

REDIRECTING THE REDIRECTED: RETURNING ATTENTION TO CLIMATE CHANGE POLICY AND PLANNING

Corporate
interests
with
strong
ties
to
conservative
politics
have
undermined



Americans' awareness and understanding about climate change. Record profits from fossil fuel businesses have been threatened by talk of reducing consumption. Rather than change their business model, these entities went on the offensive against knowledge; facts were stretched until barely recognizable, bolstered with easy untruths, and fed to the public alongside infotainment through co-opted media.

The same fossil fuel interests bought politicians who are easily led by cash infusions or manipulated through electoral scaremongering by increasingly ignorant, easily acquired political factions (hello, Tea Party).

Presto: Americans are the least likely to believe in anthropomorphic climate change, and they're likely to vote for candidates who mirror their own tractability.

But the truth has a nasty way of bitchslapping

consumers and voters until their attention is returned to the facts. Hurricane Sandy, following this past summer's wretched Dust Bowl-like drought, delivered a one-two punch to the public's consciousness. Americans are ripe right-the-hell NOW for corrective action in the form of education and effective policy.

Therein lies the problem: there is no ongoing nationwide sustained discussion on climate change reaching a critical mass of the American public, and they in turn are not demanding better, effective, and immediate policy. There's lots of hand-wringing over the damages caused by the drought and hurricane. There's discussion about improvements to emergency response (tactical), and chatter about building dikes a la Netherlands to protect New York City from future hurricanes (tactical).

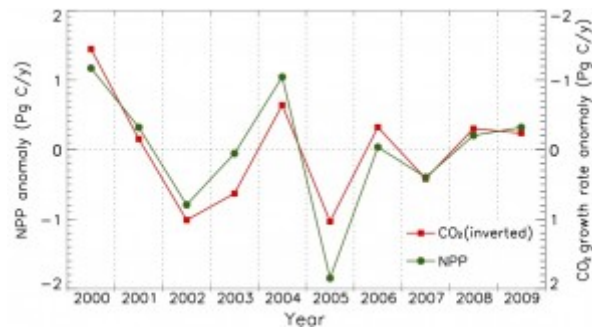
Yet there's only tactical discussion—no society-wide dialog about strategic approaches to climate change.

The challenge to the educated and aware is to change this scenario and fast. The longer it takes for the tractable to become engaged and aware, the more time fossil fuel interests have to re-poison the minds of the public before the next truth-borne bitchslapping.

One of the key threats to this process is the stickiness of misinformation. (Ugh—let's be frank, it's the persistence of the stupid.) Fossil fuel's misinfo takes two forms: deny anthropomorphic component to climate change, and corrupt understanding of climate cycles. These are not mutually exclusive, either.

The first is easy to rebut, however it takes clarity and simplicity scientists generally avoid, and media has ignored when produced.

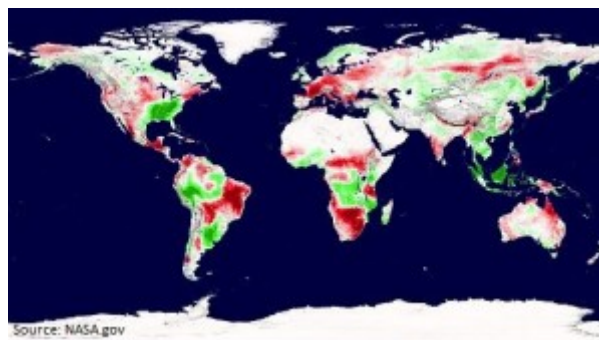
Take a look at this chart:



The relationship between plant productivity and

CO₂ is graphed here—note that the CO₂ is inverse, though. Increased CO₂ levels and subsequent related effects no longer improve plant output; it decreases it (read: decreased food outputs). Humans are the largest controllable variable when looking at global CO₂ levels; we can make it or reduce it at will.

And then this chart – note, for example, the area on South American continent where rain forests are under attack.



Red represents area with substantive plant growth

& productivity declines; green represents increases in the same. Keep in mind that plant growth in sub-alpine, alpine, and desert areas will not offset losses of more dense plant growth in tropical, sub-tropical, and moderate areas.

CO₂, a by-product of fossil fuel combustion, now increases and decreases in tandem with plant growth. Humans control the amount of plants grown or harvested—period. We plant and harvest crops around the entire world, from edible commodities to lumber. If we plant less than we harvest (ex. rain forests cut down and replaced by a lesser amount of crops), it's anticipated that CO₂ level will reflect this change based on the current trend graphed above. (One might

reasonably expect a similar shift in O₂ levels as well, modifying the percentage of atmospheric CO₂.) With adequate reversal of plant loss combined with reduction of anthropomorphic CO₂ generation, CO₂ to plant productivity may revert to a more positive relationship seen from 1982-1999.

This is simple evidence of man's impact on the planet, and specifically on climate change-inducing greenhouse gas CO₂.

Let's now refer to past history, to address the issue of climate cycles. Talking heads and think tanks funded by fossil fuel and conservative interests often push back at anthropomorphic roots of climate change by pointing to climate cycles [PDF]. In short, they ignore climate change altogether because it's natural. (Yeah, don't worry about those potato chips. They're all natural.)

