

NOTEBOOK

Climate, Class, and Claptrap

By Garret Keizer

One more song the radio won't like.

—Kathleen Edwards

The brief hubbub over Al Gore's lavish energy consumption was similar in its disingenuousness to the outcry over conditions at Walter Reed. Imagine: Rats! Roaches! Moldy walls! To think that these poor wounded soldiers might actually be sequestered in places as wretched as those in which many of them came of age and went to school—it boggled the mind. And this Gore, this patrician prophet of global catastrophe, this millionaire former candidate for president of a nation in which the phrase "millionaire candidate for president" amounts to a circumlocution—he actually lives in a big house. And he uses a lot of electricity too!

This pretense of not knowing what every idiot knows has increasingly come to define our national discourse. To say, by way of example, that it has characterized the protracted denial of global warming is to understate the point. It also characterizes the burgeoning acknowledgment of global warming, the willingness to grant that a crisis exists even as our key players scramble to guarantee that every systemic cause of that crisis remains intact. It characterizes our farcical debate over the timetable for the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq even as permanent military bases are constructed in that country to oversee the flow of its denationalized oil to our national snout.

More than anything else, it charac-

terizes our official take on wealth and class, a blind spot as large as any hole in the ozone. Consider a statement made after the 2000 election by Democratic strategist Al From to the effect that the party's "populist" message had failed to reach its target voters—that is, the same people now gushing over Al Gore's Academy Award—whom From described as "affluent, educated, diverse, suburban, 'wired,' and moderate." To believe that any person or party incapable of grasping the absurdity of that description can, nevertheless, not only grasp but engage the threat of global climate change requires a faith that makes Joan of Arc look like Nietzsche in a bad mood. Someone tell me, please, how a demographic that is "affluent, educated, suburban, 'wired,' and moderate" can be described in any meaningful way as "diverse." One might as well say that an arsenal consisting entirely of bazookas is diverse because some of them happen to be painted pink.

Or tell me instead what David Remnick, writing in a recent Talk of the Town piece in *The New Yorker*, is thinking when he says: "Can anyone seriously doubt that a Gore Administration would have meant, well, an alternate universe . . . ?" An alternate universe is where you would have had to be living for the past three centuries, or at least for the decades of Gore's political career, to swallow a statement like that. No doubt a Gore presidency would have meant better policies, a less cretinous rhetoric, but no, the universe would have been very much the same; it would have been that all-too-familiar universe in which the affluent, the educated, the suburban, and

the wired, including I daresay Messrs. Gore and Remnick, can always get a good table at a good restaurant, and the kid who buses that table can always, whenever he wants, find his way to an artificial limb plus the customary accoutrements of rats, roaches, and a moldy wall.

But I shall be accused of dancing around the most important issue of our time, the issue at the name of which every knee shall bow. Global warming, we are told, will have its most devastating effects on the world's disadvantaged. Therefore, we need not care so particularly about the world's disadvantaged; we need care only about global warming—as mediated, of course, by those who stand to make a bundle off it. Wonder of wonders: you can now download all of your convictions into this one lightweight, handheld device. You might even wear it clipped to your ear like a Vulcan from an alternate universe. To quote Mr. Gore, global climate change is "not a political issue; it's a moral issue," glad tidings of great joy to souls weary of such crassly political issues as universal health care, reproductive freedom, the rights of workers, the treatment of captives, the plight of women and men shoveled daily off our sidewalks like so much offal, and who can now devote their energies to transcendently moral issues like the daytime highs in Chattanooga.

Am I too irreverent? Am I not aware that polar bears are drowning in the Arctic? I am very much aware and very grieved as well. I am also aware, thanks to book after book by Jonathan Kozol, that children are drowning in our inner-city schools and have been

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drowning there year after year and decade after decade, but I do not recall anything like the universal lament that has met the drowning scene in *An Inconvenient Truth*. Then again, the polar bear depicted in that movie has two incontrovertible advantages over Kozol's kids: it's digital and it's white.

It would be unfair to attribute the excesses of the new religion entirely to the influence of Gore's movie, though it is hard not to see them embodied there. Early in the script Gore refers tellingly to "my friend the late Carl Sagan," who as I recall also had the unnerving habit of juxtaposing his own enlarged face with depictions of cosmic events. Watching a film that compels its audience to consider future generations, I found that I imagined a small child sitting at my elbow, tugging at my sleeve, and asking, "Grandpa, is that God?"

No, sweetheart, not God, but the imagery of something almost as absolute. It will drive the agenda of our next administration in the same cynical way as "the threat of global terror" drives that of the current regime. A new chorus of sanctimonious ministers will point to the melting ice caps, much as Bush and Cheney pointed to the site of the twin towers, and dare any would-be dissenter to profane the rising steam. I give them six months to find the temerity to say, "You are either with us or you are against us."

Tell us something we haven't already heard. Gore speaks of the need for "a different perspective," one that will place us "above ourselves and above history"—a pair of coordinates that would seem to place us in outer space, the better to see the "iconic" blue earth, I suppose. But this is the old perspective: the race to the moon, the triumph of the will, the forward march of progress on a goosetep and a prayer. The unquestioned belief that the answer to every human dilemma and desire is a gizmo—in short, the very attitude that gave us global warming to begin with. Those measuring the ice shelf in Greenland would do well to spend a few weeks measuring the time that typically elapses between any mention of conservation and the quick segue to something sexier; that is, to something you can buy or sell. The abolition of obscene excess, the equitable distribution of finite resources—

these have the same appeal for our movers and shakers as adopting a crack baby has for the infertile members of their club. We have all these wonder-working technologies, all these clever schemes for producing the golden eggs—or you could always take home little Bernice. But that's going to be a lot of work.

