



# Climate of Denial

**Can science and the truth  
withstand the merchants of poison?**

## Al Gore

*This story is from Rolling Stone issue 1134/1135,  
available on newsstands and through Rolling Stone All  
Access on June 24, 2011.*

Illustration by Matt Mahurin

The first time I remember hearing the question "is it real?" was when I went as a young boy to see a traveling show put on by "professional wrestlers" one summer evening in the gym of the Forks River Elementary School in Elmwood, Tennessee.

The evidence that it was real was palpable: "They're really hurting each other! That's real blood! Look a'there! They can't fake that!" On the other hand, there was clearly a script (or in today's language, a "narrative"), with good guys to cheer and bad guys to boo.

But the most unusual and in some ways most interesting character in these dramas was the referee: Whenever the bad guy committed a gross and obvious violation of the "rules" — such as they were — like using a metal folding chair to smack the good guy in the head, the referee always seemed to be preoccupied with one of the cornermen, or looking the other way. Yet whenever the good guy — after absorbing more abuse and unfairness than any reasonable person could tolerate — committed the slightest infraction, the referee was all over him. The answer to the question "Is it real?" seemed connected to the question of whether the referee was somehow confused about his role: Was he too an entertainer?

That is pretty much the role now being played by most of the news media in refereeing the current wrestling match over whether global warming is "real," and whether it has any connection to the constant dumping of 90 million tons of heat-trapping emissions into the Earth's thin shell of atmosphere every 24 hours.

Admittedly, the contest over global warming is a challenge for the referee because it's a tag-team match, a real free-for-all. In one corner of the ring are Science and Reason. In the other corner: Poisonous Polluters and Right-wing Ideologues.

The referee — in this analogy, the news media — seems confused about whether he is in the news business or the entertainment business. Is he responsible for ensuring a fair match? Or is he part of the show, selling tickets and building the audience? The referee certainly seems distracted: by Donald Trump, Charlie Sheen, the latest reality show — the list of serial obsessions is too long to enumerate here.

But whatever the cause, the referee appears not to notice that the Polluters and Ideologues are trampling all over the "rules" of democratic discourse. They are financing pseudoscientists whose job is to manufacture doubt about what is true and what is false; buying elected officials wholesale with bribes that the politicians themselves have made "legal" and can now be made in secret; spending hundreds of millions of dollars each year on misleading advertisements in the mass media; hiring four anti-climate lobbyists for every member of the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives. (Question: Would Michael Jordan have been a star if he was covered by four defensive players every step he took on the basketball court?)

This script, of course, is not entirely new: A half-century ago, when Science and Reason established the linkage between cigarettes and lung diseases, the tobacco industry hired actors, dressed them up as doctors, and paid them to look into television cameras and tell people that the linkage revealed in the Surgeon General's Report was not real at all. The show went on for decades, with more Americans killed each year by cigarettes than all of the U.S. soldiers killed in all of World War II.

This time, the scientific consensus is even stronger. It has been endorsed by every National Academy of science of every major country on the planet, every major professional scientific society related to the study of global warming and 98 percent of climate scientists throughout the world. In the latest and most authoritative study by 3,000 of the very best scientific experts in the world, the evidence was judged "unequivocal."

But wait! The good guys transgressed the rules of decorum, as evidenced in their private e-mails that were stolen and put on the Internet. The referee is all over it: Penalty! Go to your corner! And in their 3,000-page report, the scientists made some mistakes! Another penalty!

And if more of the audience is left confused about whether the climate crisis is real? Well, the show must go on. After all, it's entertainment. There are tickets to be sold, eyeballs to glue to the screen.

Part of the script for this show was leaked to *The New York Times* as early as 1991. In an internal document, a consortium of the largest global-warming polluters spelled out their principal strategy: "Reposition global warming as theory, rather than fact." Ever since, they have been sowing doubt even more effectively than the tobacco companies before them.

To sell their false narrative, the Polluters and Ideologues have found it essential to undermine the public's respect for Science and Reason by attacking the integrity of the climate scientists. That is why the scientists are regularly accused of falsifying evidence and exaggerating its implications in a greedy effort to win more research grants, or secretly pursuing a hidden political agenda to expand the power of government. Such slanderous insults are deeply ironic: extremist ideologues — many financed or employed by carbon polluters — accusing scientists of being greedy extremist ideologues.