But humans have seen the results of oh-so-natural climate change by cycle. In his book, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, Professor Jared Diamond looked at several societies that crashed, as well as possible causes:

Careful analysis of the frequency of droughts in the Maya area shows a tendency for them to recur at intervals of about 208 years. Those drought cycles may result from small variations in the sun's radiation, possibly made more severe in the Maya area as a result of the rainfall gradient in the Yucatan (drier in the north, wetter in the south) shifting southwards. One might expect those changes in the sun's radiation to affect not just the Maya region but, to varying degrees, the whole world. In fact, climatologists have noted that some other famous collapses of prehistoric civilizations far from the Maya realm appear to coincide with the peaks of those drought cycles, such as the collapse of the

world's first empire (the Akkadian Empire of Mesopotamia) around 2170 B.C., the collapse of the Moche IV civilization on the Peruvian coast around A.D. 600, and the collapse of the Tiwanaku civilization in the Andes around A.D. 1100.

Diamond's suspicions about the Mayans' collapse were recently validated. You'll note the recent news about the Mayans' societal collapse—climate change did them in. They abandoned their agrarian-centric way of life and moved to the beach after drought-driven downsizing and rapid de-urbanization.

(Unfortunately for us, it's not certain if there will be a recognizable beach after the loss of polar ice and the subsequent rise of ocean levels. There certainly won't be enough beach for all of us, either, assuming more folks will flee the drought-plagued heartland. And who will grow crops for us while we shift around on the beach for a new way of life?)

If Diamond was also correct that the Mayans' collapse was tied to a cyclical climate change, why aren't we talking about this cycle and what our response should be? This same 208-year cycle coincides with the de Vries-Suess solar cycle, implicated in other past climate change effects.

Do the math, it's pretty simple.

Moche IV collapse	~600 A.D.
Classic Maya drought and collapse	~600-800 A.D.
—	
Tiwanaku collapse	~1100 A.D.
—	
Great Famine, Late Middle Ages, Europe	1315-1317 A.D.
—	

30-year drought, Texas-Mexico	1450-1489 A.D.
Spanish famine	1504 A.D.
—	
Worst documented drought, Texas- Mexico	1697-1716 A.D.
Mongolian drought and intense volatility	1723-1778 A.D.
—	
Dust Bowl and drought	1934-1940 A.D.

Note these societal collapses and later major climate events occur in clusters at roughly 208-year cycles. There are other solar cycles [PDF] as well, each of which may result in climate change.

We can see these naturally occurring cycles. We can see the link between CO₂ production and human activity. They are not mutually exclusive, and frankly, the former may greatly intensify the effects of the latter. How much of the Mayans' collapse was due not only to drought, but poor resource management, overpopulation, and slow response to conditions that exacerbated the effects of drought?

At a minimum we should begin a national and global dialog about climate cycles and how we anticipate responding to their effects instead of allowing climate change denialists to use cycles as an excuse to avoid any discussion. Clearly even cycles represent catastrophic risks—we should not ignore them.

A far better approach would be a conversation conducted with a degree of urgency about climate change regardless of its natural or

anthropomorphic causes. Sticking our heads in the sand will only result in drowning as hurricanes make landfall and ocean levels rise.

Let's look at the math again: based on the 208-year de Vries-Suess cycle, the next peak should occur about 2130 A.D with conditions worsening for decades in advance as the peak approaches. If this past handful of years is any indication—and by my guess we are only half the way into the current de Vries-Suess cycle—2130 will be beyond ugly if we do not start our dialog now.

Moche-Mayan-Tiwanaku collapse ugly.

HEALTH AND WORKERS DYING TO FEED US

This article in Scientific American is unusual among the articles defending the results of the Stanford University study finding no nutritional benefit in eating organic food in that it at least mentions the people on whom pesticides have an uncontested negative effect: the workers who tend the field (though it consistently calls them “farmers,” romanticizing the labor relationship often involved).

In a section titled, “No Need to Fear,” it twice notes that “farmers” are exposed to high levels of pesticides.

To date, there is no scientific evidence that eating an organic diet leads to better health.

What of all those studies I just mentioned linking pesticides to disorders? Well, exactly *none* of them looked at pesticides from dietary intake and health in people. Instead, they involve people with high

occupational exposure (like farmers who spray pesticides) or household exposure (from gardening, etc). Judging pesticides safety by high exposures is like judging the health impacts of red wine based on alcoholics.

[snip]

The closest we have to studying the effects of diet on health are studies looking at farmers. However, farmers in general have high occupational pesticide exposures, and thus it's impossible to tease out occupational versus dietary exposure. Even still, in this high-risk group, studies simply don't find health differences between organic and conventional farmers. A UK study found that conventional farmers were just as healthy as organic ones, though the organic ones were happier.

And while the UK study—which, by its locale, leaves out some of the more dangerous chemicals used here but not in Europe—shows that organic “field and packhouse workers” were only healthier than conventional workers because they were happier, it also showed that all the 605 farm workers involved had significantly poorer health than normal in the UK.

Thus, even in an article admitting that farm workers were exposed to high amounts of chemicals that it admits are dangerous, it concludes that “there is no scientific evidence that eating an organic diet leads to better health.”

As if the health of people who work to feed me has no effect on me at all.

It reminds me of a passage from Barry Estabrook's *Tomatoland*. Three female tomato farm workers give birth within days of each other to seriously deformed children; they had worked without protection in a field sprayed with the fungicide mancozeb days before the babies were

conceived and had been sprayed with methyl bromide regularly. Lawyer Andrew Yaffa sued the owner of the field, Ag-Mart, on behalf of one of the children, a boy who had been born with no limbs and other health problems. In a deposition, Yaffa got the President of Ag-Mart to admit the chemicals used on the field caused birth defects in lab animals, but distinguished that from the birth defects of the kids born to workers who had worked without adequate protection in his field.

