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As American as Apple Pie:

How We Built America's Climate-Realist Movement

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Abstract

When EIKE invited me to speak at IKEK-17, the request was simple. I had been part of the American climate-realist movement from the start, and the country was doing well on the issue, so would I explain how we got here. None of this was an accident. We are outgunned by a margin that would make most people quit. The other side has the money, the media, the universities, the United Nations, and Hollywood. We built real influence anyway, over four decades and on purpose. Here is how we did it. We treat personnel as policy, we assemble the right people into a working network rather than a mailing list, and we borrow hard tactics from two very different books, Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* and Saul Alinsky's *Rules for Radicals*. I offer it to my European colleagues in the hope that some of it travels.

Keywords: Climate realism; climate policy; grassroots activism; energy policy; strategic communication

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1. Who We Are

A minute of shameless self-promotion first. CFACT has been around since 1985. I co-founded it with David Rothbard, which dates me more than I would like. We work on policy in Washington, D.C. We publish reports and studies, we testify, and we keep a board of scientists and academic advisors. We run the Climate Depot news service under Marc Morano, and a Collegians program that works with young people on campuses across the country. Mostly, though, we are known for our stunts. A columnist once called us “the Greenpeace of the right,” and the name stuck. We have jumped out of airplanes at conferences and boarded Greenpeace ships to drop banners off the side. The scientists here have already given your brains a workout, so I am just going to talk.

2. As American as Apple Pie

Holger Thuss asked me to explain how America ended up at the front of this movement, so let me be blunt and a little rude for a guest in someone else's country. This is going to be an unapologetically pro-American talk. We are marking 250 years since our separation from England, so my British friends will have to forgive the red coats and the blue coats before I am done.

When Europeans tell me what they admire about America, they say McDonald's. We have better exports than that. In my country, when we want to call something truly ours, we say it is “as American as apple pie.” A pickup truck on a Saturday night with Johnny Cash on the radio qualifies. So does a Red Sox game at Fenway. Well, we have a new slice. To be a climate realist in the United States today is as American as apple pie, and I want to explain how that happened.

Not everyone likes this particular pie, and the Greens have called America the problem for decades, long before Donald Trump. I was invited to the White House when George H. W. Bush signed the first global climate convention. I never made the meeting because he canceled it once

he learned we were coming to talk him out of it, and he assured us the treaty would be non-binding. That enraged the Greens, who wanted something binding. When Kyoto came in 1997, we stayed out, and George W. Bush pulled us the rest of the way out. We skipped Copenhagen. We joined Paris and then left, one of only a handful of nations outside it, in the strange company of Iran, and we have since withdrawn from the original U.N. climate framework as well. The Greens see all of this as America snubbing the world. We see it as America standing tall.

3. The Most Skeptical Nation on Earth

This is bigger than one president. Look at the data, and America is the most skeptical country on earth, and has been for a while. The most convincing survey I have seen is a 2020 poll by Ipsos, a French firm, which I still consider trustworthy, that questioned 30,000 people worldwide and found the United States the most skeptical of all. That figure counts more than the people who call climate change nonsense. It includes those who say the warming is mostly natural and those who remain undecided, and I do not know how anyone stays undecided after this much propaganda. Together they come to nearly 54%.

Critics will tell you the hard skeptics are only about 14% of Americans. That is still twice the European share, and it undersells things, because sitting next to that 14% is a 46% that has bought what the U.N. is selling. The gap shows up where it counts. Fewer than 1% of Americans name climate as a top voting issue, against about 10% in Europe. In 2024, Gallup and Pew found that 85% of EU voters say climate affects how they vote, compared with 27% in America, and those are mostly Democrats. Policy follows the public. The EU has a binding 2050 neutrality target and a 55 % emissions cut by 2030. We have repealed our greenhouse-gas finding and have almost nothing left to regulate federally. I joked to my staff that we could all quit and go home. They did not find it as funny as I did.

4. Personnel Is Policy

We have our own Captain America. Whatever you think of Donald Trump elsewhere, on this issue he has been a rock star, and he did it twice. In 2016 he pulled us out of Paris almost at once, then out of 66 other U.N. bodies, well beyond what we expected. He halted offshore wind. He called global warming a hoax, and yes, in a room full of scientists, that phrase overreaches, because the planet has warmed. What he means is that what Gore and Greta Thunberg and the U.N. are selling is a hoax, and hearing it said that forcefully moved opinion our way.

Better than any single act is who he appointed. We have a saying in Washington: people are policy. The first term was uneven on this. The second time he brought in some rock stars. Chris Wright at the Department of Energy has run one of the greatest deregulatory efforts in history, canceling 223 solar projects, limiting electric-vehicle and battery grants, and rolling back 47 energy-efficiency rules tied to climate. He convened a working group of skeptic scientists, among them Judith Curry, Roy Spencer, and John Christy, and for the first time the views you hear in this room carried a government stamp of approval. A filing error got it withdrawn, and if we handle it correctly, that should not be permanent.