After World War II, a philosopher studying the impact of organized propaganda on the quality of democratic debate wrote, "The conversion of all questions of truth into questions of power has attacked the very heart of the distinction between true and false."

*This story is from Rolling Stone issue 1134/1135, available on newsstands and through Rolling Stone All Access on June 24, 2011.*

Is the climate crisis real? Yes, of course it is. Pause for a moment to consider these events of just the past 12 months:

- **Heat.** According to NASA, 2010 was tied with 2005 as the hottest year measured since instruments were first used systematically in the 1880s. Nineteen countries set all-time high temperature records. One city in Pakistan, Mohenjo-Daro, reached 128.3 degrees Fahrenheit, the hottest temperature ever measured in an Asian city. Nine of the 10 hottest years in history have occurred in the last 13 years. The past decade was the hottest ever measured, even though half of that decade represented a "solar minimum" — the low ebb in the natural cycle of solar energy emanating from the sun.
  
- **Floods.** Megafloods displaced 20 million people in Pakistan, further destabilizing a nuclear-armed country; inundated an area of Australia larger than Germany and France combined; flooded 28 of the 32 districts that make up Colombia, where it has rained almost continuously for the past year; caused a "thousand-year" flood in my home city of Nashville; and led to all-time record flood levels in the Mississippi River Valley. Many places around the world are now experiencing larger and more frequent extreme downpours and snowstorms; last year's "Snowmageddon" in the northeastern United States is part of the same pattern, notwithstanding the guffaws of deniers.
  
- **Drought.** Historic drought and fires in Russia killed an estimated 56,000 people and caused wheat and other food crops in Russia, Ukraine and Kazakhstan to be removed from the global market, contributing to a record spike in food prices. "Practically everything is burning," Russian president Dmitry Medvedev declared. "What's happening with the planet's climate right now needs to be a wake-up call to all of us." The drought level in much of Texas has been raised from "extreme" to "exceptional," the highest category. This spring the majority of the counties in Texas were on fire, and Gov. Rick Perry requested a major disaster declaration for all but two of the state's 254 counties. Arizona is now fighting the largest fire in its history. Since 1970, the fire season throughout the American West has increased by 78 days. Extreme droughts in central China and northern France are currently drying up reservoirs and killing crops.
  
- **Melting Ice.** An enormous mass of ice, four times larger than the island of Manhattan, broke off from northern Greenland last year and slipped into the sea. The acceleration of ice loss in both Greenland and Antarctica has caused another upward revision of global sea-level rise and the numbers of refugees expected from low-lying coastal areas. The Arctic ice cap, which reached a record low volume last year, has lost as much as 40 percent of its area during summer in just 30 years.

These extreme events are happening in real time. It is not uncommon for the nightly newscast to resemble a nature hike through the Book of Revelation. Yet most of the news media completely ignore how such events are connected to the climate crisis, or dismiss the connection as controversial; after all, there are scientists on one side of the debate and deniers on the other. A Fox News executive, in an internal e-mail to the network's reporters and editors that later became public, questioned the "veracity of climate change data" and ordered the journalists to "refrain from asserting that the planet has warmed (or cooled) in any given period without IMMEDIATELY pointing out that such theories are based upon data that critics have called into question."

But in the "real" world, the record droughts, fires, floods and mudslides continue to increase in severity and frequency. Leading climate scientists like Jim Hansen and Kevin Trenberth now say that events like these would almost certainly not be occurring without the influence of man-made global warming. And that's a shift in the way they frame these impacts. Scientists used to caution that we were increasing the probability of such extreme events by "loading the dice" — pumping more carbon into the atmosphere. Now the scientists go much further, warning that we are "painting more dots on the dice." We are not only more likely to roll 12s; we are now rolling 13s and 14s. In other words, the biggest storms are not only becoming more frequent, they are getting bigger, stronger and more destructive.

"The only plausible explanation for the rise in weather-related catastrophes is climate change," Munich Re, one of the two largest reinsurance companies in the world, recently stated. "The view that weather extremes are more frequent and intense due to global warming coincides with the current state of scientific knowledge."

