

The inconvenient truth about "An Inconvenient Truth": Why Al Gore is part dangerous politician

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03 August 2006

Culture Change Letter #138

This year's movie, "An Inconvenient Truth," is a most persuasive appeal to recognize global warming as a crisis literally off the charts. The film's star Al Gore and his team have also done a good job of debunking the "confusionist" effort to downplay climate change that strives to maintain the status quo.

However, Gore's effort is also part of an attempt to hijack the growing concern over the greenhouse effect. Laying out the problem so well, and then offering piecemeal solutions, is the modus operandi of all well-funded technofix advocates. Some energy reformers have green credibility because they tend toward only renewable technologies. Gore, however, is for nuclear power and "clean coal." Or was he for these industries only up until now?

Al Gore may be repositioning himself. In a Grist online interview last May, he said "I doubt nuclear power will play a much larger role than it does now." He said if it happened, then nuclear would be used for "backing out more coal," which he calls "the real issue." If coal is the real issue, we should assume Gore has not changed his pro-"clean coal" stance, and that his movie would have contained something definitive for or against coal.

I would not put it past Gore to pretend not to be a nuclear threat, although he is articulate against nuclear weapons proliferation via nuclear power. Gore does not say to shut down the nuclear power plants, presumably because he thinks we need the energy. But do we?

Gore's energy stance, and by extension his climate stance, is in the same basic camp as Bush's except Gore would give more money to renewable energy and efficiency while upholding the Clean Air Act. One assumes that Gore or any Democrat would offer more resources for better energy policy than the Republicans do. Somehow Gore or a similar Democrat would be counted on, as a saner spender, to take money out of the Pentagon's maw and maybe even stop the needless construction of more roads. Those reforms in spending are gigantic ifs.

Then there are pseudo reforms: Switching to better light bulbs and different cars is pathetically inadequate because such a limited approach is decades late to have more than the mild impact they ever could. But those are the top recommendations Gore and his movie make. This strategy and message have been a failure for the modern environmental movement's entire history (post idealistic first Earth Day). One can point to a modicum of energy savings here and there, but not much after growth canceled out the savings over the years. But the least known reason car technology is not the key to atmospheric healing is that most of the air pollution associated with the car is from just the mining and manufacture of the car and its components [Environmental Forecasting Institute, Germany].

All considered, it is safe to say that Al Gore is in effect trying to prop up the status quo while hoping to slow down global warming a tad. Yet, "He is moving people up the ladder to an awakening, and it starts rung-by-rung, hand-over-hand." - this from one of his former mentors not in the film. The purpose of this essay is not to weigh Gore's net worthiness but to counter the dangerous error of his film's conclusion that modifications in energy use are the answer (assuming they could be done immediately).

One of the strongest criticisms of An Inconvenient Truth is that energy supply and the certain disruption of our present greenhouse-gas-generating lifestyle were not mentioned. It would be nice if petrocollapse suddenly erased the greenhouse gas threat, but it's not that simple.

For one thing, every day that the economy rolls along, the climate - and possibly Earth's life force, despite the Gaia theory - is bled to death. So the race between greenhouse hell and petrocollapse seems to be won by the former - a tireless hare, shall we say - even though the tortoise of peak oil was coming on fast to the finish line.

Perhaps Gore's biggest shortcoming is in not understanding peak oil or the role of petroleum. This spring in his Grist online interview he answered a question on whether ethanol is "the other big contender" along with nuclear energy: "Cellulosic ethanol. Different from corn-based ethanol. I think it is going to be a huge new source of energy, particularly for the transportation sector. You're going to see it all over the place." From this, we might acknowledge that Gore believes that agriculture can grow unlimited energy and that all we need for perpetuating the car and its infrastructure is different fuel.

Fortunately, Gore is courageous enough to address overpopulation in his movie. But he needs to apply this reality to his expectations for the continuation of the nation as we know it.

As happens in An Inconvenient Truth, the impassioned and rational rundown on climate change can lead people to buy into the technofix. Many activists say, "That's fine because people need to learn via baby steps, and change must be incremental." The trouble is that we are out of time, and a false lifeboat with gaping holes is not a solution. Despite the clear need for a debate on the technofix - which technofixers shy away from - people are susceptible to emotion and half-truths when faced with inconvenient facts on the climate situation. Gore is so well scripted that he appears sweet, loveable and a hero. To think he does not still want to be president is naïve.

