil performance. "I don't see how he can say that with a straight face anymore," Christine Todd Whitman, who clashed privately with Cheney over climate policy during her tenure as the administration's first chief of the Environmental Protection Agency, tells Rolling Stone. "The consequences of climate change are very real and very negative, but Cheney is not convinced of that. He believes - not quite as much as Senator James Inhofe, that this is a 'hoax' - but that the Earth has been changing since it was formed and to say that climate change is caused by humans is incorrect."

Cheney's statements were the latest move in the Bush administration's ongoing strategy to block federal action on global warming. It is no secret that industry-connected appointees within the White House have worked actively to distort the findings of federal climate scientists, playing down the threat of climate change. But a new investigation by Rolling Stone reveals that those distortions were sanctioned at the highest levels of our government, in a policy formulated by the vice president, implemented by the White House Council on Environmental Quality and enforced by none other than Karl Rove. An examination of thousands of pages of internal documents that the White House has been forced to relinquish under the Freedom of Information Act - as well as interviews with more than a dozen current and former administration scientists and climate-policy officials - confirms that the White House has implemented an industry-formulated disinformation campaign designed to actively mislead the American public on global warming and to forestall limits on climate polluters.

"They've got a political clientele that does not want to be regulated," says Rick Piltz, a former Bush climate official who blew the whistle on White House censorship of global-warming documents in 2005. "Any honest discussion of the science would stimulate public pressure for a stronger policy. They're not stupid."

Bush's do-nothing policy on global warming began almost as soon as he took office. By pursuing a carefully orchestrated policy of delay, the White House has blocked even the most modest reforms and replaced them with token investments in futuristic solutions like hydrogen cars. "It's a charade," says Jeremy Symons, who represented the EPA on Cheney's energy task force, the industry-studded group that met in secret to craft the administration's energy policy. "They have a single-minded determination to do nothing - while making it look like they are doing something."

It's now almost impossible to fathom that back in 2000, after then-candidate Bush vowed to place caps on carbon pollution, top climate scientists believed he was just the man to take action on global warming. "It looked like we could finally get beyond the fray that had consumed the Clinton administration," recalls James McCarthy, a Harvard climate scientist who co-chaired the previous report issued by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which gaveled down the very day Bush was inaugurated in 2001.

Even at that point, the science was in. The U.N. panel linked "most of the warming observed over the last fifty years" to "human activities." That judgment aligned with the National Assessment on climate change, a landmark federal report commissioned by Bush's father in 1990 and completed just before Bush was elected in 2000. The assessment projected dire impacts from global warming - from the extinction of maple trees in New England to a catastrophic loss of snowpack in California. "If we do nothing," McCarthy says, "the lack of water in California will force a mass exodus."

But those who were expecting a Nixon-to-China moment from Bush on climate weren't counting on the influence of the vice president and his industrial patrons. In March 2001, Whitman traveled to Italy for climate talks with European allies. She affirmed Bush's commitment to regulating greenhouse gases - a position she had vetted with Condoleezza

Rice and Chief of Staff Andy Card. But what Whitman didn't grasp was that when it came to climate, the president was largely irrelevant.

Whitman should have had her doubts. Prior to joining the Cabinet, she sought personal assurance from Bush that the EPA would be able to call its own shots without deferring to the CEQ - the Council on Environmental Quality, a policy arm of the White House. As Whitman recalls it, Bush made no effort to mask his bureaucratic ignorance. "What's CEQ?" he asked blankly.

Cheney took full advantage of the president's cluelessness, bringing the CEQ into his own portfolio. "The environment and energy issues were really turned over to him from the beginning," Whitman says. The CEQ became Cheney's shadow EPA, with industry calling the shots. To head up the council, Cheney installed James Connaughton, a former lobbyist for industrial polluters, who once worked to help General Electric and ARCO skirt responsibility for their Superfund waste sites.

Industry swiftly took advantage of its new friend in the White House. In a fax sent to the CEQ on February 6th, 2001 - two weeks after Bush took office - ExxonMobil's top lobbyist, Randy Randol, demanded a housecleaning of the scientists in charge of studying global warming. Exxon urged CEQ to dump Robert Watson, who chaired the IPCC, along with Rosina Bierbaum and Mike MacCracken, who had coordinated the National Assessment.

Exxon's wish was the CEQ's command. According to an internal e-mail obtained by Rolling Stone, Connaughton's first order of business - even before his nomination was made public - was to write his White House colleagues-to-be from his law firm of Sidley & Austin. He echoed Exxon's call that Bierbaum, the acting director of the Office of Science and Technology Policy, be "dealt." In the end, each of the scientists on Exxon's hit list was replaced. "It was clear there was a strong lobby and activity against me by some in the energy industry - especially ExxonMobil," says Watson.