Many of the extreme and destructive events are the result of the rapid increase in the amount of heat energy from the sun that is trapped in the atmosphere, which is radically disrupting the planet's water cycle. More heat energy evaporates more water into the air, and the warmer air holds a lot more moisture. This has huge consequences that we now see all around the world.

When a storm unleashes a downpour of rain or snow, the precipitation does not originate just in the part of the sky directly above where it falls. Storms reach out — sometimes as far as 2,000 miles — to suck in water vapor from large areas of the sky, including the skies above oceans, where water vapor has increased by four percent in just the last 30 years. (Scientists often compare this phenomenon to what happens in a bathtub when you open the drain; the water rushing out comes from the whole tub, not just from the part of the tub directly above the drain. And when the tub is filled with more water, more goes down the drain. In the same way, when the warmer sky is filled with a lot more water vapor, there are bigger downpours when a storm cell opens the "drain.")

In many areas, these bigger downpours also mean longer periods between storms — at the same time that the extra heat in the air is also drying out the soil. That is part of the reason so many areas have been experiencing both record floods and deeper, longer-lasting droughts.

Moreover, the scientists have been warning us for quite some time — in increasingly urgent tones — that things will get much, much worse if we continue the reckless dumping of more and more heat-trapping pollution into the atmosphere. Drought is projected to spread across significant, highly populated areas of the globe throughout this century. Look at what the scientists say is in store for the Mediterranean nations. Should we care about the loss of Spain, France, Italy, the Balkans, Turkey, Tunisia? Look at what they say is in store for Mexico. Should we notice? Should we care?

Maybe it's just easier, psychologically, to swallow the lie that these scientists who devote their lives to their work are actually greedy deceivers and left-wing extremists — and that we should instead put our faith in the pseudoscientists financed by large carbon polluters whose business plans depend on their continued use of the atmospheric commons as a place to dump their gaseous, heat-trapping waste without limit or constraint, free of charge.

The truth is this: What we are doing is functionally insane. If we do not change this pattern, we will condemn our children and all future generations to struggle with ecological curses for several millennia to come. Twenty percent of the global-warming pollution we spew into the sky each day will still be there 20,000 years from now!

We do have another choice. Renewable energy sources are coming into their own. Both solar and wind will soon produce power at costs that are competitive with fossil fuels; indications are that twice as many solar installations were erected worldwide last year as compared to 2009. The reductions in cost and the improvements in efficiency of photovoltaic cells over the past decade appear to be following an exponential curve that resembles a less dramatic but still startling version of what happened with computer chips over the past 50 years.

Enhanced geothermal energy is potentially a nearly limitless source of competitive electricity. Increased energy efficiency is already saving businesses money and reducing emissions significantly. New generations of biomass energy — ones that do not rely on food crops, unlike the mistaken strategy of making ethanol from corn — are extremely promising. Sustainable forestry and agriculture both make economic as well as environmental sense. And all of these options would spread even more rapidly if we stopped subsidizing Big Oil and Coal and put a price on carbon that reflected the true cost of fossil energy — either through the much-maligned cap-and-trade approach, or through a revenue-neutral tax swap.

All over the world, the grassroots movement in favor of changing public policies to confront the climate crisis and build a more prosperous, sustainable future is growing rapidly. But most governments remain paralyzed, unable to take action — even after years of volatile gasoline prices, repeated wars in the Persian Gulf, one energy-related disaster after another, and a seemingly endless stream of unprecedented and lethal weather disasters.

Continuing on our current course would be suicidal for global civilization. But the key question is: How do we drive home that fact in a democratic society when questions of truth have been converted into questions of power? When the distinction between what is true and what is false is being attacked relentlessly, and when the referee in the contest between truth and falsehood has become an entertainer selling tickets to a phony wrestling match?

The "wrestling ring" in this metaphor is the conversation of democracy. It used to be called the "public square." In ancient Athens, it was the Agora. In the Roman Republic, it was the Forum. In the Egypt of the recent Arab Spring, "Tahrir Square" was both real and metaphorical — encompassing Facebook, Twitter, Al-Jazeera and texting.

