

On the Consistency of Bullshit: *An Ever-swirling Tale*

By Scott Thompson

I think that at least 90% of what the public sees about climate change on television or reads in right-leaning books and publications is bullshit. And by that I mean bullshit proper or a derivation thereof. Those few mainstream news stories that cogently present scientific findings are too incomplete in scope to give viewers a comprehensive picture.

The print media does marginally better. There are good stories in the major daily newspapers and various online news services if you're willing to dig, but the coverage is too fragmentary to give readers a meaningful grasp of the science. My impression is that few daily newspapers across the country are committed to providing comprehensive coverage, and I suspect that many simply do an awful job. Notable green groups publish solid information, diminished by frequent reluctance to address the disastrous effect of exponential economic growth (which couldn't possibly have anything to do with protecting their business donors).

My concern is that dousing people's brains in ever-swirling bullshit about a massive danger to the stability of the planet's climate cannot be good for their mental health.

a historically destructive act, I freely admit that he had a masterful instinct for what engages and motivates people (from which the so-called left could learn much if it was paying attention).

Reagan played the archetypal father figure for the citizenry to the hilt: strong yet gentle, tough yet reassuring. And from all indications he was utterly sincere. This is exactly what people want from a father figure on an unconscious level; he filled a void in people they hadn't known was there. And Reagan indeed made the bottom fall out of environmentalism. Progress withered to skirmishes over piecemeal effects, while serious dialogue about the twin causes became taboo.

While the political strategy he transmitted still has the magic touch, it's become more difficult for right-wingers to exemplify. A key reason is that in 1980 the environmental warnings from scientists and perceptive writers were more suggestive than factual; they were sharply focused intuitions. Reagan could get away with ignoring them without the public realizing that he wasn't in fact willing to face a primary danger to the country's future.

Meaning that Reagan, despite his persona, was not a particularly strong man.



Limbaugh...Boehner...Mitt...Obama...Pelosi...Harry Reid
The Latest "Artists" at Work

My basis for saying this is experience. I can tell you that when all the adults in a family – the authority figures – emit bullshit at the 90% level over any period of time you can expect their kids to start sprouting symptoms. And those symptoms are ugly: self-mutilation with razor blades, snorting opiate pain pills, suicidal gestures, a cavalcade of nose-smashing fist fights, and so on.

Because adults have full brain development their symptoms tend to be more muted, but they're just as devastating over time. Most often what chronically bullshitted people need is someone they can trust who will encourage them to look straight at what's happening. Strangely there is a comfort in this process, even when the facts discovered are devastating.

I believe what our current political and business leaders need to think about, amid all their tactical concerns, is that there really is a point at which people are so sick of being lied to – shunted off with excuses and underhanded explanations or stonewalled with silence – that even uncovering awful truths will feel better to them.

Leaders like Abraham Lincoln, Winston Churchill, and Martin Luther King, Jr., knew this.

Let's cut through some bullshit.

Hard Bullshit: Those Right Wing Emissions

By the time Ronald Reagan emerged as a Presidential candidate in the mid-1970s a number of scientists and writers had given blunt and credible notice that due to exponential economic and population growth human societies were heading toward collapse by the end of the 21st century. And that the collapse would stem from some combination of the following effects: pollution, including climate change; resource depletion, including fossil fuels; and malnutrition and famine. And maybe pestilence.

Despite the grim nature of these warnings, responsible leaders at the time gave them serious thought. As examples, Congress passed legislation dealing with various aspects of pollution and President Carter commissioned The Global 2000 Report to assess likely environmental impacts at the end of the century and in 1979 installed solar panels on the White House roof.

Ronald Reagan spearheaded the Republican counterattack and succeeded brilliantly. Deeply appreciative, Republicans in general and right wingers in particular have followed his teachings and tactics since then. Even though I believe Reagan's removing those solar panels from the White House roof in 1986 was

He was insightful as hell about what drives people and he was graced with self-conviction, but you probably have friends and acquaintances braver, stronger, and more forward-looking than he was.

Anyway, within the last several years scientific findings have emerged that flatly bring into question the way of life Reagan and his disciples have championed. What were intuitive warnings in 1972 became flashing yellow facts by 2008. How to respond to this bad news was obvious to right wing strategists: when you can't beat the science, beat up on the scientists. So while rightist politicians and pundits continue to demonstrate the Reaganesque levels of outward strength and moral conviction, character assassination and intimidation of legitimate climate scientists has become a high art, analogous to the 17th century Catholic persecution of Galileo.

Here's an example of the Inquisitors' handiwork: in November, 2009, a month before the Copenhagen climate conference, climate scientists' e-mails and other computer data were mysteriously stolen (copied) from a British university. Shortly thereafter what the e-mails revealed about the scientists' quirks, eccentricities and personal gaffes was splattered all over right wing media and propaganda outlets and in the mainstream media as well (the thieves couldn't possibly be right wing operators or people in sync with them). This devolved into a tabloid news phenomenon with staying power, skillfully orchestrated by the network of right wing media personalities and politicians. The following July an independent commission investigating the matter in Britain concluded that although the scientists hadn't adequately shared their data with colleagues, their rigor and honesty as scientists was not in doubt. This report received little coverage, even though its findings couldn't have been more significant: that whatever their foibles, the soap operatic accusations against their scientific integrity and the quality of their scientific work were – bullshit.

