

***CLOSE THE DOORS, CLOSE THE WINDOWS,
AND MAYBE CLOSING YOUR EYES WOULD HELP TOO***

By Michael Ventura

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"Close the doors, they're coming through the windows! Close the windows, they're coming through the doors!"

My mother used to say that all the time. Perhaps a helpful reader out there could enlighten all of us on the couplet's origin? The Marx Brothers, perhaps? Mama claimed these were among the first complete sentences I spoke, though I suspect that was one of her, shall we say, embellishments. Mama was a Marxist who mixed a thorough understanding of Karl with frequent dashes of Harpo, combining both into a worldview that went something like this: Humanity is an aggregate of rational materialists who behave irrationally. In any case, her frequently invoked image is all too familiar to serious observers of history and politics: ill-timed slammings of doors and clatterings of windows, while some sinister "they" overruns the premises. The overwhelming reality, however, is that it isn't "they" anymore; it's the planet itself -- our environment, a Mother Earth driven mad by her children, children too confused and frightened, for the most part, to admit what we've done.

In my August 4 column ("White Heat") I quoted a *New York Times* report on the findings of Norwegian scientists who said that "the North Pole is melting so fast that ... it could disappear entirely each summer beginning in just 50 years ... Even a modest change in Arctic dynamics could have wrenching effects elsewhere. If the changes divert the Gulf Stream ... much of Western Europe could be plunged into an ice age."

As alarming as such statements are, we read "beginning in just 50 years" and, being human and therefore selfish, we relax a little, don't we? After all, just about everyone my age will be dead, the high school kids I teach will be retiring, and the children my friends are having we be well into middle age, so ... it's not really our problem. While we try to close the doors of our concern, they're coming through the windows -- 'cause it turns out that things are moving a lot faster than we'd like to admit; unless you choose to be benumbed, complacency is not an option. In case you missed it, here's the *Times* again, August 19, just two weeks after my column was published:

"The thick ice that has for ages covered the Arctic Ocean at the pole has turned to water, recent visitors there reported yesterday ... an ice-free patch of ocean about a mile wide has opened at the very top of the world ... 'It was totally unexpected,' said Dr. James J. McCarthy, an oceanographer, director of the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard University ... On a similar cruise six years ago, he recalled, the icebreaker plowed through an icecap six to nine feet thick at the North Pole. This time, ice was generally so thin that sunlight could penetrate and support concentrations of plankton under the ice ... the ship, the Yamal, crunched through miles of unusually thin ice and intermittent open water on the approach from Spitsbergen, Norway, to the pole. When the ship reached the pole ... water lapped its bow." Ivory gulls were seen flying overhead; according to ornithologists, this is the first time they'd ever been sighted at the pole. (The gulls feed on fish. Get it?)

On August 23 *The Times* ran an op-ed by Edmund Blair Bolles, with this pull quote: "An open polar sea is the 21st century's nightmare." It's usual for mainstream

publications to ease into alarming pieces with several calm informative paragraphs before getting to the meat, which here appeared dead-center in the article: "A temperature increase great enough to melt the northern icecap means a massive reorganization of the earth's heat and water patterns. Some places that have been able to support millions of inhabitants may in the future be able to support only thousands."

Pause a moment and consider the drastic relocation of human beings, industry, and agriculture, that may be necessary to accommodate these changes.

Bolles' piece ends: "For the first time in *50 million years* [my italics], we now have an open polar sea."

George W. Bush cautions against "haste" in these matters -- perhaps because he and his vice-presidential nominee, Dick Cheney, have been deeply involved in the Texas oil business, and Texas produces "far more greenhouse gases from the burning of fossil fuels than any other state." [the *Times*, August 24] Even so, on August 23 Texas' three "natural resource commissioners," all W.'s appointees, admitted global warming was a serious problem the ramifications of which Texas should "explore." They're all for a "thorough review" of the problem. W. offered no direct comment.

While W. has been ignoring and/or "exploring," Al Gore published a pretty solid book in 1992, updated and reissued this year, called *Earth in the Balance*, in which he pulls no punches: "Global warming is no longer a distant threat; it's as real, as clear and present an issue, with profound effects on people's lives, as war and peace or recession and prosperity -- and the effects are only beginning to be felt." Since most people won't have time to read it, I'll quote extensively. From Gore's foreword, pages xv-xvi:

"Not only have we seen a 40% decrease in ice thickness in the Arctic, with the loss averaging an ominous four inches a year since 1991; in Antarctica, we have seen icebergs the size of Rhode Island breaking off the Larsen Peninsula as local water temperatures rise. Some scientists fear that the massive West Antarctic ice sheet may eventually destabilize as the earth warms, sliding off the islands it sits on and potentially raising sea levels not by one to three feet, as current predictions have it, but by 15 feet or more -- a catastrophic mutation in our physical and human geography.

"... big changes can occur quickly. Indeed, we have experienced a smaller, temporary catastrophe of this kind nearly eleven thousand years ago. As the glaciers retreated from North America, a large freshwater lake formed, held back by an ice dam near the east coast of what is now Canada. When the dam broke, the water rushed across eastern Canada toward the Atlantic Ocean, tearing open the mouth of the St. Lawrence River. When all that fresh water reached the Atlantic, it diluted the salt water at the northern terminus of the Gulf Stream, where much of the current's heat evaporates into the trade winds that warm northern Europe ... This freshwater deluge in effect turned off the pump that drives the Gulf Stream. Steam from the Gulf Stream's evaporation supplies Europe with heat equal to one third of that which it receives each year from the sun, sustaining a temperate climate in a very northern latitude. But when the Gulf Stream stopped, Europe was plunged into an ice age that lasted for five hundred to eight hundred years. *The change occurred in less than two years, but it took centuries to undo itself and restart the Gulf Stream.*" (My italics.)

From Gore's closing passages, page 360:

"... some self-interested cynics are seeking to cloud the underlying issue of the environment with disinformation. The coal industry, for one, has been raising money in order to mount a nationwide ... advertising campaign aimed at convincing Americans that global warming is not a problem. Documents leaked from the National Coal Association

to my office reveal the depth of the cynicism involved in the campaign. For example, the strategy memorandum notes their 'target groups' as follows: 'People who respond most favorably ... are older, less-educated males from larger households, who are not typically active information-seekers ... another possible target is younger, lower-income women ... these women are good targets for magazine advertisements.'

"In order to counter entrenched interests like this one, we will have to rely on the ability of an educated citizenry to recognize propaganda for what it is. And the economic and political stakes in this battle are so high, there will be a relentless onslaught of propaganda. The key, again, will be a new public awareness of how serious is the threat to the global environment. Those who have a vested interest in the status quo will probably continue to be able to stifle any meaningful change until enough citizens who are concerned about the ecological system are willing to speak out and urge their leaders to bring the earth back into balance."

We're out of time. As I write this, as you read this, there is no ice at the North Pole. Anyone who's looking for more evidence of global warming is merely stalling. Or lying. Or both. Unless we elect leaders who recognize the problem, we don't have a chance.

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