In the America of the late-18th century, the conversation that led to our own "Spring" took place in printed words: pamphlets, newsprint, books, the "Republic of Letters." It represented the fullest flower of the Enlightenment, during which the oligarchic power of the monarchies, the feudal lords and the Medieval Church was overthrown and replaced with a new sovereign: the Rule of Reason.

The public square that gave birth to the new consciousness of the Enlightenment emerged in the dozen generations following the invention of the printing press — "the Gutenberg Galaxy," the scholar Marshall McLuhan called it — a space in which the conversation of democracy was almost equally accessible to every literate person. Individuals could both find the knowledge that had previously been restricted to elites and contribute their own ideas.

---

Ideas that found resonance with others rose in prominence much the way Google searches do today, finding an ever larger audience and becoming a source of political power for individuals with neither wealth nor force of arms. Thomas Paine, to take one example, emigrated from England to Philadelphia with no wealth, no family connections and no power other than that which came from his ability to think and write clearly — yet his *Common Sense* became the *Harry Potter* of Revolutionary America. The "public interest" mattered, was actively discussed and pursued.

But the "public square" that gave birth to America has been transformed beyond all recognition. The conversation that matters most to the shaping of the "public mind" now takes place on television. Newspapers and magazines are in decline. The Internet, still in its early days, will one day support business models that make true journalism profitable — but up until now, the only successful news websites aggregate content from struggling print publications. Web versions of the newspapers themselves are, with few exceptions, not yet making money. They bring to mind the classic image of Wile E. Coyote running furiously in midair just beyond the edge of the cliff, before plummeting to the desert floor far beneath him.

The average American, meanwhile, is watching television an astonishing five hours a day. In the average household, at least one television set is turned on more than eight hours a day. Moreover, approximately 75 percent of those using the Internet frequently watch television at the same time that they are online.

Unlike access to the "public square" of early America, access to television requires large amounts of money. Thomas Paine could walk out of his front door in Philadelphia and find a dozen competing, low-cost print shops within blocks of his home. Today, if he traveled to the nearest TV station, or to the headquarters of nearby Comcast — the dominant television provider in America — and tried to deliver his new ideas to the American people, he would be laughed off the premises. The public square that used to be a commons has been refeudalized, and the gatekeepers charge large rents for the privilege of communicating to the American people over the only medium that really affects their thinking. "Citizens" are now referred to more commonly as "consumers" or "the audience."

That is why up to 80 percent of the campaign budgets for candidates in both major political parties is devoted to the purchase of 30-second TV ads. Since the rates charged for these commercials increase each year, the candidates are forced to raise more and more money in each two-year campaign cycle.

Of course, the only reliable sources from which such large sums can be raised continuously are business lobbies. Organized labor, a shadow of its former self, struggles to compete, and individuals are limited by law to making small contributions. During the 2008 campaign, there was a bubble of hope that Internet-based fundraising might even the scales, but in the end, Democrats as well as Republicans relied far more on traditional sources of large contributions. Moreover, the recent deregulation of unlimited — and secret — donations by wealthy corporations has made the imbalance even worse.

In the new ecology of political discourse, special-interest contributors of the large sums of money now required for the privilege of addressing voters on a wholesale basis are not squeamish about asking for the quo they expect in return for their quid. Politicians who don't acquiesce don't get the money they need to be elected and re-elected. And the impact is doubled when special interests make clear — usually bluntly — that the money they are

withholding will go instead to opponents who are more than happy to pledge the desired quo. Politicians have been racing to the bottom for some time, and are presently tunneling to new depths. It is now commonplace for congressmen and senators first elected decades ago — as I was — to comment in private that the whole process has become unbelievably crass, degrading and horribly destructive to the core values of American democracy.

Largely as a result, the concerns of the wealthiest individuals and corporations routinely trump the concerns of average Americans and small businesses. There are a ridiculously large number of examples: eliminating the inheritance tax paid by the wealthiest one percent of families is considered a much higher priority than addressing the suffering of the millions of long-term unemployed; Wall Street's interest in legalizing gambling in trillions of dollars of "derivatives" was considered way more important than protecting the integrity of the financial system and the interests of middle-income home buyers. It's a long list.

