

WILL WE MUSTER THE POLITICAL WILL TO COMBAT THE EFFECTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE, BEFORE IT IS TOO LATE

Oliver Milman, writing in the Guardian this past weekend (“[After America's summer of extreme weather; 'next year may be worse'](#)”), succinctly captured what he described as our strange, cruel summer: “A relentless barrage of extreme weather events, fueled by human-caused global heating, has swept the North American continent..., routinely placing a third of the US population under warnings of severe heat and unleashing floods, fire and smoke upon communities, with a record 15 separate disasters causing at least \$1bn in damages so far this year.”

The “parade of horrors” with which we have become all too familiar includes:

- over 5,800 wildfires that have destroyed over 15 million hectares (close to 59,000 square miles) in Canada that led to smoky, polluted air in much of the United States;
- the warmest July on record in Arizona, Florida, Maine and New Mexico, while an additional 13 states saw their top-10 warmest July on record;
- 31 consecutive days of temperatures above 110°F in Phoenix;
- school closures due to heat in Wisconsin, Colorado and Iowa;
- 46 consecutive days of temperatures above 100°F in Miami and coastal waters off Florida described as “hot tubs”;
- the devastating wildfires in Maui representing the deadliest disaster of its kind in nearly a century;
- Arizona, Idaho and Minnesota each had their third-driest July on record, while California and New Mexico had one of their top-10 driest Julys on record. Connecticut and Vermont experienced their second-wettest July on record. Massachusetts, Michigan, New Hampshire, New York, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania and Rhode Island all had a July ranking among top-10 wettest on record,
- record rainfall in Los Angeles caused by the first tropical storm in decades to hit a region more recently typically ravaged by drought and wildfires; and
- flooding in Detroit and Vermont, destroying homes, businesses and infrastructure in what the Vermont governor termed “historic and catastrophic.”

Global daily and monthly temperatures in July were the [hottest](#) recorded in modern times, leading [some experts](#) to conclude that July was probably the hottest month in 120,000 years. According to the [World Meteorological Organization](#), as of July, sea ice was the lowest on record, and for the fourth consecutive month, the global ocean surface temperature hit a record high.

And the list goes on, and so do warnings that, going forward extreme, weather events will be more frequent and more severe. That means wildfires will be more intense and will spread farther (driven by heat and drought), storms will be more severe, and heatwaves will be more intense and will last longer. Extreme weather events will continue to hit

areas that historically did not experience such events. No area on Earth is likely to be spared.

The cause is clear: As Andrea Thompson, [writing](#) in Scientific American, notes, “The [July] records are primarily linked to overall rising global temperatures from the excess heat trapped in the atmosphere by humans burning fossil fuels. An analysis published last month by the [World Weather Attribution](#) group found that the heatwaves in North America and Europe were “virtually impossible” without climate change. It also found that the heatwave in China was 50 times more likely to occur in our current warmer world. All three heatwaves were hotter than they would have been without the boost from global warming.”

The UN’s [International Panel on Climate Change](#) (“IPCC”), in what may be its [final warning](#) issued in March, stated, based on the fourth installment (the [synthesis](#) of the three prior installments) of its sixth assessment report:

“In 2018, IPCC highlighted the unprecedented scale of the challenge required to keep warming to 1.5°C. Five years later, that challenge has become even greater due to a continued increase in greenhouse gas emissions. The pace and scale of what has been done so far, and current plans, are insufficient to tackle climate change.

More than a century of burning fossil fuels as well as unequal and unsustainable energy and land use has led to global warming of 1.1°C above pre-industrial levels. This has resulted in more frequent and more intense extreme weather events that have caused increasingly dangerous impacts on nature and people in every region of the world.

Every increment of warming results in rapidly escalating hazards. More intense heatwaves, heavier rainfall and other weather extremes further increase risks for human health and ecosystems. In every region, people are dying from extreme heat. Climate-driven food and water insecurity is expected to increase with increased warming. When the risks combine with other adverse events, such as pandemics or conflicts, they become even more difficult to manage.”

The IPCC [concludes](#) on a positive note that “there are multiple, feasible and effective options to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and adapt to human-caused climate change, and they are available now.”

The question is whether we are prepared to do the necessary to address the crisis.

Climate Appeasement

Writing in Prospect two weeks ago, former editor of the Guardian Alan Rusbridger, in a piece entitled “[The climate appeasers are leading us towards catastrophe](#),” drew a forceful comparison between the failure of many to appreciate the looming threat of the Second World War until it was almost too late and the failure today to face up to, and act upon, the risks to the planet posed by climate change.

