



NEVER CRITICIZE AN ASTRONAUT AND OTHER LESSONS FROM THE CLIMATE WARS



I began writing the SciGuy blog for the *Houston Chronicle's* web site, covering everything from nanometers to parsecs, in June 2005. This was an interesting time for climate change, because just a few months later the movie *An Inconvenient Truth* hit theaters. During the summer of 2006, I took nine readers—three people who professed to be skeptics, three people who professed to be neutral, and three who fully accepted the science—to the movie and held a roundtable afterward. (Now this is anecdotal, of course, but I had a much more difficult time finding the believers than I did the skeptics.) At the time, climate change was not an overtly partisan issue, but when I sat down with the readers after watching the film, what one of the professed skeptics, Matt

Bramanti, said at the time strikes me as being eerily prophetic.

“The fact that Al Gore identified the movie so closely with himself—I think it’s more about him, to him, than it is about global warming,” Bramanti said. “The polarization really hammers away at the effectiveness.”

That polarization has made the coverage of climate change for Houston’s major newspaper, which I have undertaken during the last decade, a maddening, and at times carnivalesque, undertaking.

Houston is a city that has, in many ways, embraced climate-change skepticism. The city’s most well-known TV meteorologist, former National Hurricane Center director and former chief meteorologist of Channel 11 Neil Frank, openly denies climate change. What is perhaps the city’s largest scientific group, the Houston Geological Society, regularly holds luncheons with speakers skeptical of climate change. In February 2013, for example, petroleum geologist Bob Shoup gave a talk that he promoted as follows: “Predictions for the future have been dire, bordering on catastrophic. We’ll examine the predictions versus the reality. Finally, we’ll close with a look at history to see if we are better off with a warm or cold climate.”

Based upon polling data, however, the city of Houston does not appear to be too far out of step with public attitudes toward climate change. Between 2006 and 2012, the Houston Area Survey, a long-running project by Rice University sociologist Stephen L. Klineberg, sampled the attitudes of Houstonians four times. In 2006, he found that over 79.4 percent of respondents considered the threat of global warming to be “very” or “somewhat” serious. In 2012, the number softened a bit to 73.5. Nationally, Gallup found a similar trend during the last decade, with 58 percent of Americans having a “great deal” or “fair amount” of worry about climate change. Although the polls used slightly different methodologies and asked different questions, I believe this provides reasonable evidence that overall, despite their location in the oil patch, Houstonians share similar views about climate change to those of Americans in general.

What is notable is that the trend during the last decade of declining public perception of climate change as a threat is not nearly as dramatic or visible as

the increasing polarization and nastier tenor of the climate change discussion, of which I have been a firsthand witness.

An Inconvenient Truth was not a box office smash—it grossed \$24 million—but the injection of climate change into the film medium helped push global warming more broadly into the public consciousness, and because Gore was the star of the film, he became its principal public advocate in the public mind. As Gore became the public spokesman for climate change, the issue became ever more partisan. Of course, Gore does not deserve all of the blame for this. More than a decade ago, Republican pollster Frank Luntz authored a memo that outlined a strategy for opponents of regulations on greenhouse gas emissions, arguing they should discredit the science so the public wouldn’t demand action on climate change and would continue to think there was a scientific controversy around the subject.

“I think, in a sense, Al Gore and *An Inconvenient Truth* played, perhaps unwittingly, right into the hand of those looking to polarize the public as a pathway to maintaining the status quo,” Penn State University climate scientist Michael Mann, a climate wars veteran, told me in an interview. “Here comes a partisan political figure. They recognized that if they could make him the face of climate change, it would indeed aid them in their strategy.”

Invariably, a blog entry on climate change will draw out comments opining that Al Gore is fat, that he didn’t invent the Internet, and that this whole espousing of climate change thing must be similarly fraudulent. Probably 70 or 80 percent of the comments on the climate change blog entries I write have a skeptical or denialist viewpoint.

The biggest challenge for me, in responding to readers in this deeply polarized context, is that the science itself is complex. For example, though the Arctic sea ice you always hear about has undergone a stark decline, the Antarctic ice extent has increased over the last 30 years. How can that be happening in a warming world? The theories out there are complicated. Furthermore, over the last 15 years, global temperature trends have been essentially flat. Why at a time when our rate of greenhouse gas emissions are accelerating, are planet temperatures not accelerating too? The prevailing theory is that much of the heat is going into the oceans, but the climate models didn’t predict that this would happen. These are difficult things for a science reporter to explain to a broader public.

Of late, climate change denial in Houston has taken yet another odd turn. About four dozen former NASA astronauts, engineers, and scientists, under the rubric The Right Climate Stuff, issued an “Anthropogenic Global Warming Science Assessment” report in April. The group concluded, among other things, “The scientific progress on this issue has been corrupted by political and special interest influences that determine where our research dollars get spent.”

In a blog post on the development, I pointed out that while these Houstonians were unquestionably heroes, what they were not is climate scientists. The response from the Houston public was swift and, at times, angry.

“It is always fun to read AGW true believers express their conspiracy kook/magical thinking,” commented “hunter,” whose sentiment was shared by many others.

The take-home messages for me from all of this are: (1) Al Gore has indeed grown fat since 2000, (2) Houstonians who don’t believe in climate change must have become more vocal than those who do not because polling indicates the deniers are in the minority, and (3) never, ever even obliquely criticize an astronaut in Houston. We’re divided on climate change, but we love our spacefarers.