"So in regards to the pesticides that you use day in and day out, as you sit here today you are aware that there are, in fact, studies linking animals who are exposed to these pesticides to birth defects?"

"Yes, there are studies."

"This isn't new to you?"

"No, no, this is not new."

[snip]

"You knew for years that these pesticides were linked to birth defects in lab animals. We talked about that ... knowing the risk was there, why not be proactive and take that step before you have three women bearing children with such horrific defects?"

"Well, the three women were not all—I don't believe thta—this is my belief, so I—I—don't believe that the pesticides caused the birth defects. I believe that the pesticides have been tested to cause birth defects in animals, but I don't believe pesticides caused birth defects in those three women."

Sure, the President of Ag-Mart was playing a legal word game. But it's a word game often repeated by discussions of the dangers of pesticides, an admission that pesticides are bad for the invisible—often migratory and

undocumented—people who work to feed us, but a confidence that they nevertheless are not bad for **our** health.

As if the only effect our industrial food system has on us is via our own ingestion of the problems it brings.

JOHN BRENNAN VOWS TO COMBAT THE “BAD GUYS” ATTACKING OUR CRITICAL INFRASTRUCTURE

John Brennan just gave a speech, purportedly about our policy in Yemen. But it ended up being largely about infrastructure. That’s partly because his speech focused on how, rather than spending 75% of our Yemen funds on bombs, we’re now spending just 50% (having bumped up the total to include an equal amount development assistance). So a good part of his talk focused on whether or not Yemen would be able to do the critical work of rebuilding its infrastructure sufficient to combat AQAP which, in some areas, has done a better job of building infrastructure.

Of course as I noted while he spoke, a number of the infrastructure challenges Brennan confidently assured we could help rebuild—things like access to water—are challenges we are increasingly failing in our own country.

And then, because the DC attention span had had enough of Yemen, moderator Margaret Warner asked Brennan what the Administration will do now that their cybersecurity bills have been defeated. To justify his talk of using Executive Orders to address some of the infrastructure problems,

Brennan talked about the “bad guys” who posed a cyberthreat to our critical infrastructure.

Nowhere did Brennan acknowledge the much more immediate threat to our critical infrastructure: in the corporations and politics that let it decline. PG&E and Enbridge, failing to invest the money to fix known defects in their pipelines. Fracking companies, depleting and degrading our water supply. Verizon, eliminating choice for Internet access for rural customers. Republicans who want to gut our Postal Service and passenger rail. And heck, even Fat Al Gore and climate change, which is not only depleting our water supply but stalling key water transport routes.

Brennan promises to help rebuild Yemen’s infrastructure. But not only can’t he implement his plan against the bogeyman “bad buys” threatening our infrastructure, he seems completely unaware that those “bad guys” aren’t anywhere near the biggest threat to our infrastructure.

Don’t get me wrong. I applaud the Administration’s decision to dedicate money to Yemen’s infrastructure, even if I think a 50/50 split, aid to bombs, is still woefully inadequate. But until we begin to see what “bad guys” pose the biggest threat to our own infrastructure, I’m skeptical our efforts in Yemen will be any more successful than they were in Iraq or Afghanistan.

**IS OBAMA WORRIED
THAT FAT AL GORE’S
DROUGHT WILL**

THREATEN HIS REELECTION?



I'm beginning to wonder whether Obama is worried the drought—particularly in the Midwest—could imperil his reelection campaign. I say that because he seems to be avoiding addressing it on the campaign trail. (Compare that to the way he has addressed other tragedies, such as his well-received conversations with the victims of the Aurora shooting.)

To the best of my knowledge, this July 18 photo is as close as Obama has gotten to publicly expressing concern about the drought. And in a press briefing on the drought the same day, both participants—Tom Vilsack and Jay Carney—avoided addressing questions about whether Obama would visit drought affected areas.

Q Secretary, should we be expecting that you and the President will be heading to a drought-stricken area soon? That's normally a path that you take when you're trying to show something is a priority.

SECRETARY VILSACK: Well, I can't speak obviously for the President's schedule, but I can tell you that actually I was in Pennsylvania yesterday. We do have the Deputy Secretary going to Georgia tomorrow. We've got the Under Secretary of the Farm Service Association traveling to several states that are

drought-impacted and affected.

[snip]

Q Is the President going, Jay, to go anywhere –

MR. CARNEY: I don't have any scheduling updates for the President to provide to you today. If and when I do, I'll provide them.

Now, I'm not trying to concern troll about the President's schedule, in the way Republicans are criticizing Obama for not meeting with his Jobs Council. Nor am I saying Obama's not responding to the drought; the USDA has been making low-cost loans available to those in areas declared a disaster, as well as certain other things that may provide immediate if not long-term relief.

Rather, I'm raising it because I really do think it might affect the election. Consider how many swing states are affected by the drought (conditions have gotten better in MI of late).



And while IA has not been included among the counties in which Vilsack has declared a disaster, its corn harvest has been affected (with 40% deemed poor or very poor on July 22). And their livestock will be affected as well.

All that's before food prices go up in time for the election. Vilsack seemed to try to insulate the Administration from responsibility for that in the same July 18 press conference.