Then there is Lee Zeldin at the EPA. I introduced him at a conference two months ago, where he said something I keep repeating: those of us who spent years telling the truth on climate had wondered when our day of vindication would come, and it had arrived. He has cut EPA staffing by a quarter, ended Solar for All, killed “sue and settle,” defunded a long list of grants to green groups, and moved to strike the endangerment finding, the legal foundation of nearly all federal climate regulation. So, we are happy. I do not mean to gloat, but we are rocking right now. The lesson is that this leadership was the culmination of our work, not its beginning.

5. We Are Outgunned

Why the success? Is there something in the water that turns Americans into skeptics? No. And here is what I most want you to hear. It is not because our side is well funded. If anything, we are the underdog by an embarrassing margin.

Line up the resources, and it is not close. The alarmists have the major scientific bodies, the enormous NGOs, government grants, wealthy donors, the big foundations, social media, the United Nations, and Hollywood. On our side stand a few modest groups such as Heartland, the CO2 Coalition, and CFACT, plus conservative media that still reaches the audiences we need, from talk radio to Fox and Newsmax. We have genuinely credible scientists, many of them here, and I like to say you do not count heads on our side; you weigh them.

Now the money, and I will admit I pulled the top figure from an AI search and checked it against other tools. The ten largest organizations pushing climate alarm come to roughly \$4.7 billion, before you count the foundations behind them, from Bezos pledging up to \$10 billion to the Rockefellers. In the other corner, the ten groups fighting back total under \$200 million. Remove one of them, Heritage, and you are under \$100 million. Narrow it to the five doing this work day to day, and you are under \$25 million. So, sit with that. On one side, \$4.7 billion. On the other, under \$25 million. It is not a fair fight, which raises the obvious question: given those odds, how do you win?

6. An Army Travels on Its Belly

Step one, you need supplies. I was in the military, and we used to say an army travels on its belly. The other side needs a fortune because a lie is expensive to spread. The truth costs less, but it is not free.

So, the Greens try to starve us. You have seen the elaborate maps, like the one Sheldon Whitehouse waved in a hearing, claiming the fossil-fuel industry bankrolls the skeptic movement. It is garbage. Did those companies fund us long ago? Yes. Between roughly 1998 and 2006, it was natural for CEI, CFACT, and others to ask those industries to defend themselves, and they gave modestly, on the public record, with no hiding it. Then, in 2006, the companies became Benedict Arnolds, the American general who turned and fought for the British. They publicly announced they were not funding any skeptic group, and named us while they did it. And it was true. They stopped. Honestly, it helped us, and we have only grown since.

Big oil is now our opponent, not our patron. The major companies have all signed up for net zero by 2050. Margaret Thatcher had the phrase: they fed the crocodile, hoping it would eat them last. They threw the skeptics overboard, sure the Greens would leave them alone. The Greens did not. Boulder, Colorado, is suing them right now over heat waves and droughts, and I will be candid: I do not have much sympathy. What is being done to them is wrong, but they rather earned it. And notice who really takes the money. The Sierra Club took \$21 million from Chesapeake Energy. Reports tie green funding to the Sea Change Foundation, which traces back to Russian and Chinese interests, and you can work out why Moscow and Beijing would want to cripple American energy. Al Gore sold his television network to Al Jazeera, owned by the Qatari petro-state, and pocketed around \$100 million, against the \$30 million ExxonMobil gave 60 groups over ten years. He made three times as much on one sale as 60 organizations did in a decade. So, my advice is plain: raise from individuals, foundations, and corporations, expect the sources to be attacked, and hold the Greens to the standard they demand of you.

7. The Right People and the Network

Supplies are not enough. Since this is our 250th anniversary, let me keep the Revolutionary War picture. To fight, you need the right people, a working network, and tactics.

We are blessed with real intellectuals. The late Fred Singer, and here today, Will Happer, along with Willie Soon, David Legates, Richard Lindzen, Judith Curry, and Roy Spencer. Our revolution has its Thomas Jeffersons, and I picture them in powdered wigs, because they are the minds that drive it. But thinkers alone will not win. You need foot soldiers: the people who work the media, run the accounts that carry the message, and lead the NGOs, such as James Taylor at Heartland, Greg Wrightstone, the late Fred Smith, and Myron Ebell. Sometimes being a soldier means you end up wanted. There is a photograph of Marc Morano and James Taylor holding mock wanted posters outside the Paris meeting, and we wear that as a badge of honor.

Then you network. The Greens love to chart how we supposedly connect, and they produce baffling maps. They once mapped Heartland's work in Europe in a chart I could not make sense of. Somehow everything is connected. Our real networking is far simpler than their conspiracy walls. A group of us meets monthly at the Cooler Heads Coalition, where we do not debate whether the other side is right. We talk about specific bills, specific lawsuits, and specific resolutions, and we get down and dirty. CEI and CFACT formed it around 2000, and Myron Ebell led it for years. When Trump first took office, he picked Ebell to staff the EPA transition. Each group brings its own gift. CEI was strongest on Washington policy, the CO2 Coalition owns the science, Heartland excels in the states and abroad, and we do the grassroots and the media. Nobody does everything.