Almost every group organized to promote and protect the "public interest" has been backpedaling and on the defensive. By sharp contrast, when a coalition of powerful special interests sets out to manipulate U.S. policy, their impact can be startling — and the damage to the true national interest can be devastating.

In 2002, for example, the feverish desire to invade Iraq required convincing the American people that Saddam Hussein was somehow responsible for attacking the United States on September 11th, 2001, and that he was preparing to attack us again, perhaps with nuclear weapons. When the evidence — the "facts" — stood in the way of that effort to shape the public mind, they were ridiculed, maligned and ignored. Behind the scenes, the intelligence was manipulated and the public was intentionally deceived. Allies were pressured to adopt the same approach with their publics. A recent inquiry in the U.K. confirmed this yet again. "We knew at the time that the purpose of the dossier was precisely to make a case for war, rather than setting out the available intelligence," Maj. Gen. Michael Laurie testified. "To make the best out of sparse and inconclusive intelligence, the wording was developed with care." Why? As British intelligence put it, the overthrow of Saddam was "a prize because it could give new security to oil supplies."

That goal — the real goal — could have been debated on its own terms. But as Bush administration officials have acknowledged, a truly candid presentation would not have resulted in sufficient public support for the launching of a new war. They knew that because they had studied it and polled it. So they manipulated the debate, downplayed the real motive for the invasion, and made a different case to the public — one based on falsehoods.

And the "referee" — the news media — looked the other way. Some, like Fox News, were hyperactive cheerleaders. Others were intimidated into going along by the vitriol heaped on any who asked inconvenient questions. (They know it; many now acknowledge it, sheepishly and apologetically.)

Senators themselves fell, with a few honorable exceptions, into the same two camps. A few weeks before the United States invaded Iraq, the late Robert Byrd — God rest his soul — thundered on the Senate floor about the pitiful quality of the debate over the choice between war and peace: "Yet, this Chamber is, for the most part, silent — ominously, dreadfully silent. There is no debate, no discussion, no attempt to lay out for the nation the pros and cons of this particular war. There is nothing."

The chamber was silent, in part, because many senators were somewhere else — attending cocktail parties and receptions, largely with special-interest donors, raising money to buy TV ads for their next campaigns. Nowadays, in fact, the scheduling of many special-interest fundraisers mirrors the schedule of votes pending in the House and Senate.

By the time we invaded Iraq, polls showed, nearly three-quarters of the American people were convinced that the person responsible for the planes flying into the World Trade Center Towers was indeed Saddam Hussein. The rest is history — though, as Faulkner wrote, "The past is never dead. It's not even past." Because of that distortion of the truth in the past, we are still in Iraq; and because the bulk of our troops and intelligence assets were abruptly diverted from Afghanistan to Iraq, we are also still in Afghanistan.

In the same way, because the banks had their way with Congress when it came to gambling on unregulated derivatives and recklessly endangering credit markets with subprime mortgages, we still have almost double-digit unemployment, historic deficits, Greece and possibly other European countries teetering on the edge of default, and the threat of a double-dip recession. Even the potential default of the United States of America is now being treated by many politicians and too many in the media as yet another phony wrestling match, a political game. Are the potential economic consequences of a U.S. default "real"? Of course they are! Have we gone completely nuts?

We haven't gone nuts — but the "conversation of democracy" has become so deeply dysfunctional that our ability to make intelligent collective decisions has been seriously impaired. Throughout American history, we relied on the vibrancy of our public square — and the quality of our democratic discourse — to make better decisions than most nations in the history of the world. But we are now routinely making really bad decisions that completely ignore the best available evidence of what is true and what is false. When the distinction between truth and falsehood is systematically attacked without shame or consequence — when a great nation makes crucially important decisions on the basis of completely false information that is no longer adequately filtered through the fact-checking function of a healthy and honest public discussion — the public interest is severely damaged.

That is exactly what is happening with U.S. decisions regarding the climate crisis. The best available evidence demonstrates beyond any reasonable doubt that the reckless spewing of global-warming pollution in obscene quantities into the atmospheric commons is having exactly the consequences long predicted by scientists who have analyzed the known facts according to the laws of physics.