The question that a lot of folks are asking is what will the impact be on food prices. Because livestock producers will begin the process of potentially reducing their herds in light of higher feed costs, we would anticipate in the short term actually food prices for beef, poultry, pork may go down a bit, but over time they will rise. We will probably see those higher prices later this year, first part of next year. Processed foods obviously impacted by crop yields, and we will likely see the increase of that also in 2013.

It's important to note that farmers only receive 14 cents of every food dollar that goes through the grocery store, so even though prices on commodities increase significantly, it doesn't necessarily translate into large increases for food prices. And if, in fact, people are beginning to see food price increases now, it is not in any way, shape, or form, related to the drought. And we should be very careful to keep an eye on that to make sure that people do not take advantage of a very difficult and painful situation.

Though he didn't address speculation—which drove up prices in 2008 and which the Administration has not done enough to fix.

The whole thing reminds me how a year ago the President wouldn't brag about the auto bailout (because it did not yet poll well; though predictably it now polls better) nor the energy jobs his Administration supported (presumably because of the Solyndra faux scandal).

While leads me to wonder whether he's afraid to open up the question of climate change. Vilsack, at least, refused to address it in that press conference, effectively saying that Monsanto would save us all.

Q Could you talk a little bit about the drought itself? Is it very unusual? Did anyone see it coming? Is it from climate change? Is there anything you can do to prepare?

SECRETARY VILSACK: I'm not a scientist so I'm not going to opine as to the cause of this. All we know is that right now there are a lot of farmers and ranchers who are struggling. And it's important and necessary for them to know, rather than trying to focus on what's causing this, what can we do to help them. And what we can do to help them is lower interest rates, expand access to grazing and haying opportunities, lower the penalties associated with that, and encourage Congress to help and work with us to provide additional assistance. And that's where our focus is.

Long term, we will continue to look at weather patterns, and we'll continue to do research and to make sure that we work with our seed companies to create the kinds of seeds that will be more effective in dealing with adverse weather conditions.

It's one of the reasons – because they have done that, it's one of the reasons why we're still uncertain as to the impact of this drought in terms of its bottom line because some seeds are drought-resistant and drought-tolerant, and it may be that the yields in some cases are better than we'd expected because of the seed technology. [snip]

Q Mr. Secretary, I want to follow through on the climate change question. Is there any long-range thinking at the Department that – you had the wildfires and the heat wave and the rise in sea levels, and now this drought – that there's something more going on here

than just one year of a bad crop, and you need more than better seeds, maybe do something about climate change?

SECRETARY VILSACK: Our focus, to be honest with you, in a situation like this is on the near term and the immediate, because there's a lot of pressure on these producers. You take the dairy industry, for example. We've lost nearly half of our dairy producers in the last 10 years. They were just getting back to a place where there was profitability and now they're faced with some serious issues and, again, no assistance in terms of disaster assistance.

So that's our near-term focus. Long term, we obviously are engaged in research projects; we're obviously working with seed companies. Don't discount the capacity of the seed companies. These technologies do make a difference. And it's one of the reasons why, at least based on the yields today, we're looking at potentially the third largest corn crop in our history. Now, that may be adjusted downward, it may be adjusted upward – depends on the rain, depends on circumstances. But even with the difficulties we're experiencing, we're still looking at a pretty good crop as of today. Tomorrow it could change, obviously.

Now maybe my instinct is incorrect and this won't affect the campaign, either directly or indirectly. Maybe the Administration is gambling they can offer sufficient short term relief in IA and other must-win states to stave off the political effect of this drought until after the election. Maybe the Administration is just waiting a few weeks to get a better sense whether the dire predictions about the drought come true.

But for the moment, let me just register surprise that the campaign has been as silent about the drought as it has.

THE ONLY TERRIFYING MATH THAT GETS ANY ATTENTION IS DEFENSE SPENDING

Bill McKibben had a long piece on climate change this week, "Global Warming's Terrifying New Math," that has justifiably gotten a lot of attention. The terrifying math of the title is this:

- Almost the entire world agreed in 2009 that we must keep global temperature increases below 2°C
- Since then, the 0.8°C increase in temperature we've hit has brought far more damage than scientists expected
- Humans can introduce no more than 565 gigatons of carbon into the atmosphere if they want to keep the temperature from rising that 2°C which now seems too high
- Fossil fuel companies already have in reserve—and plan to develop—2,795 gigatons of carbon fuels

The math means, McKibben explains, that to keep global warming within the consensus but already too high limit of 2°C, we've got to find some way to force the fossil fuel companies not to develop their existing reserves.

At this point, effective action would require actually keeping most of the carbon the fossil-fuel industry wants to burn safely in the soil, not just changing slightly the speed at which it's burned.

[snip]

According to the Carbon Tracker report, if Exxon burns its current reserves, it would use up more than seven percent of the available atmospheric space between us and the risk of two degrees. BP is just behind, followed by the Russian firm Gazprom, then Chevron, ConocoPhillips and Shell, each of which would fill between three and four percent. Taken together, just these six firms, of the 200 listed in the Carbon Tracker report, would use up more than a quarter of the remaining two-degree budget. Severstal, the Russian mining giant, leads the list of coal companies, followed by firms like BHP Billiton and Peabody. The numbers are simply staggering – this industry, and this industry alone, holds the power to change the physics and chemistry of our planet, and they're planning to use it.

