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Op-Ed Columnist

# Enemy of the Planet

By [PAUL KRUGMAN](#)

Lee Raymond, the former chief executive of Exxon Mobil, was paid \$686 million over 13 years. But that's not a reason to single him out for special excoriation. Executive compensation is out of control in corporate America as a whole, and unlike other grossly overpaid business leaders, Mr. Raymond can at least claim to have made money for his stockholders.

There's a better reason to excoriate Mr. Raymond: for the sake of his company's bottom line, and perhaps his own personal enrichment, he turned Exxon Mobil into an enemy of the planet.

To understand why Exxon Mobil is a worse environmental villain than other big oil companies, you need to know a bit about how the science and politics of climate change have shifted over the years.

Global warming emerged as a major public issue in the late 1980's. But at first there was considerable scientific uncertainty.

Over time, the accumulation of evidence removed much of that uncertainty. Climate experts still aren't sure how much hotter the world will get, and how fast. But there's now an overwhelming scientific consensus that the world is getting warmer, and that human activity is the cause. In 2004, an article in the journal *Science* that surveyed 928 papers on climate change published in peer-reviewed scientific journals found that "none of the papers disagreed with the consensus position."

To dismiss this consensus, you have to believe in a vast conspiracy to misinform the public that somehow embraces thousands of scientists around the world. That sort of thing is the stuff of bad novels. Sure enough, the novelist Michael Crichton, whose past work includes warnings about the imminent Japanese takeover of the world economy and murderous talking apes inhabiting the lost city of Zinj, has become perhaps the most prominent global-warming skeptic. (Mr. Crichton was invited to the White House to brief President Bush.)

So how have corporate interests responded? In the early years, when the science was still somewhat in doubt, many companies from the oil industry, the auto industry and other sectors were members of a group called the Global Climate Coalition, whose de facto purpose was to oppose curbs on greenhouse

gases. But as the scientific evidence became clearer, many members — including oil companies like BP and Shell — left the organization and conceded the need to do something about global warming.

Exxon, headed by Mr. Raymond, chose a different course of action: it decided to fight the science.

A leaked memo from a 1998 meeting at the American Petroleum Institute, in which Exxon (which hadn't yet merged with Mobil) was a participant, describes a strategy of providing "logistical and moral support" to climate change dissenters, "thereby raising questions about and undercutting the 'prevailing scientific wisdom.' " And that's just what Exxon Mobil has done: lavish grants have supported a sort of alternative intellectual universe of global warming skeptics.

The people and institutions Exxon Mobil supports aren't actually engaged in climate research. They're the real-world equivalents of the Academy of Tobacco Studies in the movie "Thank You for Smoking," whose purpose is to fail to find evidence of harmful effects.

But the fake research works for its sponsors, partly because it gets picked up by right-wing pundits, but mainly because it plays perfectly into the he-said-she-said conventions of "balanced" journalism. A 2003 study, by Maxwell Boykoff and Jules Boykoff, of reporting on global warming in major newspapers found that a majority of reports gave the skeptics — a few dozen people, many if not most receiving direct or indirect financial support from Exxon Mobil — roughly the same amount of attention as the scientific consensus, supported by thousands of independent researchers.

Has Exxon Mobil's war on climate science actually changed policy for the worse? Maybe not. Although most governments have done little to curb greenhouse gases, and the Bush administration has done nothing, it's not clear that policies would have been any better even if Exxon Mobil had acted more responsibly.

But the fact is that whatever small chance there was of action to limit global warming became even smaller because Exxon Mobil chose to protect its profits by trashing good science. And that, not the paycheck, is the real scandal of Mr. Raymond's reign as Exxon Mobil's chief executive.

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