The article is framed around George Orwell’s February 1941 [call to arms](#) lambasting those who were unwilling or unable to see the threat posed by fascism and the looming

winds of war. Orwell writes of the British ruling class that “they could not struggle against Nazism or Fascism, because they could not understand them. . . . They dealt with Fascism as the cavalry generals of 1914 dealt with the machine-guns – by ignoring it.” “Anyone able to read a map knows that we are in deadly danger,” Orwell wrote, not long after the retreat from Dunkirk. He continued, “I do not mean that we are beaten or need be beaten. . . . But at this moment we are in the soup, full fathom five, and we have been brought there by follies which we are still committing and which will drown us altogether if we do not mend our ways quickly.”

Rusbridger reminds us that Orwell was scathing in his critique of the conservative press, which, up until three weeks before Britain declared war, maintained that there would be *no* war. Orwell wrote that the ruling class, “unwilling to face a change in their way of life, had shut their eyes to the nature of Fascism and modern war. And false optimism was fed to the general public.” Notwithstanding the reluctance of leadership pre-Churchill to see the threat, the British people rose to the challenge and were prepared for the sacrifice. The rest, as they say, is history.

Rusbridger then makes the connection to present day: “Substitute ‘the nature of the climate crisis’ for ‘the nature of fascism’ and Orwell’s words still land with the force of a punch.” “Today we face a different war – on the climate crisis – and we are as much ‘in the soup’ now as we were then.”

Domestic Public Opinion

While significant numbers of Americans are concerned about the climate crisis, there is a deep partisan divide over the need to address the climate crisis and, in fact, as to whether or not there is a crisis. [Polling](#) published earlier this month by the Pew Research Center (May 30-June 4) reveals:

- Two-thirds of U.S. adults say the country should prioritize developing renewable energy sources, such as wind and solar, over expanding the production of oil, coal and natural gas. Nine-in-ten Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents say the U.S. should prioritize developing alternative energy sources to address America’s energy supply. Among Republicans and Republican leaners, 42% support developing alternative energy sources, while 58% say the country should prioritize expanding exploration and production of oil, coal and natural gas. As for age differences within the GOP: 67% of Republicans under 30 prioritize the development of alternative energy sources, while 75% of Republicans 65 and older prioritize expanding the production of oil, coal and natural gas.
- Overall, 54% of U.S. adults describe climate change as a major threat to the country’s well-being. Nearly eight-in-ten Democrats (78%) describe climate change as a major threat to the country’s well-being, up from about six-in-ten (58%) a decade ago. By contrast, about one-in-four Republicans (23%) consider climate change a major threat, a share that is almost identical to ten years ago.

- Overall, 37% of Americans say addressing climate change should be a top priority for the president and Congress in 2023, and another 34% say it is an important but lower priority. For Democrats, it falls in the top half of priority issues, and 59% call it a top priority. By comparison, among Republicans, it ranks second to last, and just 13% describe it as a top priority.

Similarly, a PBS News Hour-Marist-NBC [poll](#) (July 24-27) found that:

- 53% of Americans overall (Democrats 80%; Republicans 23% and independents 54%) believe addressing climate change should be a priority, even at the risk of slowing economic growth, with 44% overall (Democrats 18%; Republicans 72% and independents 44%) saying the economy should be prioritized.
- Majorities believe climate change is affecting their local communities (62% overall - Democrats 86%; Republicans 37% and independents 58%) and that it is a “major” threat (56% overall - Democrats 87%; Republicans 28% and independents 52%). In terms of 2020 voting, 86% of Biden voters and only 22% of Trump voters believe climate change is a “major” threat.
- Majorities also believe climate change is causing serious impacts *now* (55% overall - Democrats 85%; Republicans 24% and independents 53%), and while 3% of Democrats and 16% of independents believe climate change will never have a serious impact, 43% of Republicans believe it will never have a serious impact. Interestingly, the “unsure” responses are in the 0-2% range. In terms of 2020 voting, 85% of Biden voters and only 21% of Trump voters believe climate change is causing serious impacts now.

Despite clear overall majorities expressing concern, we are inhibited from taking drastic action to tackle climate change. Moreover, financial market and corporate efforts around ESG, admittedly a less precise indicator, are coming under increasing political attack. The simple reason: one of our two political parties refuses to act on the climate crisis and, in fact, does not believe a crisis exists. As an extension of that delusion, efforts to transition to a net zero economy are suspect.

Politicians in Denial

At the GOP presidential debate last week, eight presidential hopefuls on the stage were asked for a show of hands as to whether they agreed that humans had contributed to climate change, and none of the candidates did so. Vivek Ramaswamy declared that the “climate agenda is a hoax.” Nikki Haley, in the discussion that followed, conceded that climate change “is real,” and blamed China and India, and Tim Scott blamed China, India and Africa. So much for standing up to the defining challenge of our time.