From this McKibben proposes a solution: Tax carbon to make it cost prohibitive to develop these reserves. To tax carbon you've got to undercut the fossil fuel industry's power, and to do that you've got to villainize them, but heck that's easy because they really are villains, since their business model will kill the planet. And so a movement like the South African divestment campaign can make it toxic to own fossil fuel stocks.

That's a gross oversimplification—please do read the full article for a nuanced version.

Now, there's nothing in the article that I disagree with. I'm all for making fossil fuel companies pay for the waste their industry creates. I'm all in favor of villainizing them to make that more likely.

But I'll note that McKibben doesn't utter the words that would both make it easier to villainize the fossil fuel industry and explains some of the underlying reasons why that's not going to be enough.

"National security." Or even "security."

In that silence, McKibben is a mirror image of the same fault in Obama's own strategy and discussions more generally about threats to this country, even fairly realistic ones.

Sure, all the details McKibben cites about evident and likely effects of climate change imply this is a security issue: 356 homes gone in Colorado Springs, spiking food prices, even entire countries disappearing.

But until we start using the language of national security, we won't properly demonstrate the treachery of those who refuse to deal with this. It is politically toxic not to treat terrorism (a far tinier threat to our country) as a war, but no one pays a political price for ignoring the much graver threat climate change poses to our country and way of life. And yet refusing to do things to protect against climate change are similar to Bush telling a CIA briefer, "you've covered your ass," while ignoring the hair-on-fire warnings about an imminent al Qaeda attack.

Furthermore, thinking of this in terms of national security gets at some of the underlying reasons behind what McKibben labels as the hypocrisy of the governing elite. Why does Hillary fight for Arctic drilling rights on the same trip when she bemoans visible climate damage in Norway; why does Obama approve Shell

drilling in the Arctic even while paying greater lip service to climate change than previous Presidents? Because the US believes increasing our own reserves is necessary to minimize the risk that Middle East volatility will threaten our hegemony. Why does Hugo Chavez preach Rosa Luxemburg while developing the Orinoco? Because not only do petro-politics keep Chavez politically viable in his own country, but it's the leverage Bolivarian regimes have used to foster a populism that challenges the Washington consensus.

Even McKibben falls into this trap. He suggests if we tax carbon China and India will follow.

At this point, what happens in the U.S. is most important for how it will influence China and India, where emissions are growing fastest.

But he makes that suggestion at a time when the Administration's claimed primary strategic goal (it's not: they're still fighting for stability and access to resources in the Middle East and Africa) is an "Asian pivot" to combat China's challenge to US hegemony. But given that the Administration explicitly regards Chinese competition as a greater threat than losing entire towns to extreme weather and the destabilizing effects of spiking prices in our core crop, what are the chances that we'll tax carbon to set a good example for China?

The fossil fuel companies' imperative to find and develop ever more carbon reserves stems not just from a desire to deliver astronomical profits for its stockholders. On the contrary, even more, it stems from the partnership between our government and oil that presumes that oil is the cornerstone of our national security.

And yet that supposed cornerstone of our national security is leading to more deaths and property damage within the US than China or Islamic terrorists or cyberattacks put together (though the wars we're fighting in the name of

combating Islamic terrorism are definitely causing a greater number of deaths and destruction overseas, though climate change probably has war on terrorism beat there too).

Climate change isn't even among the threats considered a national security threat (though some of our national security experts study how it will exacerbate all other threats, though primarily overseas). Until it is, we're never going to even balance the danger of fossil fuel production as a trade off that must be weighed in other national security decisions, to say nothing of generating the kind of urgency that will keep that oil and coal in the ground.

Update: I originally our wars on terror have killed more people in other countries than climate change. Given climate change related famine, that's probably not true (or soon no longer will be), even considering the larger estimates of Iraqi casualties.

OBAMA BRINGS BANKSTER AND OIL CURSES TO BURMA

After I read Obama's Executive Order opening up trade with Burma, I joked,

Wait. We're exporting FINANCIAL SERVICES to Myanmar? This is considered a favor to them?

Seriously. Sending our financial services to another country is, these days, the equivalent of bombing them.

Just as—probably more—troubling though are the concerns Josh Rogin lays out about Obama green-lighting investment in the Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise, off of which the military profits.

[Aung San] Suu Kyi, who was elected to Burma's parliament in April after more than two decades of house arrest, last month specifically asked foreign governments not to allow their companies to partner with MOGE at this time.

"The Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise (MOGE) ... with which all foreign participation in the energy sector takes place through joint venture arrangements, lacks both transparency and accountability at present," she said June 14 in a speech in Geneva. "The [Myanmar] government needs to apply internationally recognized standards such as the IMF code of good practices on fiscal transparency. Other countries could help by not allowing their own companies to partner [with] MOGE unless it was signed up to such codes."

The Obama administration has repeatedly said that it would follow Suu Kyi's lead while cautiously opening up to closer ties with the Burmese regime. The new U.S. ambassador to Burma **Derek Mitchell** arrived there today.

[snip]

Following a Deputies Committee meeting last week, the side that advocated for a broader repeal of the investment ban won out. That side included the State Department's East Asian and Pacific affairs bureau (EAP), led by Assistant Secretary **Kurt Campbell**, the economics office at State led by Undersecretary **Robert Hormats**, and the Treasury and Commerce departments.