A month after Exxon's fax, Whitman got her first sign that the EPA was no longer in charge of climate policy. "When I made the statement in Italy that something might happen on CO₂," she says, "the utility industry got really engaged, and all of that caused a rethink." In a move Cheney is suspected of engineering, conservative senators Jesse Helms, Chuck Hagel and Larry Craig wrote the White House on March 6th seeking a "clarification" of the president's policy.

Two days later, the climate "rethink" was laid out in a memo by a team of advisers loyal to Cheney - two of whom, Andrew Lundquist and Karen Knutson, would go on to lead the vice president's energy task force. The memo - provided to Rolling Stone by a former administration official - concluded that Bush's campaign promise to regulate CO₂ "did not fully reflect the president's position" and that "it would be premature at this time to propose any specific policy or approach aimed at addressing global warming." The authors dismissed both the IPCC and the National Assessment, writing that "the current

state of scientific knowledge about causes of and solutions to global warming is inconclusive and . . . must await further scientific inquiry."

When Whitman heard that Bush was wavering on warming, she "broke through the palace guard," as the president had urged her to do, and marched into the Oval Office. "I wanted to tell him that there were ways to call for a cap on carbon that wouldn't hamstring the economy," she says, "and that it was vitally important we not be seen as ignoring the issue of climate change." But before Whitman could even present her case, the president cut her off. "It was clear the decision had already been made," she says.

As a dumbstruck Whitman walked out of the Oval Office, she bumped into the true Decider. There was Cheney, collecting the envelope from a secretary that contained Bush's "clarification" on climate-warming pollution - which he was on his way to deliver, in person, to his allies in the Senate.

Although the letter was signed by the president, it bore Cheney's unmistakable stamp. Quoting the language of the vice president's energy staffers almost verbatim, it not only reversed Bush's promise to regulate CO₂, it also made a sweeping new declaration: that carbon dioxide "is not a 'pollutant' under the Clean Air Act." (The administration would cling to this untenable position for six years, until the Supreme Court ruled in April that federal law compels the EPA to take regulatory action on climate pollution.)

The letter concluded with a hint of things to come: "I look forward to working with you and others to address global climate change issues in the context of a national energy policy." Bush's about-face on planet-warming pollution thus enabled Cheney to take control of the White House's energy policy and to work with industry behind closed doors to craft a polluter-friendly approach to global warming. "By having control of the energy plan, the vice president also had the reins on the climate policy," says Symons, who sat in on Cheney's energy task force. "The ideology is simple: You don't put limits on greenhouse-gas pollution, because that might put limits on coal and oil - and that would hurt industry's performance. Everything else flowed from that."

As he shaped climate policy, Cheney took his cues from the Global Climate Coalition, an alliance of anti-Kyoto polluters that included the top lobbying arms of the oil and coal industries. In June 2001, the administration dispatched Paula Dobriansky, the undersecretary of state for global affairs, to address the GCC at the headquarters of the American Petroleum Institute. In her speech, Dobriansky was glad to give the industry crowd credit for the president's decision to withdraw from the international treaty designed to slow climate change. Her talking points from that day read, "POTUS rejected Kyoto, in part, based on input from you."

Documents released under the Freedom of Information Act also reveal that Dobriansky had received a copy of the GCC's "21st Century Climate Action Agenda," a game plan crafted by polluting industries that calls for "a new approach to climate policy" focusing on "voluntary actions" rather than mandatory limits on greenhouse gases. On February 14th, 2002, Bush gave a speech at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

that laid out his policy on global warming for the first time. The speech was a Valentine's Day gift to polluters, officially enshrining the GCC's agenda, almost point for point, as the White House's climate policy. Under the plan, planet-warming pollution would actually *increase* by thirty-four percent by 2030. Bush vaguely promised to cut the "intensity" of carbon emissions by eighteen percent over the next ten years - neglecting to mention that the nation was already on track for a fourteen percent reduction. He touted \$700 million in new funding for technologies that might someday reduce emissions - money that government auditors were later unable to find any trace of. And he promised that the entire plan would be thoroughly reviewed and re-evaluated - in 2012, four years after he left office.

The National Academy of Sciences blasted the policy, saying it lacked a "guiding vision, executable goals, clear timetables and criteria for measuring progress." Even the technology promoted in the president's plan was bogus. "It's as if these people were not cognizant of the existing science," one member of the academy remarked. "Stuff that would have been cutting-edge in 1980 is listed as a priority for the future."