As Mary Anna Mancuso, a spokesperson for RepublicEn.org, a group of conservatives who care about climate change, writing in *The Hill* [noted](#), the candidates “had a real chance to show they’ve come a long way on climate change, especially coming one month after the hottest July on record, amid what is likely to be the first annual Hot

Planet Summer. Overall, they all failed the test. The topic of climate change, surely the greatest existential crisis of a generation – or more at the rate we’re working on solving it – didn’t even break the top five in terms of time spent on the issues. But at least it came up.”

Sadly, among Republican lawmakers, government efforts to force a reduction in GHG emissions remains a non-starter. The Heritage Fund’s [Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise](#) (the so-called “Project 2025”), which in effect is the platform for a Republican administration (should one emerge), views Biden administration efforts to combat climate change as misguided, counter-productive and part of a broader radical ideology. It states, for example,

“Finally, the next Administration will face a significant challenge in unwinding policies and procedures that are used to advance radical gender, racial, and equity initiatives under the banner of science. Similarly, the Biden Administration’s climate fanaticism will need a whole-of-government unwinding. As with other federal departments and agencies, the Biden Administration’s leveraging of the federal government’s resources to further the woke agenda should be reversed and scrubbed from all policy manuals, guidance documents, and agendas

The new energy crisis is caused not by a lack of resources this, but by extreme “green” policies. Under the rubrics of ‘combating climate change’ and ‘ESG’ (environmental, social, and governance), the Biden Administration, Congress, and various states, as well as Wall Street investors, international corporations, and progressive special-interest groups, are changing America’s energy landscape. These ideologically driven policies are also directing huge amounts of money to favored interests and making America dependent on adversaries like China for energy. In the name of combating climate change, policies have been used to create an artificial energy scarcity that will require trillions of dollars in new investment, supported with taxpayer subsidies, to address a ‘problem’ that government and special interests themselves created.”

As NPR noted in [“How climate policy could change if a Republican is elected president in 2024,”](#) the intellectual firepower on the right is moving away from “climate change is a hoax” (Vivek Ramaswamy notwithstanding) to downplaying the consequences and taking issue with science-based and scientist-endorsed solutions. For example, the author of the Project 2025 climate chapter, the former EPA chief of staff in the Trump administration, characterized in the [NPR interview](#) the “perceived threat” of climate change as “overstated.” She continued, “A lot of the general rhetoric is more about capturing headlines or pulling from some of the most extreme analyses that are out there. A lot of the rhetoric that the public sees and experiences is based on a picture that's not consistent with what we’ve seen¹ with observed climate data, and that the forecasts

¹ When asked in the interview to name scientists who supported her view of “mild and manageable” consequences, she did not name any, and a follow-up response from the Heritage Foundation stated, “it regularly consults many scientists and climate experts who have diverse areas of expertise that cover the full spectrum of issues. We value their contributions and also respect their desire to provide this guidance in confidence.” NPR noted that scientists writing for the IPCC and for peer-reviewed journals are named.

actually suggest a *mild and manageable climate change* in the future” (emphasis added). NPR, in its explainer, quotes the [IPCC](#), “Climate change is a threat to human well-being and planetary health. ... There is a rapidly closing window of opportunity to secure a liveable and sustainable future for all.” Hardly “mild and manageable.”

Concluding Thoughts

The science is clear, and has been clear for some years. The [IPCC](#) sets out the challenges in stark terms:

- Human activities, principally through GHG emissions, have unequivocally caused global warming and continued GHG emissions will lead to increasing global warming;
- Human-caused climate change is already affecting many weather and climate extremes in every region across the globe, leading to widespread adverse impacts and related losses and damages to nature and people;
- The current pace and scale of climate action are insufficient to tackle climate change;
- The adverse impacts from human-caused change will intensify;
- Extremes are becoming more widespread and pronounced with every increment of warming;
- The world must cut emissions quickly, sharply to create a safer, sustainable world, scale up practices and infrastructure to enhance resilience, and cut global GHG emissions by nearly half by 2030.

Perhaps, just as the British war effort kicked into gear as Winston Churchill replaced Neville Chamberlain and the “Men of Munich,” so too could there be movement in the Republican Party. After all, back in 2003, Senator John McCain co-authored legislation with Senator Joe Lieberman [to cap GHG emissions](#) by industries across the economy, having acted, as described in a 2018 article in [the Conversation](#) by Lieberman’s environmental counsel, based on the science. Rusbridger rightly asks, “Who is now our Churchill”? And taking the war analogy one step further, just as we look to military strategists in time of a military conflict, so too should we be looking to climate scientists for guidance on how best to address the climate crisis.

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