You may have noticed that the American Petroleum Institute, naturally in sync with the right wing, has flooded American television screens with an attractive 30 second ad touting oil and natural gas production. A professionally clad, agreeable-looking woman strides purposefully across the screen, explaining in a soothing but firm tone that the oil and natural gas industry "supports 9.2 million American jobs." To be sure we get the message she adds, "We're fueling all kinds of jobs." With the upbeat background music the message seems cheery and reasonable: just reminding us that oil and gas is a vital part of our economy.

The key to this remarkable piece of hard bullshit is what it doesn't tell you ver-

sus what it does. Note that I assume the facts recited in the ad are accurate.

What it doesn't tell you: that in the past decade world-wide CO2 emissions have been increasing at about 3% or more per annum; there was a dip in emissions following the 2008 recession but now they're roaring back. The implications of this are frightening. Although nobody knows the precise deadline, there is solid evidence indicating that in order to avert a climate catastrophe, global CO2 emissions must peak by 2015-2020 or so and then start dropping steadily thereafter. The longer humans delay this peak, the steeper the yearly decline will have to be thereafter. Already climate models are requiring a rate of decrease after a hypothetical peak in 2020 that looks plainly incompatible with a growth economy.

The last thing the fossil fuel industry wants is for the citizens to be alert to this terrible and fast-approaching dilemma. It would mean the end of their massive profit stream if not their industry altogether.

What the ad does tell you: that petroleum isn't simply used to make gasoline, and natural gas isn't just used to heat houses and office buildings, as we may blithely assume. That in fact they're used in industrial processes, such as making nitrogen fertilizers and pharmaceutical medications. The ad wants you thinking that in the midst of this awful recession our society can't afford to risk losing scads of jobs, maybe your job, because those pissant tree huggers want to cut back on fossil fuel production.

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In other words, the ad wants the public to be fearful of what the fossil fuel companies fear: cutting back if not eliminating fossil fuels. Now when as a hard bullshitter you can scare people into putting the well being of their own grandchildren and great grandchildren in peril without their being aware of it, that's some stinky piece you've just laid.

There's much more hard bullshit – but I'm getting tired of smelling it.

Soft Bullshit: a Liberal Parfait

Most political liberals - yes, I'm using the "L" word - are creatures of the Enlightenment, with a bedrock faith in science and human reason. As a group, they're much better informed about scientific findings, especially in climate, environmental and social sciences, than is the crowd on the right. Many center-lefties are dutiful about keeping up with the latest discoveries. Ls are offended by rightists who interpret environmental, climate, and social science findings as a plot by leftist professors against the taxpayers and free market capitalism. Ls regard such rightists as ignoramuses or worse (thus underestimating them, as Reagan well knew).

Many Ls instinctively subject their own political behavior to standards of reasonableness, assuming that's what voters prefer (another mistake: most people yearn for the archetypal, not the rational, as Reagan also knew). Ironically, Ls' rational decision making is one thing that makes them prone to emitting soft bullshit.

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Another is that they're almost as ideologically committed to exponential economic growth as the Republicans and right wingers they disparage. The reason is that the funding for the entire spectrum of social safety nets and entitlement programs that they've labored to establish may evaporate without that growth. The prospect of putting all this at risk in order to talk straight about climate change makes them cautious.

With Steven Chu on board, the Obama administration HAS to know how ominous global warming is (I think the Wall Street Republicans know, too), and also how successful right wing operators have been in confusing the public. But they realize that if they hit the airways in a continuing effort to tell the public the bald truth, the investor class will descend upon them in fury, throwing their future campaign contributions into Republican coffers. Loss of this financial support would be a grave risk, not only to their individual careers but to the stability of the Democratic Party itself. It would also mean being grossly underfunded in a brutal political war for the soul of the country with no assurance that the public would give them a victory.

Cautious, rational politicians don't take such risks, so...the Democrats don't. The tragedy, which will not be lost on future generations, is that although the Democrats have the very best public relations experts in the world to help them, they choose instead to mumble vaguely about "green growth" and "green jobs;" otherwise they remain mute.

In such a vacuum the real work of warning the public is left to a few intrepid scientists, willing to risk their careers and financial well being, along with a hap-hazard array of writers and stray green groups.

A little more before we leave this point. The right wing may be suspicious of scientists but it's superb at strategy and it knows how to keep those latte-totin' Democrats on the defensive; always an advantage. Above all the right wing knows this: the more doubt and confusion it can create in the public's mind about climate change the more reluctant Democrats will be to risk speaking out boldly and the longer the scientific findings can be kept under wraps.

My conclusion about the Obama administration, sadly because I like President Obama, is that silence in the face of bullshit is itself bullshit. Soft bullshit.

Many people sense that the country is in trouble and that their leaders aren't leveling with them. At the same time they feel puzzled in a way they find difficult to explain. This does remind me of situations I sometimes encounter as a counselor working with teenagers who are being chronically bullshitted by, for example, alcohol-swamped parents (i.e., alcoholic parent plus enabling parent) or with adults who are still recovering from living through something like that.

I believe we are coming to a point where the citizens badly need simple honesty. By that I mean leaders who refuse to deny the crisis of climate change and also refuse to talk about it as though it's another problem to be solved. Because, even though hope has its place, the way things look now a genuine solution, one that makes the predicament go away, is unlikely. Instead we need leaders who will say that humanity faces an ordeal that it will have to live with and learn from and that much difficulty and sacrifice lies ahead.

In 1940 Winston Churchill said to the British people, "I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears, and sweat. We have before us an ordeal of the most grievous kind." We need somebody like him.

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