We can praise the film's climate presentation to the skies, but if taking action is the stated purpose of gaining this knowledge about climate change, then the film must be countered with a message that offers radical action commensurate with Earth's plight. Such action would be anything that, if done by a large enough segment of the population, could stop the production of greenhouse gases to the greatest extent possible.

Near his closing argument in *An Inconvenient Truth*, Gore presents a graph that shows significant amounts of carbon emissions that can be reduced through several efforts led by energy efficiency, renewable energy and carbon sequestration, to a level of carbon dioxide emissions below that of 1970. That's impressive, but his analysis did not factor in the effects of future growth during the period it would take to implement the changes. There was also the assumption that his package of solutions could be accomplished quickly. Perhaps unintentionally, the movie uses smoke and mirrors when discussing the opportunities to cut emissions: the accumulation of greenhouse gases keeps on despite big cutbacks, but on a graph the cutbacks can appear to be overall a lessening of CO2 levels. The UN's IPCC group of scientists called for up to 80% cutbacks in greenhouse gases - back in the early 1990s. Gore and the funded environmental movement have to be even more radical than the IPCC if they are to offer a serious solution for the climate.

Because a major technofix attempt can't and won't happen quickly - because, as Gore says in the film, the wrong guy got into the White House - we are faced with the need for sudden reduction of greenhouse-gas emissions on a much bigger scale than Gore's greatest aims or hopes.

Such a scale is on tap due to the energy crisis that has already begun. Just as global warming has been launched and we can't pull much of the carbon or methane back out of the sky in our lifetimes or in this century, we have overshot any natural energy consumption and gone too far out on a deadly limb. Because *An Inconvenient Truth* and Gore say nothing about peak oil or petrocollapse, the energy panic will be all the more sudden and total. Gore needs to be reached on the issues of oil depletion, the ability of the oil market to turn a shortfall of product into a disastrous shortage, and how vulnerable modern society is to permanent and rapid loss of energy and petro-materials at any price.

Al Gore's son was almost killed by a car not long after Gore held his historic Senate hearing that ushered in awareness on global warming in 1988. But his son's massive injuries did nothing to change Gore's policies and the White House's efforts to increase the population of cars. His father, Al Gore Sr., was number one architect of the U.S. Interstate Highway System, something that is viewed as an accomplishment by those who don't put the Earth and local communities first.

In *An Inconvenient Truth*, the ending credits tell the audience what we can do to fight global warming. After several technofix "solutions" that don't include massively curtailing energy use, there is the suggestion to "walk or ride a bike." But that is the only suggestion among the many and mostly ineffective, counter-productive (e.g., buy a hybrid car) solutions that come close to pulling the plug. If Gore's solutions were rethought and reprioritized, the theoretical CO2 emission levels could realistically get cut back to perhaps 1940 levels.

To stop using energy to the greatest extent imaginable means complete change in culture. It's not only desirable but up ahead, as our oil-guzzling economy crashes largely because substitute energies cannot step in as some folks expect or wish. This column has explored this process extensively, and our message is echoed by peak oil experts in the Establishment such as Matthew Simmons, Robert Hirsch and Roscoe Bartlett.

Al Gore may be a Trojan Horse for nuclear power, if his record as Vice President is a guide. When people were wondering if he had even written his book *Earth In The Balance*, he was pushing nuclear power plant deals in China. In a public conversation I had with him before his book came out, he responded to my "What about plutonium's half-life of 240,000 years?" by saying only, "I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" (turns out the figure is 24,000 years) Gore may sincerely believe in nuclear power to cut down on carbon emissions, but we don't really need the damn energy, even with population growth - unless you believe in crass materialism for a world of clueless consumers.

Clean-coal technology is more correctly termed "clean-coal mythology." Minimizing carbon emissions from coal sounds like good environmental policy, but it is one shared by George W. Bush, Al Gore, and green groups such as the NRDC. A question for them all is, "Are you for or against mountaintop removal to get at coal, which is going on as we speak in West Virginia, Tennessee, Kentucky and Virginia?" Coal mining, incidentally, spews more uranium pollution into the environment than uranium mining itself.

Turning our backs on murderous coal and slashing energy use would help radically restructure U.S. society and help victims of corporate greed in various countries who are losing their lands and sense of identities via "free trade" agreements and multilateral loans.