While the Treasury version of today's news imposes human rights (but not profit) controls on investments over \$500,000 and threatens sanctions on anyone threatening the peace in Burma (this is akin to the sanctions passed on

Yemen),

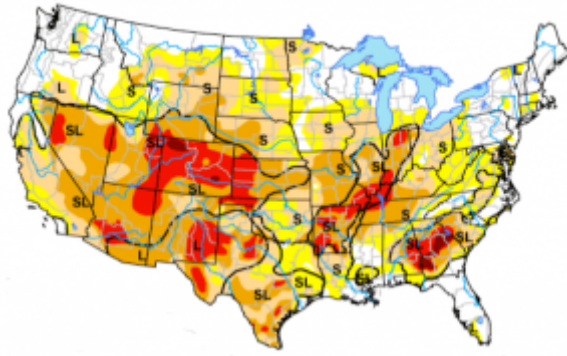
The order provides new authority to impose blocking sanctions on persons determined by the Secretary of the Treasury, in consultation with or at the recommendation of the Secretary of State: to have engaged in acts that directly or indirectly threaten the peace, security, or stability of Burma, such as actions that have the purpose or effect of undermining or obstructing the political reform process or the peace process with ethnic minorities in Burma;

Ultimately, it's Treasury—one of the entities that overrode the human rights advocates in this debate and has proven unable to regulate our own bankers—that gets to decide what constitutes peace.

There's a very long, almost universal history of bad outcomes associated with big investments in oil. And yet the only safeguard Obama has put in place to prevent the oil curse from spoiling this really superb development—the opening of Burma—is the diligence of the Treasury Department that refuses to even reign in our own cursed industries.

FAT AL GORE COLLUDES WITH BANKSTERS IN THE MIDWEST

There's an ominous storm brewing in flyover country that may amount to little more than higher food and fuel prices, or may amount to something else.



First there's the drought. Last week's heat wave and the last month's dry weather hit just as much of America's corn crop was set to pollinate. And if the corn doesn't pollinate, it never grows kernels. Even as I've been writing this post, USDA sharply cut forecasts for the corn harvest.

As a result, corn prices (soy prices too) are rising sharply. Which will, for better and worse, have repercussions on all the aspects of our super-processed life that relies on corn.

"The drought of 2012 will be one for the records," said Peter Meyer, the senior director for agricultural commodities at PIRA Energy Group in New York, who forecasts a drop in output to 11 billion bushels if the hot, dry spell lasts another three weeks. "Whether it's ethanol or livestock, no one is immune from this impending disaster. The ramifications will be widespread, affecting everything from your food to your gasoline."

And all that's before any follow-on effects, if the drought continues. Even in Grand Rapids, we've had some unusual fires. Rivers that were experiencing historic floods last year are approaching record lows this year; traffic on the Mississippi has already slowed.

Yet all that—even with our country’s industrialized reliance on corn—might be no more concerning than other droughts, such last year’s drought in Texas.

Meanwhile, banksters keep stealing farmers’ money—first via MF Global and now with Peregrine.

The U.S. futures industry reeled as regulators accused Iowa-based PFGBest of misappropriating more than \$200 million in customer funds for more than two years, a new blow to trader trust just months after MF Global’s collapse.

Centered in the heart of farm belt, the firm handled agricultural futures accounts for a number of clients who grow corn, soybeans and cotton.

“For the farmers who are directly affected it can be a very severe financial blow,” said Dave Miller, director of research for the Iowa Farm Bureau.

[snip]

Doug McClelland, who runs Plains Commodities, a one-man brokerage in Lincoln, Nebraska, with about \$500,000 in accounts at PFGBest, said three of his farmer customers had already sworn off futures trading after first losing money to MF Global.

Initially, the customers said, “We’ll give it one more shot,” McClelland said. Traders and exchange officials have said the collapse of MF Global does not seem to cast a lasting chill over market activity. Now, says McClelland, they feel that “somehow the public’s money is becoming a depository for a CEO.”

I’m sure the percentage of farmers affected by these two scandals is relatively small. But farmers are one of the groups for whom futures

really do serve an important purpose, but trust is likely to crumble quickly after these two scandals.

Note, this article quotes Debbie Stabenow talking tough about fixing this problem; having Stabenow Chair the Ag Committee is far better than the alternative on a number of fronts, but getting tough with banksters—particularly in an election year—is not one of them.

Then there's this. While the rest of the real estate market was in doldrums in the last few years, the Midwest has had a farmland bubble based in part on banksters' need to invest somewhere but also on farmers' revised assumptions about the profitability of farms based on the same crops being affected by the drought.

Part of what has economists and rural bankers on edge is that Midwest farm prices are climbing at rates last seen in the go-go 1970s, the period that set the stage for the farmland bust of the 1980s, when prices sank by half. The bust ignited a rural crisis that pushed many farmers out of business and hundreds of their banks to the brink of collapse.

"Land prices are too high. Things are getting out of whack" said Michael Swanson, an economist at banking giant Wells Fargo & Co. He figures that Midwest farmers have historically bought an acre of land for the value of corn it can produce over four years. Now, an acre of land easily fetches six years of crop production—at a time when crop prices are well above historical averages.

The Federal Reserve issued a memo to farm bankers in late October warning that the market for cropland "may reflect overly optimistic long-term expectations" and that land values would

fall if interest rates increase abruptly and farm profits shrink.