In his Valentine's Day speech, Bush gave credit to the man who Cheney had placed in charge of crafting the nation's climate policy to suit the needs of big polluters. "I want to thank Jim Connaughton, who is the chairman of the Council on Environmental Quality," Bush declared. "He's done a fabulous job of putting this policy together."

Connaughton's mission at the CEQ was to make sure climate regulations never got in the way of energy development. A Yale-educated lawyer, Connaughton comes across like a slightly caffeinated Ron Howard, with a manic energy and a balding pate of wispy red hair. As head of the CEQ, he put a green spin on polluter-friendly measures: Lowering air quality became the "Clear Skies Initiative," while allowing timber companies to step up their clear-cutting was dubbed the "Healthy Forests Initiative."

To direct the White House's spin on global warming, Connaughton appointed Philip Cooney as his top deputy. Cooney had the right experience for the job: He worked as "climate team leader" for the American Petroleum Institute. In 1998, the API took part in an industry coalition that created the "Global Climate Science Communications Action Plan." The plan, recently entered into evidence by the House Oversight Committee, maps out an elaborate disinformation campaign to prevent "precipitous action on climate change." The strategy was to sow doubt about global warming, disseminating industry-funded research to challenge "the science underpinning the global climate change theory."

Now, with Cooney in the White House, the industry had its own anti-climate man running the disinformation campaign. As the "action plan" directed, Cooney set out to censor the EPA's science on global warming and inject the industry's denialist positions into government documents. "They decided they didn't need to win the debate on climate," says Piltz, the former official who exposed Cooney's tactics. "They just had to leave an atmosphere of uncertainty about it and dissipate the will for political action."

But for all his credentials as a master of spin, Cooney got off to a rough start. In May 2002, the administration released its Climate Action Report, a dispatch to the U.N. that documents progress on climate-treaty obligations. The report was developed by the EPA, but internal documents reveal that Cooney edited it to reflect positions advocated by the API and Ford. On the opening page of the chapter on climate impacts, Cooney inserted a litany of language in bold intended to cast doubt on the science: "the weakest links in our knowledge . . . a lack of understanding . . . uncertainties . . . considerable uncertainty . . . perhaps even greater uncertainty . . . regarded as tentative."

But the clumsy caveats weren't enough to obscure the report's real science. With the help of an EPA source, *The New York Times* filtered out Cooney's waffling and filed a front-page story that called the report "a stark shift for the Bush administration." The report, the *Times* observed, detailed "far-reaching effects that global warming will inflict" and "for the first time mostly blames human actions for recent global warming."

Cooney was horrified: An obscure government report he had tried to whitewash now threatened to undermine his former employers in the energy industry. Panicked, he called on an old friend for help. Myron Ebell had been a key member of the coalition that crafted the disinformation "action plan." In fact, casting doubt on global warming is Ebell's full-time job: He heads the climate-denial campaign at the Competitive Enterprise Institute, a think tank that was underwritten in part by ExxonMobil.

Ebell recalls that Cooney was frantic over the story in the *Times*. "We tried to put some qualifiers on that chapter in the report," Cooney told him. "We'd take the text from EPA, and then we'd add a sentence like, 'We don't really know if this is really happening.' So we tried to do it, but I can see now that we made a total mess of it."

Ebell's advice to Cooney is contained in a e-mail dated June 3rd, 2002. "Thanks for asking for our help," he wrote. "I know you're in crisis mode. . . . I want to help you cool things down, but after consulting with the team, I think that what we can do is limited until there is an official statement from the administration repudiating the report."

That repudiation came the very next day. President Bush himself dismissed the report, saying it had been "put out by the bureaucracy." Forget the headlines, he said - there was no shift in the administration's policy.

What happened next, according to internal e-mails obtained by Rolling Stone, reveals just how seriously the White House took its intelligence fixing on global warming. Cooney was put in charge of damage control and was apparently instructed to craft a letter to the *Times* denying that the president had changed course on climate change. But this time, Cooney's editor was not just Connaughton, but Bush's chief political adviser, Karl Rove. The collaboration with Rove raises questions about Cooney's congressional testimony last March, in which he insisted, under oath, that he had not discussed with Rove his work at the CEQ.

The letter drafted by Cooney - and vetted by Rove - insists that the Climate Action Report "reinforces" the "significant scientific uncertainties" emphasized in the president's climate policy. Edits to the rough drafts of the letter were blacked out by White House censors, but Rove's pithy endorsement of the final draft survived. "Great," he wrote in praise of Cooney's spin. "Defends the report rather than staying focused on the policy." In other words, Cooney had succeeded in emphasizing the report's overhyped uncertainties, thus shifting attention away from the White House's do-nothing approach to global warming.