Some people believe that Al Gore would have led the U.S. in a completely different direction than George W. Bush did. But another politician considered to be on top of climate change, and is pro-Kyoto Protocol, Tony Blair, has bought into the Iraq War (much as Al Gore favored the Gulf War) and has failed as a leader on many fronts. Most significantly perhaps, Blair has not addressed his nation's precipitous slide from its maximum petroleum extraction as the U.K. rapidly approaches petrocollapse.

Al Gore may have changed toward being greener, but truly green would require that he cease being a politician. An example of his past doings that would make the average shopper at Whole Foods cringe is from the Environmental Research Foundation which reported on Al Gore's pro-Genetically Modified Organism politics:

When the French were reluctant to allow Monsanto's seeds to sprout on French soil, Secretary of State Madeline Albright and U.S. Trade Representative Charlene Barshefsky intervened on Monsanto's behalf. When the French still refused to yield, President Clinton personally took up the matter with French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin and gave him "an earful," Lambrecht writes. When that didn't work, Vice-President Gore followed up with a phone call to the French Prime Minister. Ultimately, the French gave in to the steady, high-level pressure.

Gore has been an avid backer of corporate globalization. His and any other "green" Democrats' support of NAFTA and other disasters (that serve commerce at the expense of people and the environment) ought to make anyone think hard

about a Democrat's message on what to do about global warming.

Ralph Nader is reviled as the man who gave us George W. Bush, although some numerical analyses indicate Nader was not the factor in Florida that lost the presidency for Gore. But Nader has an even longer track record than Gore for tackling tough issues. From Nader's October 20, 2000 "To whom the earth concerns:"

… Finally on the energy issue, Gore agreed with George W. Bush to extend and further fund the "Clean Coal" subsidy, which wastes millions of dollars finding ways to clean up the burning of domestic coal, such as "sequestering" the resultant CO2 in sea beds or oil wells. Meanwhile it totally ignores all the environmental harm that comes from mining - including mountaintop removal in West Virginia and in his home state of Tennessee - and its resultant waste disposal. With all these fossils getting their way, it seems the Kyoto treaty is doomed.

Al Gore is something of a mystery man, as shown when he refused to fight what was the final give-away of the U.S. presidency to the aggressive Bush-Cheney faction. If the good of the nation was Gore's true goal in not using his authority over the Senate regarding the outcome of the 2000 election - and the nation's good was the reason for all his other questionable actions - then we need to awaken completely from the bogus American Dream. Activist-citizens' efforts to help the Earth and our communities can actually leapfrog over policy reforms and emotional appeals by would-be leaders. Lifestyle change that puts polluting, rapacious industries out of business is overdue.

- August 4, 2006, at L.A. Ecovillage, a wonderful oasis of thought and cooperation and gardens.

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"The Real Al Gore on the Environment" and
Ralph Nader letter

www.debatethis.org/gore/enviro/

Environmental Research Foundation:

www.rachel.org/bulletin/bulletin.cfm?Issue_ID=1282

Clean-air group urges execs to see Al Gore film / Guerilla News Network, May 30, 2006

gaanjah_mama.gnn.tv/blogs/15718/Clean_air_group_urges_execs_to_see_Al_Gore_film

Coal gasification: "clean coal" or subsidy-hungry boondoggle? by David Roberts in the website Oil Change: A campaign to reduce our dependence on oil (NRDC and Sierra Club):

www.participate.net/node/1585

"Al Revere: An interview with accidental movie star Al Gore" by David Roberts, May 9, 2006

www.grist.org/news/maindish/2006/05/09/roberts/

Q: Who is David Roberts? A: a prolific energy writer who in a recent Grist blog on the growth of coal power plants, "Locking in global warming," said: "What do you call it when a society knowingly cripples itself?" Aug 1, 2006.

gristmill.grist.org/user/David%20Roberts

Anti-Bush blogsite with references to global warming and coal:

www.taylormarsh.com/archives_view.php?id=24226

News on coal: EnergyBiz website: "Sierra Club sues EPA over Four Corners Power Plant emissions" The Rio Grande chapter of the Sierra Club has sued the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in an attempt to force it to implement emission controls at the coal-fired Four Corners Power Plant. [do a search for this older story]

www.energycentral.com/centers/news/daily/latest_power_list.cfm

EnergyPulse online magazine: syndication of and comments on Jan Lundberg's report in June on Matt Simmons:

www.energypulse.net/centers/article/article_display.cfm?a_id=1306

Go see An Inconvenient Truth. For locations and more, see the film's website:

www.climatecrisis.net/