

Climate Change is not a Hoax
by Bill Menke
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"Nothing could possibly convince me that Elvis is not still alive". If that's what you think, I'm not going to try to dissuade you. First off, people like you come by their conviction by many idiosyncratic and circuitous routes that, I suppose, are earnest enough, without any authority figure, or at least anyone I've ever heard of, demanding that they espouse that belief. Second, although your longing for Elvis to reappear and top the charts of the music world again may cause you to enjoy Taylor Swift the less, it is not something that is going to make any difference whatsoever to my life or that of my children. Nevertheless, I am going to point out that whether or not Elvis died of a drug overdose on August 16, 1977 in Graceland is a matter of fact, the veracity of which can be addressed through historical research. You could start, for example, by reading contemporary news accounts of how Ginger Alden found his body.

The belief that Climate Change is a hoax is fundamentally different from the belief that Elvis lives. First, this belief is being promoted by the leaders of one of America's major political parties and has become a de facto litmus test for membership in that party. People who might want to join for other reasons are finding that they have to become climate deniers, just so they can fit in. Second, the belief really does get in the way of a well-reasoned assessment of the severity of climate change and any sort of decision about how far we should go to slow or prevent it. The uninformed belief that Climate Change is a hoax is doing real harm.

I am in a pretty good position to have an informed opinion about Climate Change, because I am a scientist who has worked for nearly forty years at one of the premier Earth and Environmental research labs in the world¹, and because my own research, though touching upon climate physics, is mostly independent of it. In the course of my career, I have published 135 journal articles and three textbooks. Of these, two papers and one textbook are climate-related; the rest are on subjects that are more geological in subject matter. I can say unequivocally that the evidence is very strong that significant climate change is occurring. The hundred or so climate scientists who work in my lab, and the many thousands that from similar labs who I have met over the years are not hucksters. Neither am I. We are concerned about a real problem that is already causing suffering and loss here in the US and around the world, and that is very likely to get worse.

Having grown up in the Fifties and Sixties in a house with a chain smoking dad, I can't help to compare the climate deniers of today to the cadre of people who believed back then that the notion that smoking cigarettes caused cancer was a hoax. It was a widespread belief back then. I even once saw a little booklet, written by a cancer denier (and underwritten by a tobacco company), that tried to argue the implausibility of a cancer - smoking link. However, a major difference was that cancer denial was not a plank in the platform of any political party. Yes, some influential public figures - JFK, for example - were smokers, and some of them downplayed the cancer link, but denial never became a litmus test for party membership. However, by delaying people's quitting from smoking, cancer denial did cause needless deaths (including my dad's, though towards the end of his life he quit so as to be able to go on oxygen).

The residents of Florida perplex me. Florida is a swampy and low-lying place (think alligators) that is especially at risk of flooding from climate-change induced sea level rise. Furthermore, Florida has recently experienced several damaging hurricanes whose unusual strength is attributable to climate-change warming of Gulf of Mexico waters. Yet Florida is a hotbed of climate denial. My professional opinion is that enough sea level rise will occur during our children's lifetimes to destroy large swaths of coastal Florida. I'd work to prevent that, if I could. I urge the residents of Florida to show more self-interest.

Which brings me back to political litmus tests. Don't become a climate denier just because some politician - even a politician you admire - urges you to believe it's all a hoax. Form your own opinions on climate change. When the next climate-related disaster happens, don't pretend it didn't happen or was nothing worse than what your great-grandma endured. Recognize that we are changing the world. Demand that your party leaders fix it.

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