At the same time, Cooney got a pat on the back from Bill O'Keefe, his old boss at API. In a letter to Bush's chief of staff, O'Keefe - by that point a registered lobbyist for ExxonMobil - urged the president to tighten up the White House spin machine and make sure all communications were "on the same page, with the same message." O'Keefe also faxed a copy to Cooney with a handwritten note reading, "P.S. You are doing a great job."

From then on, Cooney wielded a heavier pen when editing official reports on global warming. Not content to obscure science with uncertainty, he began to rewrite the science itself. Draft documents made public by the House Oversight Committee reveal that Cooney now had veto power over federal scientists, including Richard Moss, coordinator of the Climate Change Science Program Office, and even James Mahoney, the assistant commerce secretary nominally in charge of America's climate science.

In one document, Moss and Mahoney attempted to push back on several of Cooney's more than 100 edits to an EPA document called "Our Changing Planet" - each of which served to amplify uncertainty and downplay the threat posed by global warming. Cooney repeatedly overruled Moss and Mahoney with an aggressive "no" scrawled in the margins. On another document Cooney marked up, he commanded EPA officials that "these changes must be made." Beside one strike-through marked with a star, Cooney wrote, "Red Flag: Do not cite National Assessment" - dismissing the landmark report commissioned by Bush's father.

Although some of Cooney's edits were revealed in a *New York Times* story in June 2005 that led to his departure, the full extent of his interference has never been reported. His commissarial coup came in April 2003, with his revisions to the EPA's Draft Report on the Environment. He began by deleting the sentence "climate change has global consequences for human health and the environment." He then deleted the top-line assessment by the National Research Council, which establishes an unequivocal cause-and-effect link - "Greenhouse gases are accumulating in the atmosphere as the result of human activities, causing surface air temperatures and subsurface ocean temperatures to rise." In its place, Cooney wrote the following mishmash of his own creation: "Some activities emit greenhouse gases and other substances that directly or indirectly may affect the balance of incoming and outgoing radiation, thereby potentially affecting climate on regional and global scales."

The changes sparked a rebellion by the EPA's senior scientists. In an internal memo uncovered by Congressional investigators, they wrote that Cooney's edited text "no longer accurately represents scientific consensus on climate change" and "may leave an impression that cooling is as much an issue as warming." Whitman was also furious. "The language that CEQ found acceptable was such pablum," she says now. "It was so much below the level of sophistication of the report that I felt it would have denigrated it all." But her solution to this problem was to simply delete the section on climate change - handing Cooney a carte-blanche victory.

Whitman says she killed the section hoping that scientific documents included with the report would speak for themselves. But the capitulation helped drive her to the breaking point. Four days after bowing to Cooney, she resigned as head of the EPA.

Internal documents uncovered by Rolling Stone reveal that Cooney did far more than edit scientific reports to suit the administration's point of view. Just as neoconservative hawk Douglas Feith funneled false intelligence on Iraq's weapons programs to the vice president, Cooney steered industry-sponsored junk science on global warming to Cheney. "What disturbed me most," Whitman says, "was the administration's record of taking the most extreme of the science - what I call the 'political science' - and giving it the same weight as the real science."

The most egregious example of cooked intelligence was a study underwritten in part by the API, Cooney's former employer. The study, which purported to show that the twentieth century was not unusually warm, was authored by two astrophysicists, both of whom were on the payroll of the George C. Marshall Institute, a climate-denial group funded by ExxonMobil and now headed by Bill O'Keefe, Cooney's former boss. The paper's publication in a minor German journal in January 2003 quickly created a scandal, with the editor in chief and three other editors resigning in shame after acknowledging that the paper was fundamentally flawed and should never have been published.

"It was sham science," says McCarthy, the Harvard scientist. "It's almost laughable, except that this study was held up by the administration as a definitive refutation of the temperature record."

But even as the paper was being discredited, it was causing great excitement in the White House. When Kathie Olsen of the Office of Science and Technology Policy forwarded the study to Cooney, he responded with an enthusiastic, "Thanks, Kathie!" Six minutes later, according to internal e-mails, the study was in the hands of Kevin O'Donovan, who served as Cheney's point man on climate. The study also grabbed President Bush's attention, as revealed in an e-mail sent two days later to a high-ranking White House official: "Bob - if you din't [sic] already have, this is the study the President was talking about."