8. Our Tactical Playbook

Now the fun part. Two books shaped how we operate: Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* and Saul Alinsky's *Rules for Radicals*, which was written for the left. When David Rothbard and I started CFACT in 1985, we studied how clever the left was about tactics. Obama himself trained on Alinsky's principles at the Midwest Academy in Chicago. What the left uses to advance its cause can be turned around against it. I like tactics. In high school, I organized students to take over classrooms and free their classmates from teachers, which you could never get away with today, and I served in the actual military too. We are in a war, so we fight like it. Here are five principles the two books share, each with an example.

First, win through strategy and disruption rather than costly frontal confrontation. We had an early advantage. I was there when James Hansen told the Senate in 1988 that human activity was driving the climate. Almost no one had heard of the idea. I am from Buffalo, and until then we only talked about the coming ice age. Within four years the U.N. staged its huge 1992 summit in Rio, and only a couple of groups, mainly CEI and CFACT, wanted a dissenting voice there. A protest our size would have been the mouse that roared. So instead we sent Dixy Lee Ray, a scientist, a former governor of Washington, and the author of the best-selling *Trashing the Planet*, and we got her onto Rush Limbaugh's show. Rush loved it, and even gave her a limousine to drive around Rio on the condition that she run the air conditioning full blast with the windows down to let the CFCs out. He reached 15 to 20 million Americans a day, and they heard the unvarnished truth. I believe it helped push Bush toward a non-binding treaty, because he knew his own people opposed it. The Greens never got their binding deal, and they were furious.

Second, exploit your strength against their weakness. Their great weakness is the truth. Take green energy, sold as clean and green with no downside. It has plenty. Dead eagles are a real impact, and so are land use, higher power bills, and the possible harm to whales. Blanket 20 square miles in solar panels and tell me that is good habitat. As our own president put it, every windmill costs the country a fortune to turn; it is ugly, and it kills birds. Willie Soon gave me a slide showing what a solar field does to a bird that lands on it. The public feels this. Robert Bryce has been counting the projects halted by local opposition, and the number is past 825. We organized ranchers, farmers, and Native Americans against wind in Oklahoma and Wyoming, flew banners over Atlantic City, put up billboards, held rallies in New Jersey, and took boats onto the ocean. They are vulnerable here, and we keep hammering.

Third, attack where the enemy is unprepared and appear where you are not expected. My favorite is Al Gore. After the Nobel Prize, he flew to Indonesia to be welcomed as a hero, and we secured a permit to protest right where he would arrive. When the U.N. found out, it revoked the permit, saying we would be too disruptive. Somehow that second email never reached me. So, the cameras gathered, everyone waiting for Gore, the sort of press you could never buy, and out came Lord Monckton, Joanne Nova, and a parade of skeptics instead. The officials came charging out looking ready to remove our heads, but the media was already interviewing us. We did the same by boarding a Greenpeace ship in Copenhagen, and again by sending students with banners to greet James Hansen at Rice University. Our Collegians like to cause trouble. People say we are leading the youth astray. They are having fun.

Fourth, and one Alinsky prized, ridicule is man's most potent weapon. There is no defense against it. We film the other side saying foolish things. In Doha, Qatar, we handed U.N. delegates an ordinary construction dust mask and told them it would capture the CO₂ they exhale, and we recorded people, including some from the IPCC, agreeing to wear it and to put it on their spouse and their dog. That was before COVID, so I suppose we gave them the idea, and I am sorry. The master of ridicule at CFACT is Marc Morano. When I hired him, I told him his job, like the Hulk in the Avengers, was to clobber, but with humor. Read climatedepot.com, where this week he is mocking claims that the World Cup is dangerous and that warming will send snakes after you.

Fifth, force the opponent into hypocrisy. This one is easy, because they hand it to you. Our film *Climate Hustle* has a whole section on it. Barbra Streisand lectures on climate, then flies her two dogs across the Atlantic on a private jet to join her at a concert. Al Gore preaches the carbon-neutral life while his house burns more electricity in a month than a typical American family uses in a year. Gore is the gift that keeps giving. We also shoot our own investigative videos, catching them dining on champagne and salmon at their exclusive summits while they tell the rest of us to sacrifice.

9. It Was No Accident

So here is my message to Europe. The skeptic movement in America is not an accident, and it is not haphazard. It is orchestrated and coordinated, built over decades of publishing, testimony, coalition work, media, and grassroots trouble. When the political weather finally changed, a prepared movement had the ideas, the people, and the muscle ready to act, and the leadership we now enjoy was the culmination of that work rather than its cause. It will not copy neatly onto your own countries, because your constitutions, parties, media, and energy realities differ from ours. The core still travels. Build the institutions before the favorable election, recruit the credible scientists and the seasoned staff, coordinate around concrete bills and lawsuits, and keep the science precise and the human costs plain. Do that, and a small movement becomes a serious one. There is a vast right-wing conspiracy on climate in America, and you are looking at one of its members. Thank you.

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