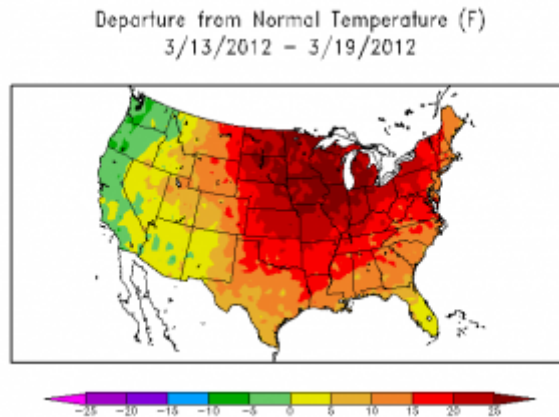
Land values are soaring again because prices for crops such as corn and soybeans are more than double what they were before mid-2006. That is thanks in large part to a surge in demand for food from China's expanding middle class and the rapid emergence of a corn-to-ethanol industry, which now gobbles up 40% of the nation's corn crop and supplies about 10% of the nation's gasoline. The Department of Agriculture estimates that net farm income, a widely used measure of profitability, will jump 28% this year from 2010, to \$100.9 billion.

I, frankly, have no fucking clue how the drought and futures crisis will affect the bubble (which really continued until early this year). But you need crops to make farmland—particularly expensive farmland—pay off. And a lot of farmers aren't going to have their expected crops this year.

As I said, all this may amount to no more than another big spike in food prices, with all the detrimental effects that will have on those struggling in this terrible economy.

But a lot of the states where this storm is brewing also happen to be the swing states where the Presidential election will be decided (to say nothing of the western drought-affected states like CO where this has manifested as massive wildfires). So it may well have repercussions beyond just the farmers who stand to lose their farms and the poor people who will struggle to pay for food.

WHY DOES FAT AL GORE HATE FLOWER FESTIVALS?



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an unseasonably warm DC and returning to even warmer temperatures here in MI, I felt it deserves a post.

In DC all weekend, people were enjoying the gorgeous cherry blossoms, but bemoaning the fact that the peak bloom pretty much has preceded the Cherry Blossom Festival. Now in Holland, MI, they're facing the likelihood that not even moving up its Tulip Fest will ensure there are still blooms on the stems come May.

It is 85 degrees here at the moment (though there's a pleasant breeze coming off the river), and predicted to climb higher. Tomorrow it is predicted to break 90. Nine. Zero. In March. In MI.

(If posts are thin tomorrow, you can presume McCaffrey the MilleniaLab and I have gone to the beach.)

As the map above makes clear, temperatures this week are 25 degrees above where they're supposed to be this time of year.

And while I realize Mr. Pricky Cactus will show up and boast about how hot and dry it is in AZ, things are just so far outside of the norm here it's creepy (though pleasant). Wunderblogs notes that some of the the "coldest places" in the

nation are setting repeated record highs.

Summer in March continues for the Midwest

The ongoing March heat wave in the Midwest will continue to set all-time heat records through Thursday, gradually shifting its peak intensity eastwards during the week. A few highlights from yesterday's records:

Pellston, Michigan in the Northern Lower Peninsula is called "Michigan's Icebox", since it frequently records the coldest temperatures in the state, and in the entire nation. But the past three days, Pellston has topped out at 80° – 82°F, the first 80°F March days in their history. Yesterday's 82° reading broke the previous record for the date (56° in 1976) by an **amazing 26°**, and was 44°F above average. Nearby Traverse City hit 83°F yesterday, the third consecutive day the city has experienced its hottest March temperature on record.

International Falls, Minnesota hit 78°F yesterday, 42° above average, and the 2nd hottest March temperature on record in the Nation's Icebox. The record of 79°F was set the previous day.

Remarkably, the low temperature for International Falls bottomed out at 60°F yesterday, tying the previous record high for the date. I've never seen a station with a century-long data record have its low temperature for the date match the previous record high for the date. Yesterday was the seventh consecutive day that International Falls broke or tied a daily record. That is spectacularly hard to do for a station with a century-long weather record. The longest string of consecutive records being broken I'm aware of is nine days in a row, set June 2 – 10, 1911 in Tulsa, Oklahoma (with weather records

going back to 1905.) International Falls has a good chance of surpassing nine consecutive records this week.

And MoJo's Julia Whitty had more here earlier in the week.

I'm loving having summer on the first day of spring and all, but at some point we need to get serious about climate change.

CLEAR AND PRESENT CLIMATE BLINDNESS

This Micah Zenko and Michael Cohen essay, attacking the "threat inflation" in foreign affairs, is generating a lot of buzz. DDay wrote about it here, and Paul Pillar has a worthwhile addition here. At one level, I'm positively thrilled that this sentiment is being expressed in the bible of the foreign policy establishment, Foreign Affairs.

Within the foreign policy elite, there exists a pervasive belief that the post-Cold War world is a treacherous place, full of great uncertainty and grave risks. A 2009 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press found that 69 percent of members of the Council on Foreign Relations believed that for the United States at that moment, the world was either as dangerous as or more dangerous than it was during the Cold War. Similarly, in 2008, the Center for American Progress surveyed more than 100 foreign policy experts and found that 70 percent of them believed that the world was becoming more dangerous. Perhaps more than any other idea, this belief shapes debates on U.S. foreign policy

and frames the public's understanding of international affairs.