The emergence of the climate crisis seems sudden only because of a relatively recent discontinuity in the relationship between human civilization and the planet's ecological system. In the past century, we have quadrupled global population while relying on the burning of carbon-based fuels — coal, oil and gas — for 85 percent of the world's energy. We are also cutting and burning forests that would otherwise help remove some of the added CO<sub>2</sub> from the atmosphere, and have converted agriculture to an industrial model that also runs on carbon-based fuels and strip-mines carbon-rich soils.

The cumulative result is a radically new reality — and since human nature makes us vulnerable to confusing the unprecedented with the improbable, it naturally seems difficult to accept. Moreover, since this new reality is painful to contemplate, and requires big changes in policy and behavior that are at the outer limit of our ability, it is all too easy to fall into the

psychological state of denial. As with financial issues like subprime mortgages and credit default swaps, the climate crisis can seem too complex to worry about, especially when the shills for the polluters constantly claim it's all a hoax anyway. And since the early impacts of climatic disruption are distributed globally, they masquerade as an abstraction that is safe to ignore.

These vulnerabilities, rooted in our human nature, are being manipulated by the tag-team of Polluters and Ideologues who are trying to deceive us. And the referee — the news media — is once again distracted. As with the invasion of Iraq, some are hyperactive cheerleaders for the deception, while others are intimidated into complicity, timidity and silence by the astonishing vitriol heaped upon those who dare to present the best evidence in a professional manner. Just as TV networks who beat the drums of war prior to the Iraq invasion were rewarded with higher ratings, networks now seem reluctant to present the truth about the link between carbon pollution and global warming out of fear that conservative viewers will change the channel — and fear that they will receive a torrent of flame e-mails from deniers.

Many politicians, unfortunately, also fall into the same two categories: those who cheerlead for the deniers and those who cower before them. The latter group now includes several candidates for the Republican presidential nomination who have felt it necessary to abandon their previous support for action on the climate crisis; at least one has been apologizing profusely to the deniers and begging for their forgiveness.

"Intimidation" and "timidity" are connected by more than a shared word root. The first is designed to produce the second. As Yeats wrote almost a century ago, "The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity."

Barack Obama's approach to the climate crisis represents a special case that requires careful analysis. His election was accompanied by intense hope that many things in need of change would change. Some things have, but others have not. Climate policy, unfortunately, is in the second category. Why?

First of all, anyone who honestly examines the incredible challenges confronting President Obama when he took office has to feel enormous empathy for him: the Great Recession, with the high unemployment and the enormous public and private indebtedness it produced; two seemingly interminable wars; an intractable political opposition whose true leaders — entertainers masquerading as pundits — openly declared that their objective was to ensure that the new president failed; a badly broken Senate that is almost completely paralyzed by the threat of filibuster and is controlled lock, stock and barrel by the oil and coal industries; a contingent of nominal supporters in Congress who are indentured servants of the same special interests that control most of the Republican Party; and a ferocious, well-financed and dishonest campaign poised to vilify anyone who dares offer leadership for the reduction of global-warming pollution.

In spite of these obstacles, President Obama included significant climate-friendly initiatives in the economic stimulus package he presented to Congress during his first month in office. With the skillful leadership of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and committee chairmen Henry Waxman and Ed Markey, he helped secure passage of a cap-and-trade measure in the House a few months later. He implemented historic improvements in fuel-efficiency standards for automobiles, and instructed the Environmental Protection Agency to move forward on the regulation of global-warming pollution under the Clean Air Act. He appointed many

excellent men and women to key positions, and they, in turn, have made hundreds of changes in environmental and energy policy that have helped move the country forward slightly on the climate issue. During his first six months, he clearly articulated the link between environmental security, economic security and national security — making the case that a national commitment to renewable energy could simultaneously reduce unemployment, dependence on foreign oil and vulnerability to the disruption of oil markets dominated by the Persian Gulf reserves. And more recently, as the issue of long-term debt has forced discussion of new revenue, he proposed the elimination of unnecessary and expensive subsidies for oil and gas.

