

OP-ED COLUMNIST

Who Cooked the Planet?

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Never say that the gods lack a sense of humor. I bet they're still chuckling on Olympus over the decision to make the first half of 2010 — the year in which all hope of action to limit climate change died — the hottest such stretch on record.



Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

Paul Krugman

Of course, you can't infer trends in global temperatures from one year's experience. But ignoring that fact has long been one of the favorite tricks of climate-change deniers: they point to an unusually warm year in the past, and say "See, the planet has been cooling, not warming, since 1998!" Actually, 2005, not 1998, was the warmest year to date — but the point is that the record-breaking temperatures we're currently experiencing have made a nonsense argument even more nonsensical; at this point it doesn't work even on its own terms.

But will any of the deniers say “O.K., I guess I was wrong,” and support climate action? No. And the planet will continue to cook.

So why didn't climate-change legislation get through the Senate? Let's talk first about what didn't cause the failure, because there have been many attempts to blame the wrong people.

First of all, we didn't fail to act because of legitimate doubts about the science. Every piece of valid evidence — long-term temperature averages that smooth out year-to-year fluctuations, Arctic sea ice volume, melting of glaciers, the ratio of record highs to record lows — points to a continuing, and quite possibly accelerating, rise in global temperatures.

Nor is this evidence tainted by scientific misbehavior. You've probably heard about the accusations leveled against climate researchers — allegations of fabricated data, the supposedly damning e-mail messages of “Climategate,” and so on. What you may not have heard, because it has received much less publicity, is that every one of these supposed scandals was eventually unmasked as a fraud concocted by opponents of climate action, then bought into by many in the news media. You don't believe such things can happen? Think Shirley Sherrod.

Did reasonable concerns about the economic impact of climate legislation block action? No. It has always been funny, in a gallows humor sort of way, to watch conservatives who laud the limitless power and flexibility of markets turn around and insist that the economy would collapse if we were to put a price on carbon. All serious estimates suggest that we could phase in

limits on greenhouse gas emissions with at most a small impact on the economy's growth rate.

So it wasn't the science, the scientists, or the economics that killed action on climate change. What was it?

The answer is, the usual suspects: greed and cowardice.

If you want to understand opposition to climate action, follow the money. The economy as a whole wouldn't be significantly hurt if we put a price on carbon, but certain industries — above all, the coal and oil industries — would. And those industries have mounted a huge disinformation campaign to protect their bottom lines.

Look at the scientists who question the consensus on climate change; look at the organizations pushing fake scandals; look at the think tanks claiming that any effort to limit emissions would cripple the economy. Again and again, you'll find that they're on the receiving end of a pipeline of funding that starts with big energy companies, like Exxon Mobil, which has spent tens of millions of dollars promoting climate-change denial, or Koch Industries, which has been sponsoring anti-environmental organizations for two decades.

Or look at the politicians who have been most vociferously opposed to climate action. Where do they get much of their campaign money? You already know the answer.

By itself, however, greed wouldn't have triumphed. It needed the aid of cowardice — above all, the cowardice of politicians who

know how big a threat global warming poses, who supported action in the past, but who deserted their posts at the crucial moment.

There are a number of such climate cowards, but let me single out one in particular: Senator John McCain.

There was a time when Mr. McCain was considered a friend of the environment. Back in 2003 he burnished his maverick image by co-sponsoring legislation that would have created a cap-and-trade system for greenhouse gas emissions. He reaffirmed support for such a system during his presidential campaign, and things might look very different now if he had continued to back climate action once his opponent was in the White House. But he didn't — and it's hard to see his switch as anything other than the act of a man willing to sacrifice his principles, and humanity's future, for the sake of a few years added to his political career.

Alas, Mr. McCain wasn't alone; and there will be no climate bill. Greed, aided by cowardice, has triumphed. And the whole world will pay the price.