There is just one problem. It is simply wrong. The world that the United States inhabits today is a remarkably safe and secure place. It is a world with fewer violent conflicts and greater political freedom than at virtually any other point in human history. All over the world, people enjoy longer life expectancy and greater economic opportunity than ever before. The United States faces no plausible existential threats, no great-power rival, and no near-term competition for the role of global hegemon. The U.S. military is the world's most powerful, and even in the middle of a sustained downturn, the U.S. economy remains among one of the world's most vibrant and adaptive. Although the United States faces a host of international challenges, they pose little risk to the overwhelming majority of American citizens and can be managed with existing diplomatic, economic, and, to a much lesser extent, military tools.

But there's just one problem with their argument. "It is simply wrong."

This is an over 5,000-word article, 16 pages long.

And while Zenko and Cohen discuss non-military threats—primarily health and economics and cybersecurity—they **[update (see below)—almost]** never discuss climate change.

That's largely a reflection of the paradigm of foreign policy. After all, climate change doesn't pose a unique, comparative threat to the US. It's a real, pressing threat to the entire globe at once.

But that doesn't mean the US—and every other country—is as safe as Zenko and Cohen claim. It just means the risk—one that transcends

boundaries and nationalities, though is exacerbated by the latter—doesn't fit the framework foreign policy wonks work under. And until the foreign policy community gets that climate change should be today's key foreign policy issue—one that will disrupt the current paradigm of international relations, sure, but as such (particularly given all the very legitimate points Zenko and Cohen make about other threats) really ought to represent an opportunity as well as an imperative.

Update: I apologize to Zenko and Cohen: They do too mention climate change: once, in the following passage.

Indeed, the most lamentable cost of unceasing threat exaggeration and a focus on military force is that the main global challenges facing the United States today are poorly resourced and given far less attention than “sexier” problems, such as war and terrorism. **These include climate change**, pandemic diseases, global economic instability, and transnational criminal networks—all of which could serve as catalysts to severe and direct challenges to U.S. security interests. But these concerns are less visceral than alleged threats from terrorism and rogue nuclear states. They require long-term planning and occasionally painful solutions, and they are not constantly hyped by well-financed interest groups. As a result, they are given short shrift in national security discourse and policymaking. [my emphasis]

My point still stands though: Climate change is not a catalyst to severe challenges, it is in fact, itself, a challenge (and also contributes to instability and migration and food insecurity which will be catalysts to insecurity).

So I apologize to Zenko and Cohen for accusing them of being “blind,” though I still think the

claim that no real threats face the US to be “simply wrong.” And thanks to Cohen for alerting me of my initial error.

I ALWAYS HATED PINK, ANYWAY

From when I was 6 until I was 16, in two different houses, my bedroom was painted pink. I don’t think I ever liked the color, but I learned to



loathe it along the way, even if it was just my parents’ half-hearted attempt to encourage me to be girly.

But I suspect that’s only a part of the reason why, as a breast cancer survivor, I learned to hate the pink ribbons purportedly serving my interests.

It may have been when Eureka developed an ad campaign around the pink ribbon. I was less than thrilled that Eureka tried to use my cancer as a reason to sell women more vacuum cleaners along with their stale gender stereotypes.

But I think the moment when I most realized that the cancer industry was about turning breast cancer patients into profit centers came when I went to a Komen-funded Young Survival Coalition conference. The organization itself—focused on breast cancer resources for those diagnosed under the age of 40—was a godsend. But the conference insisted on calling us patients and survivors “customers.”

Customers, I thought (as I got the swag bag full of drug marketing gimmicks). I'm a customer because I have cancer?

Though we conference attendees had our revenge at the session sponsored by Genentech, the maker of the anti-nausea drug Kytril. As the speaker thanked "Genentech, maker of Kytril," someone yelled out "it doesn't work." And another. Then me. And another. And another. It took getting a bunch of us in a room together to compare notes and learn that a bunch of us found the \$50/pill medicine to be less effective than older drugs.


You have to be a shrewd customer to survive cancer without getting fleeced.

Komen just pretended to reverse its decision defund Planned Parenthood's cancer screening services (it promises only to consider PP applications in the future, not to fund them). And, as Greg Sargent reports, they deny that Nancy Brinker did anything wrong.

But now that everyone has become aware of Komen's sleaziness, it's time to look at what they—and the cancer industry—do more generally. They fund efforts to diagnose and find a cure but—as this excellent diary describes—they work against things like prevention. They also tend to push back against research that shows we've been over-diagnosing and over-treating breast cancer. (I know such studies are controversial, but as someone who learned only after my treatment that European countries would have treated my case very differently, for a fraction of the cost and invasiveness, but with statistically equivalent outcomes, I take them seriously.)

One of the leading breast cancer doctors and advocates, Susan Love, had this to say Tuesday.

Rather than putting politics into the breast cancer movement, lets rise above the political divisions and work together. Let's redirect all the money that will be spent on investigating Planned Parenthood into funding studies



looking to find the cause and prevent the disease once and for all. Let's redirect our anger to making mammograms unnecessary because we know how to prevent the disease.

We ought to use this scandal to examine more closely where cancer money gets spent—on treatment, turning cancer patients into customers—and rarely on prevention.

While I appreciate the gesture, pink ribbons to me have come to symbolize cancer patients as profit centers, both for consumer goods capitalizing on an association with the goodwill (and Komen), as well as for ungodly expensive drugs that don't always provide better outcomes. They've come to symbolize the same kind of passive compliance I think of when I remember those damn pink walls.

It's time we aspired to stopping cancer, not just throwing tons of increasingly expensive drugs and consumer products at it. And that, in turn, means finding some other entity besides Komen to take the lead.