But in spite of these and other achievements, President Obama has thus far failed to use the bully pulpit to make the case for bold action on climate change. After successfully passing his green stimulus package, he did nothing to defend it when Congress decimated its funding. After the House passed cap and trade, he did little to make passage in the Senate a priority. Senate advocates — including one Republican — felt abandoned when the president made concessions to oil and coal companies without asking for anything in return. He has also called for a massive expansion of oil drilling in the United States, apparently in an effort to defuse criticism from those who argue speciously that "drill, baby, drill" is the answer to our growing dependence on foreign oil.

The failure to pass legislation to limit global-warming pollution ensured that the much-anticipated Copenhagen summit on a global treaty in 2009 would also end in failure. The president showed courage in attending the summit and securing a rhetorical agreement to prevent a complete collapse of the international process, but that's all it was — a rhetorical agreement. During the final years of the Bush-Cheney administration, the rest of the world was waiting for a new president who would aggressively tackle the climate crisis — and when it became clear that there would be no real change from the Bush era, the agenda at Copenhagen changed from "How do we complete this historic breakthrough?" to "How can we paper over this embarrassing disappointment?"

Some concluded from the failure in Copenhagen that it was time to give up on the entire U.N.-sponsored process for seeking an international agreement to reduce both global-warming pollution and deforestation. Ultimately, however, the only way to address the climate crisis will be with a global agreement that in one way or another puts a price on carbon. And whatever approach is eventually chosen, the U.S. simply must provide leadership by changing our own policy.

Yet without presidential leadership that focuses intensely on making the public aware of the reality we face, nothing will change. The real power of any president, as Richard Neustadt wrote, is "the power to persuade." Yet President Obama has never presented to the American people the magnitude of the climate crisis. He has simply not made the case for action. He has not defended the science against the ongoing, withering and dishonest attacks. Nor has he provided a presidential venue for the scientific community — including our own National Academy — to bring the reality of the science before the public.

Here is the core of it: we are destroying the climate balance that is essential to the survival of our civilization. This is not a distant or abstract threat; it is happening now. The United States is the only nation that can rally a global effort to save our future. And the president is the only person who can rally the United States.

---

Many political advisers assume that a president has to deal with the world of politics as he finds it, and that it is unwise to risk political capital on an effort to actually lead the country toward a new understanding of the real threats and real opportunities we face. Concentrate on the politics of re-election, they say. Don't take chances.

All that might be completely understandable and make perfect sense in a world where the climate crisis wasn't "real." Those of us who support and admire President Obama understand how difficult the politics of this issue are in the context of the massive opposition to doing anything at all — or even to recognizing that there is a crisis. And assuming that the Republicans come to their senses and avoid nominating a clown, his re-election is likely to involve a hard-fought battle with high stakes for the country. All of his supporters understand that it would be self-defeating to weaken Obama and heighten the risk of another step backward. Even writing an article like this one carries risks; opponents of the president will excerpt the criticism and strip it of context.

But in this case, the President has reality on his side. The scientific consensus is far stronger today than at any time in the past. Here is the truth: The Earth is round; Saddam Hussein did not attack us on 9/11; Elvis is dead; Obama was born in the United States; and the climate crisis is real. It is time to act.

Those who profit from the unconstrained pollution that is the primary cause of climate change are determined to block our perception of this reality. They have help from many sides: from the private sector, which is now free to make unlimited and secret campaign contributions; from politicians who have conflated their tenures in office with the pursuit of the people's best interests; and — tragically — from the press itself, which treats deception and falsehood on the same plane as scientific fact, and calls it objective reporting of alternative opinions.

All things are not equally true. It is time to face reality. We ignored reality in the marketplace and nearly destroyed the world economic system. We are likewise ignoring reality in the environment, and the consequences could be several orders of magnitude worse. Determining what is real can be a challenge in our culture, but in order to make wise choices in the presence of such grave risks, we must use common sense and the rule of reason in coming to an agreement on what is true.

So how can we make it happen? How can we as individuals make a difference? In five basic ways:

First, become a committed advocate for solving the crisis. You can start with something simple: Speak up whenever the subject of climate arises. When a friend or acquaintance expresses doubt that the crisis is real, or that it's some sort of hoax, don't let the opportunity pass to put down your personal marker. The civil rights revolution may have been driven by activists who put their lives on the line, but it was partly won by average Americans who began to challenge racist comments in everyday conversations.