The study gave Cheney's office the quasi-plausible refutation of climate science it was waiting for. According to a memo reviewed by congressional investigators, but which the CEQ refused to make public, Cooney was eager to promote the sham science. The study,

he e-mailed O'Donovan, "represents an opening to potentially reinvigorate debate on the actual climate history of the past 1,000 years." The paper, he added, "contradicts the dogmatic view held by many in the climate science community that the past century was the warmest in the past millennium. . . . We plan to begin to refer to this study in administration communications on the science of global climate change."

One e-mail exchange about the study underscores just how many industry foxes were guarding the climate henhouse. When Matthew Koch (a White House energy adviser who today lobbies for API) saw the study, he wrote to Cooney (the former API lobbyist who is now "corporate issues manager" for ExxonMobil) and CC'd O'Donovan (who now works for Shell Oil).

"What??!!" Koch wrote in mock disbelief at the study's claim that the planet isn't really heating up. "I want to grow oranges in the Arctic!"

Such joking aside, the administration continues to hold up the discredited study as a counterweight to the IPCC's scientific, peer-reviewed findings on global warming. Testifying before the House Oversight Committee in March, Connaughton lauded the study as a "new and major piece of science." His only regret, he said, is that "I'm not a scientist, so I can't find it conclusive."

Although Cooney resigned in 2005, the campaign of disinformation he implemented had the desired effect. Two months after Cooney returned to work for ExxonMobil, the Cheney energy plan was passed into law. A massive giveaway for the fossil-fuel industry, the Energy Policy Act authorized \$6 billion in subsidies for oil and gas production and another \$9 billion for coal producers. Worst of all, the bill fast-tracked the construction of coal-fired power plants that would hasten global warming.

Nor did Cooney's return to the oil industry spell an end to the administration's meddling in climate science. Less than a month later, before the G8 summit on climate change, the administration killed the opening line of the eight-country report - "Our world is warming" - and quashed a section that cited "increasingly compelling evidence of climate change." Last month, in negotiations leading up to the newest round of G8 talks, the administration blocked another motion that "resolute action is urgently needed in order to reduce global greenhouse gas emissions."

"It's the ideological bent of the current administration," says McCarthy. "They seem absolutely resistant to any call to action, no matter what the science says."

Indeed, the campaign to sow doubts about climate change has grown more aggressive in recent years. No longer is the administration simply censoring scientific reports - it has moved to silence the scientists themselves. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, the administration refused to allow a top federal scientist whose research links increased hurricane intensity to global warming to speak to the press. It sent out a gag order to top government polar scientists, demanding that anyone attending international scientific conventions agree not to speak to reporters about "climate change, polar bears and sea

ice." And it ordered a former intern from the Bush-Cheney campaign in the NASA press office to prevent Dr. James Hansen, the godfather of global-warming science, from talking to the media.

"Interference with communication of science to the public has been greater during the current administration than at any time in my career," Hansen testified before Congress in March, suggesting that NASA's press office had become an "office of propaganda." This month, when news leaked that the Pentagon plans to kill a satellite program critical to monitoring the Earth's climate, NASA's scientists issued a confidential memo warning that the move "places the overall climate program in serious jeopardy."

In many ways, the administration's refusal to budge on global warming mirrors its intransigence on Iraq. No matter how bad the reports from the field get, Bush appears determined to stay the course. "Never once - not a single time - have they revisited the decision to not do anything serious about global warming," says Symons, who sat in on Cheney's task force. "They say it's more 'serious' now than they did earlier on. But the president has never said, 'Let's start over and come up with a real plan.' "

Even when Bush proposes what looks like a plan, it's designed to stall real progress on global warming. In May, America's allies in the G8 unveiled an ambitious proposal: Member nations would cut planet-warming pollution in half by 2050, accepting mandatory caps on carbon emissions. But the administration flatly rejected the plan, which it called "fundamentally incompatible with the president's approach to climate change."

Instead, at the G8 summit on June 6th, Bush pushed what he touted as his "new initiative" for combating climate change. For the first time, the president acknowledged that "long-term goals for reducing greenhouse gases" are needed. But his solution, in essence, is to take his do-nothing strategy global, turning our allies into a Coalition of the Warming. Under his proposal, mandatory caps on emissions would be replaced with "aspirational goals" to be met through voluntary cuts and futuristic technology. Countries would work independently for the next "ten to twenty years" to develop strategies to "improve energy security, reduce air pollution and also reduce greenhouse gases" - apparently in that order.

And when will the United States and other polluting nations be expected to meet the nonbinding targets they set for themselves under Bush's plan? Not until as late as 2075 - well past the point that global warming will have superheated the planet.