

Much Ado About Nothing: The New York Times' Claim of “a striking shift” in the Bush Administration Portrayal of Climate Science

By Jeff Kueter, Executive Director

In an August 26 article by Andrew Revkin, *The New York Times* claimed that a report submitted to Congress by the Climate Change Science Program (CCSP), represented “a striking shift” in the way the Bush Administration portrayed climate science.¹ We at the Marshall Institute questioned that claim based on the work the Administration had done to develop a strategic plan for climate science research and the systematic approach it is using to implement that plan.²

We've now had a chance to review the CCSP report, which is titled *Our Changing Planet: The U.S. Climate Change Science Program for Fiscal Years 2004 and 2005*.³ It is the latest in a series of similar documents in which the CCSP reports to Congress on key program results, its expenditures for the previous fiscal year, and its budget request for the next fiscal year. The part of the report that appears to have gotten *The New York Times* so excited appears on Pg. 47, where CCSP presents the results of a modeling study conducted at the National Center for Atmospheric Research (NCAR). The study purports to show that the increase in global average surface temperature of the first half of the 20th century was due to natural causes, but that the increase of the second half of the 20th century was due to human emissions. The report also refers to an unspecified study showing similar results for North America.

NCAR's global study is a repeat of earlier work by the UK's Hadley Centre that featured so prominently in the IPCC's Third Assessment Report (TAR), and was the basis for the IPCC's claim: “There is new and stronger evidence that most of the warming of observed over the last 50 years is attributable to human activities.”⁴ Both NCAR and the Hadley Centre ran three simulations of 20th century global climate. The first used only natural drivers of climate change: solar variation and volcanic eruptions. The second used only human-induced drivers of climate change: greenhouse gas and particulate emissions, and the third used both natural and human-induced drivers. In both studies, using only natural drivers gave a reasonable simulation of global average surface temperature for the first half of the century, but a poor simulation of the second half for the century. Using only human-induced drivers gave a poor simulation global average surface temperature for the first half of the century, but a better simulation for the second half of the century. Using both types of drivers gave the best simulation for the full century.

While the results of the Hadley Centre work made an impressive display in the TAR, they are subject to significant uncertainties arising from:

- (1) the lack of a greenhouse “fingerprint” in the temperature record;
- (2) the quality of the surface temperature data used to determine the global average surface temperature; and
- (3) the models used to simulate that surface temperature.

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In 2001, the Marshall Institute analyzed the IPCC's claim in *Climate Science and Policy: Making the Connection*,⁵ and concluded

When all of the available information is considered, the IPCC simulation of surface temperature appears to be more a fortuitous case of curve fitting than a demonstration of the human influence of the global climate.

The NCAR study reported by CCSP is subject to all of the same problems that plagued the Hadley Centre's study, and cannot be considered any more conclusive. Modeling studies are no better than the quality of the model and inputs they use. At this time no climate model has been scientifically validated, and input data for both natural and human-induced climate system drivers for the first half of the 20th century are highly uncertain.⁶

The Bush Administration has been aware of the Hadley Centre's work and the conclusion that the IPCC drew from it. Early in his term, President Bush asked the National Academies of Science to review a number of key issues in climate science, a review which included an assessment of the capability of climate models. On models, the NAS concluded:

... climate models are imperfect. Their simulation skill is limited by uncertainties in their formulation, the limited size of their calculations, and the difficulty in interpreting their answers that exhibit almost as much complexity as in nature.⁷

Based on inputs such as this, the Bush Administration has chosen, we believe wisely, to be cautious in its acceptance of climate model results.

The CCSP report did not provide many details on the study purporting to show that the

increase in North American surface temperature during the second half of the 20th century was also due to human activities. However, the information it did provide indicates that the continental study used the same approach as the global study. If so, it is subject to all of the concerns raised about the global study. Again, we see no reason why this study should be a basis for changing U.S. climate policy, especially since climate models do an even poorer job of simulating regional climate than simulating global climate.

The CCSP was obligated to report the results of the NCAR study to Congress, since it was federally funded. CCSP did so without drawing any policy implications; only *The New York Times* did that. We see no reason why the NCAR study should be a basis for changing U.S. climate policy, nor is a reference to it indicative of a shift in policy.

Notes

1. Revkin, A. (2004): "U.S. Report, In Shift, Turns Focus to Greenhouse Gases." August 26, 2004.
2. Kueter, J. (2004): "New York Times Leaps Before Looking." Available on the web at: <http://marshall.org/article.php?id=239>
3. *Our Changing Planet: The U.S. Climate Change Science Program for Fiscal Years 2004 and 2005*. A Report by the Climate Change Science Program and the Subcommittee on Global Change Research.
4. J.T. Houghton, *et al.* (2001): *Climate Change 2001: The Scientific Basis*. Cambridge University Press, Pg. 10-11.
5. Schlesinger, J. and R. Sproull (2001): *Climate Science and Policy: Making the Connection*. Available on the web at: <http://marshall.org/article.php?id=86>
6. O'Keefe, W. and J. Kueter. (2004). *Climate Models: A Primer*.
7. NAS (2001): *Climate Change Science: An Analysis of Some Key Questions*. Pg. 15.