Second, deepen your commitment by making consumer choices that reduce energy use and reduce your impact on the environment. The demand by individuals for change in the marketplace has already led many businesses to take truly significant steps to reduce their global-warming pollution. Some of the corporate changes are more symbolic than real — "green-washing," as it's called — but a surprising amount of real progress is taking place.

---

Walmart, to pick one example, is moving aggressively to cut its carbon footprint by 20 million metric tons, in part by pressuring its suppliers to cut down on wasteful packaging and use lower-carbon transportation alternatives. Reward those companies that are providing leadership.

Third, join an organization committed to action on this issue. The Alliance for Climate Protection ([climateprotect.org](http://climateprotect.org)), which I chair, has grassroots action plans for the summer and fall that spell out lots of ways to fight effectively for the policy changes we need. We can also enable you to host a slide show in your community on solutions to the climate crisis — presented by one of the 4,000 volunteers we have trained. Invite your friends and neighbors to come and then enlist them to join the cause.

Fourth, contact your local newspapers and television stations when they put out claptrap on climate — and let them know you're fed up with their stubborn and cowardly resistance to reporting the facts of this issue. One of the main reasons they are so wimpy and irresponsible about global warming is that they're frightened of the reaction they get from the deniers when they report the science objectively. So let them know that deniers are not the only ones in town with game. Stay on them! Don't let up! It's true that some media outlets are getting instructions from their owners on this issue, and that others are influenced by big advertisers, but many of them are surprisingly responsive to a genuine outpouring of opinion from their viewers and readers. It is way past time for the ref to do his job.

Finally, and above all, don't give up on the political system. Even though it is rigged by special interests, it is not so far gone that candidates and elected officials don't have to pay attention to persistent, engaged and committed individuals. President Franklin Roosevelt once told civil rights leaders who were pressing him for change that he agreed with them about the need for greater equality for black Americans. Then, as the story goes, he added with a wry smile, "Now go out and make me do it."

To make our elected leaders take action to solve the climate crisis, we must forcefully communicate the following message: "I care a lot about global warming; I am paying very careful attention to the way you vote and what you say about it; if you are on the wrong side, I am not only going to vote against you, I will work hard to defeat you — regardless of party. If you are on the right side, I will work hard to elect you."

Why do you think President Obama and Congress changed their game on "don't ask, don't tell?" It happened because enough Americans delivered exactly that tough message to candidates who wanted their votes. When enough people care passionately enough to drive that message home on the climate crisis, politicians will look at their hole cards, and enough of them will change their game to make all the difference we need.

This is not naive; trust me on this. It may take more individual voters to beat the Polluters and Ideologues now than it once did — when special-interest money was less dominant. But when enough people speak this way to candidates, and convince them that they are dead serious about it, change will happen — both in Congress and in the White House. As the great abolitionist leader Frederick Douglass once observed, "Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did, and it never will."

What is now at risk in the climate debate is nothing less than our ability to communicate with one another according to a protocol that binds all participants to seek reason and evaluate

---

facts honestly. The ability to perceive reality is a prerequisite for self-governance. Wishful thinking and denial lead to dead ends. When it works, the democratic process helps clear the way toward reality, by exposing false argumentation to the best available evidence. That is why the Constitution affords such unique protection to freedom of the press and of speech.

The climate crisis, in reality, is a struggle for the soul of America. It is about whether or not we are still capable — given the ill health of our democracy and the current dominance of wealth over reason — of perceiving important and complex realities clearly enough to promote and protect the sustainable well-being of the many. What hangs in the balance is the future of civilization as we know it.

**Related:** [Photos: 11 Extreme-Weather Signs the Climate Crisis is Real](#)

- [How Obama Gave Up on Climate Change Legislation](#)
- [Photos: Who's to Blame: 12 Politicians and Execs Blocking Progress on Global Warming](#)
- [How Oil and Gas Companies Have Blocked Progress on Global Warming](#)

*This story is from Rolling Stone issue 1134/1135, available on newsstands and through Rolling Stone All Access on June 24, 2011.*