Op-Ed

Webs of Denial: Climate Change and the Challenge to Public Health

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IN AN INTERVIEW WITH *THE NEW YORK TIMES* ON SEPTEMBER 8, 2016, President Barack Obama reflected on what “he believes . . . will be the most consequential legacy of his presidency.” It wasn’t progress in destroying ISIS or efforts to bring peace to the Middle East; nor was it marriage equality, the Affordable Care Act, or his steady hand in bringing the nation out of recession. Rather, it was his struggles to slow global warming—the inexorable, slow-moving process he considered “the greatest long-term threat facing the world.” The president eloquently spoke of the potential political and social unrest caused by the dislocation of a billion people living in countries threatened by rising sea levels, droughts, intense heat waves, global pollution, new patterns of epidemic disease, and other health risks. Together, these could destabilize the most modern industrial society.¹

Obama echoed some of the same points illustrated in a sobering study by the US Global Research Program titled “The Impacts of Climate Change on Human Health in the United States.” “Climate change,” the report argues, “can . . . affect human health in 2 main ways . . . first, by changing the severity of . . . respiratory diseases and cardiovascular diseases due to air pollution; second, by creating unprecedented or unanticipated health problem . . . in places where they have not previously occurred.”²

This past summer, a group of 19 Democratic senators led by Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI) focused on the political reasons why emergency action has stalled. On July 11 and 12, just days before the Senate adjourned on July 15, they spoke about the “dozens of shadowy organizations” that, according to Senator Harry Reid, “are waging a campaign to mislead the public and undermine American leadership on climate change.”

The goal of these organizations, Reid argues, is to destroy the Paris climate agreement and erode support for “clean air initiatives across the country.”^{3(p1)}

Whitehouse has spoken to the Senate on this issue more than 140 times. He often describes the “web of denial” tactics first employed by the tobacco and lead industries. For example, Whitehouse identified several industry-sponsored “research centers” with soothing names like the Franklin Center for Government and Public Integrity, which features a “nice little silhouette of Ben Franklin on its logo”; the James Madison Institute, a libertarian think tank; the John Locke Foundation; and the Thomas Jefferson Institute and called them “very shady . . . front groups in the web of denial . . . [promoters of] preposterous nonsense.”^{3(pp142-153)}

Senators Elizabeth Warren and Tim Kaine added other groups to this list, saying that the Science and Public Policy Institute is ostensibly dedicated to “sound public policy based on sound science”^{3(p26)} but whose publications are neither “sound” nor scientific. Senator Edward Markey, the dean of the Senate’s environmentalist bloc, reviewed the long history of climate change denial, going back to before the Reagan administration.^{3(pp126-141)} The power behind this pollution of science and academia are, according to Reid, “David and Charles Koch and the shadowy groups they fund.” Reid argued that the Kochs “have a simple agenda—to promote their own interests at everyone else’s expense.”^{3(p1)}

Why should we bother worrying about this misuse—or, rather, corruption—of academic and scientific endeavors? Perhaps Senator Charles Schumer of New York summed it up best: “It matters because this private sector-funded research is being used to give the false impression that there is a legitimate academic debate about climate change, and then that debate is used by colleagues as an excuse for no action.”^{3(p43)}

This is only a short summary of the long history of industry attempts to obfuscate climate science, deny scientific evidence, and create doubt. In the name of transparency, I want to note that Gerald Markowitz and I have been the focus of other tactics used to shut out dissent. So my views on the matter are very strong. Nevertheless, I want to let readers know of a useful website that allows scholars access to millions of corporate documents about pollution and environmental diseases not previously available. Readers can judge for themselves how polluting industries react to bad news about their products. The Center for the History and Ethics of Public Health at Columbia University and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, through the skilled technical help of Professor Merlin Chowkwanyun, have launched www.toxicdocs.org, a collection of internal corporate memos, letters,

and reports gathered through a variety of discovery proceedings in lawsuits over occupational and environmental damage.

If we don't educate ourselves, if we don't educate our students, we will be complicit in Senator Schumer's assessment: "Anyone who participates in this [effort to obscure truths] should be ashamed of themselves. . . . Shame."^{3(p44)}

References

1. Davis JH, Landler M, Davenport C. "Terrifying" path of climate change weighs on Obama. *New York Times*. September 8, 2016:A1. <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/08/us/politics/obama-climate-change.html>. Accessed September 9, 2016.
2. US Global Change Research Project. *The Impacts of Climate Change on Human Health in the United States: A Scientific Assessment*. Washington, DC: US Global Change Research Program; April 2016. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7930/J0R49NQX>. Published 2016. Accessed September 9, 2016.
3. Office of Senator Sheldon Whitehouse. Senators call out web of denial blocking action on climate change. <https://www.whitehouse.senate.gov/news/release/senators-call-out-web-of-denial-blocking-action-on-climate-change>. July 11-12, 2016. Remarks are available in print form through the office of Senator Sheldon Whitehouse.

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