



Sustainable Fear

There are ominous signs that the Earth's weather patterns have begun to change dramatically and that these changes may portend a drastic decline in food production – with serious political implications for just about every nation on Earth. The drop in food output could begin quite soon, perhaps only 10 years from now. The regions destined to feel its impact are the great wheat-producing lands of Canada and the USSR in the North, along with a number of marginally self-sufficient tropical areas – parts of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indochina and Indonesia – where the growing season is dependent upon the rains brought by the monsoon.

Newsweek April 28, 1975

The Newsweek article is 40 years old, but it sounds like the beginning of a typical news story today. There is nothing wishy-washy about the assertions in popular press stories on the environment. We're doomed, damn it, doomed. No maybes are in the forecast of food shortage by 1985. Newsweek even knows with certainty where the problems will occur. The story is a warning about Global Cooling and the coming Ice Age.

The Newsweek story has the science down pat and presents it in a manner that leaves no room for doubt by us simple laymen. The article presents experts to back its theme:

A survey completed last week by Dr Murray Mitchell of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration reveals a drop of half a degree in average ground temperatures in the Northern Hemisphere between 1945 and 1968. According to George Kukla of Columbia University, satellite photos indicated a sudden, large increase in Northern Hemisphere snow cover in the winter of 1971-72. And a study released last month by two NOAA scientists notes that the amount of sunshine reaching the ground in continental U.S. diminished by 1.3% between 1964 and 1972.

So there we have it. Those of us that have not starved by 1985 will freeze to death.

Now, of course, the solution cannot be left to individual action and the free enterprise system. Newsweek says scientists want to melt the Arctic ice cap by covering it with black soot collected from coal-fired power plants. Such action would require a huge global bureaucracy and lots of taxes. Global disaster can only be met with global central planning. All this sounds very much like the politically fashionable scare theme de jour of global warming and its centrally planned solutions.

Writer Michael Crichton in his novel State of Fear has a minor character articulate the theme and title of his book.

For 50 years, Western nations had maintained their citizens in a state of perpetual fear. Fear of the other side. Fear of nuclear war. The Communist menace. The Iron Curtin. The Evil Empire. And within the Communist countries, the same in reverse. Fear of us. Then, suddenly, in the fall of 1989, it was all finished. Gone, vanished. Over. The fall of the Berlin Wall created a vacuum of fear. Nature abhors a vacuum. Something had to fill it.

Terrorism is a reason for fear says the character, a professor; and the cause changes over time, but fear is always with us. The professor lectures further:

Has it ever occurred to you how astonishing the culture of Western society really is? Industrialized nations provide their citizens with unprecedented safety, health, and comfort. Average life spans increased fifty percent in the last century. Yet modern people live in abject fear. They are afraid of strangers, of disease, of crime, of the environment. They are afraid of the homes they live in, the food they eat, the technology that surrounds them. They are in a particular fear over things they can't even see – germs, chemicals, additives, pollutants. They are timid, nervous, fretful, and depressed. And even more amazingly, they are convinced that the environment of the entire planet is being destroyed around them. Remarkable! Like the belief in witchcraft, it's an extraordinary delusion – a global fantasy worthy of the Middle Ages. Everything is going to hell, and we must live in fear. Amazing.

Those of us in the energy business might not be too interested in the foolishness of the environmental movement except that the movement now wants to substitute painting the North Pole black for a system of mandatory energy planning and wasteful conservation measures that will raise the price of energy. We have our own special fear. Fear of what harmful policies will flow from the widely-held belief in environment doomsday.

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