

WHITE HEAT

By Michael Ventura

August 4, 2000

"How's the weather in Lubbock?" I asked my friend Deborah. "White heat," was her answer. Deborah said it wasn't only that the thermometer registered higher, but that the heat itself had changed. A more harsh and brutal heat. My friend and teacher George told me a few years ago that it wasn't just that the world's temperature will rise: "There'll be more degrees [of heat] and they're gonna be *different* degrees. Meaner. One more degree of this new mean heat is gonna feel like 5 or 10 degrees of the old heat."

Let's say that George's mind accesses sources of information that mine can't, but wherever his information comes from I've learned to trust it. Certainly in this case he's being proven right. And not only about the Panhandle.

The New York Times has recently reported several studies that, taken together, predict a drastic change in climates, geographies, economies, and, of course, the lives of us little people. June 12 saw the initial findings of an extensive report commissioned by the Clinton administration, which will be published in its entirety soon. This is the most widely researched effort on global warming the U.S. has yet attempted: "Scientists from dozens of government agencies, universities, private groups and industries conducted the studies and more than 300 independent reviewers offered comments."

It's been firmly established that the average temperature of the planet rose by 1 degree in the 20th century; the results of that change have become staples of daily conversation. But this report concludes that one very real possibility is that "the average temperature [in North America] would rise 5-10 degrees in the next century." According to this report, New York City will have the climate of Atlanta, and Atlanta will have the climate of Houston. The *Times* didn't go on to say what climate Houston and Austin will have, but extrapolating from their information: Austin will feel like a Mexican border down, as far as weather goes -- Del Rio or Terlingua.

The report predicts less snow for the mountains of California, which means less runoff, less water for agriculture and for the Southern California megalopolis of Los Angeles-San Diego. When you consider that roughly 25% of the national GNP comes from the total affected area of California, you're talking about major national economic impact. And that's only one area. According to the report, farmers in the Northern Plains will benefit, but Southern and Southwestern agriculture could be devastated -- and there goes the Texas economy too.

"The study says that one of the most likely of all consequences from continued warming would be coastal erosion and destructive storm surges as sea level steadily rises." Which dovetails into another report covered by the *Times* on June 28: "The Federal Emergency Management Agency said yesterday ... that a quarter or more of houses within 500 feet of the United States coast may be lost to erosion in the next 60 years." The rate of coastal homes that have to be abandoned is already 1,500 a year; in 10 years, that number is expected to rise to 10,000 a year, and that's if coastal populations stay as they are. But the agency says that 3,600 Americans a day (!) are relocating to coastal regions.

It's interesting that most studies assume that the sea level is rising and will continue to rise, but nobody seems willing to say how much or at what rate. Nobody's

sure. But, given such effects as storm surges and lunar tides, a rise of just 1-3 feet would make an enormous difference. What happens to Galveston, Houston, New Orleans, South Florida, and Manhattan? Nobody that I read is being very specific, but between the lines there's a lot going on: a likelihood of massive population, industrial, and agricultural relocations. Which will likely happen the way such things usually happen: not in a well-planned manner, but helter-skelter -- and only when things get so bad that our governmental and economic powers-that-be (not to mention the rest of us) can't avoid the truth anymore.

On July 6, the *Times'* Bob Herbert interviewed Dr. Michael Oppenheimer, described as "chief scientist of Environmental Defense," a research group, who informs us that "the northernmost part of Antarctica [has warmed] 4 and a half degrees" in the last 50 years. On July 11 the paper reported the findings of Norwegian scientists who say that "the North Pole is melting so fast that ... it could disappear entirely each summer beginning in just 50 years, radically altering the Earth's environment, the global economy, and the human imagination."

It's certainly boggling my imagination.

"Since 1978, the coverage of sea ice in winter has decreased by 6 percent, equivalent to an area roughly the size of Texas." The report went on to state: "Even a modest change in Arctic dynamics would have wrenching effects elsewhere. If the changes divert the Gulf Stream ... much of Western Europe could be plunged into an ice age."

And if even a modest change would have "wrenching effects elsewhere," what happens if the Norwegians are right and the entire Arctic icecap melts every summer? An ice age in Europe concurrent with a perennial heat wave in most of the United States? It's possible. As are events just as dire. What happens if Europe and North America, the world's two economic powerhouses, are both facing drastic socioeconomic revision and relocation at the same time? A world in chaos. A chaos that will make the 20th century's disorders look as well-mannered as a Victorian tea party.

All we need in addition is a well-aimed comet or meteor. (Pretend I didn't say that.)

Scientists the world over agree on two things: Global warming isn't coming, it's here; and it's unpredictable. Computer models can supply likely scenarios, but given only slightly different conditions the very same data indicates wildly different conclusions. For instance: Mojave desert-like heat all across the Southwest or ... "rising precipitation that could cause shrubby forests to overtake desert landscapes." Again in the Southwest, one intensity of precipitation causes new forest growth; a greater intensity of rainfall causes erosion on an almost unimaginable scale. The earth's average temperature rises 1-3 degrees, or 10! Some models predict the changes will take place over the course of nearly a century or more, others suggest a progression of changes that could multiply and feed into each other such that massive change occurs within the span of only a few years.

The forces in play are overwhelming. No government or technology is prepared to deal with, say, a major shift in the Gulf Stream -- or even to fully calculate the consequences. If the minimal predictions are right, there will be significant stress on all present human systems. If the middling or extreme predictions are right, then the story of the 21st century won't be a story of global economies spiked by computer- and biotechnology; rather it will be a story of civilization's frantic efforts to adjust to what will essentially be a new planet.

In the face of such overwhelming possibilities, both hope and hopelessness are mere preoccupations -- home entertainments for the easily distracted. The real issue may be how humanity reacts to being humbled by the planet it sought to dominate. Which values will be useful in such a transition, and which will have to be jettisoned? It's not beyond the realm of possibility that such drastic change could strip us of many a debilitating illusion and realign human society with the Nature that created it. It's well to remember that global warming hasn't come about merely through human greed, but through the incredible power of human innovation -- which is itself an expression of Nature, a natural force. We are children of the Earth, after all, so what we've done to the Earth is really something the Earth has done to itself. Which means we may still deserve a place upon it when all the changes are done.

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