The bottom line here is, as always, the bottom line, already being parsed out in prospectus form for the eco-savvy investor. Climate change will offer "many unique opportunities for outsized gains," according to Spratt Asset Management, which feels compelled to add: "It is undoubtedly callous to discuss the investment opportunities that an abrupt climate change will spawn, considering the unspeakable horrors that life on our planet is facing." Gregg Easterbrook, writing in the April issue of *The Atlantic*, is less of a prig. The question he invites us to ask in regard to climate change—"What's in it for me?"—is "neither crass nor tongue-in-cheek," he assures us. Much of what's in it for you (that is, if you happen to be affluent, educated, etc.) will come in the form of carbon trading, a shell game allowing polluters to purchase "offsets" in green-energy production, which may or may not come to include nuclear power. According to Dan Dudek, chief economist for the advocacy group Environmental Defense, "the beauty of carbon trading is that it has the potential to harness a primal human impulse—greed—and redirect it toward saving the planet."

Presumably this is not the same greed that inspired ExxonMobil to wage a campaign of disinformation about climate change. Presumably we might also consider redirecting the primal human impulse of hate. We could get the Ku Klux Klan to buy "offsets" for lynchings in Mississippi by funding paramilitaries in Darfur—much as the nations of Christendom have for decades offset all those nasty emissions coming out of Dachau, York, and Babi Yar by conniving in the occupation of the West Bank. It's the devil's old remedy: If you're being poisoned to death, try taking more poison.

If I sound bitter it is partly because I have been vouchsafed a glimpse of

the new carbon-trading world order in the New England villages where I have lived, taught, and buried the dead for close to thirty years, and where any egress from one's house now risks collision with an eco-fluent carpetbagger. Apparently, this place that has never had much use to the larger world beyond that of hosting a new prison or a solid-waste dump turns out to be an ideal location for an industrial "wind farm," ideal mostly because the people are too few and too poor to offer much in the way of resistance. So far only one of the towns affected has "volunteered"—in much the same way and for most of the same reasons as our children volunteer for service in Iraq—to be the site of what might be described as a vast environmentalist grotto of 400-foot-high spinning "crosses" before which the state's green progressives will be able to genuflect and receive absolution before zooming back to their prodigiously wired lives.

The plot has unfolded in the usual way, according to a formula that has not changed significantly since the purchase of Manhattan Island: flash the trinkets, entice the local sachems (unless they're hostile), say the word *entrepreneur*, which in the native tongue means "divine." People who have traditionally had to drive long distances to be instructed and certified by their betters need no longer budge an inch to hear the old cant about Vermont's venerable record of leading the nation, as exemplified by its precedent-setting abolition of slavery, a sacrifice entailing untold hardship for its many cotton plantations. The intestinal tipping point came for me when a contingent of students from Middlebury College (annual tuition and fees \$44,330) found both the gas money and the gall to drive to the town of Sheffield (annual per capita income \$13,277) in order to lecture the provincials on their responsibility to the earth and its myriad creatures. Not to be outdone, a small private boarding school in our area (annual tuition and fees \$76,900) has challenged the wind project as a source of noise disturbance for its special-needs students. This could actually turn the tide. Like a bookie assessing the hindquarters of horses, I've learned to place my bets

with a sharp eye on tuition and fees. Don't tell me where you went to school; just tell me what it cost.

Meanwhile, in my town, where 67 percent of the kids in the public elementary school qualify for a reduced price on their hot lunch, a fifteen-year-old boy has just been arrested for shooting to death his mentally ill mother's twenty-four-year-old boyfriend in a trailer located on—I kid you not—Freedom Road. The story appears on the front page of the local newspaper next to an article about the public hearings for the wind farm. It's the sort of sad-all-around story not uncommon in these parts, but for once it has a silver lining, because the lightbulb that will shine like the Bethlehem star over the poor little fucker's cell-block initiation may be powered by a negligible percentage of renewable juice. Our nomadic purveyors of information will be able to fly in and out on their seraphic wings and pronounce it all very good. And the offset mongers and their green-team lackeys, those whose favorite sneering put-down is "not in my back yard," will be glad to know that none of this—the wind farm, the coal plant it "offsets," or any wasted life that perishes in between—is even close to *their* back yards. And the lattes will roll down like waters, and the bullshit like an ever-flowing stream.

I woke in the middle of the night, unable to sleep, probably due to some indigestible thing I'd eaten, a sacred cow or a digital bear. On my way back to bed from scribbling some of these words, I looked out the window and saw the stars through the bare branches of the century-old-and-older sugar maples that line my dirt road. I confess that iconic, God's-eye views of Earth do not move me, but starlight through the bare branches of maple trees in one radically particular place can move me a great deal. If the earth continues to grow warmer, I may live to see the day when sugar maples no longer exist at this latitude. I think of that line of Rilke's, written after beholding another particular object of beauty: "You must change your life."

But how? It is not enough to acknowledge that global warming ex-

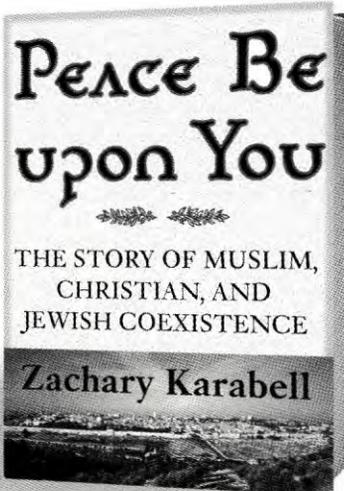
ists; we also need to ask what global warming means. Surely one thing it means is that a culture that has as its highest aim the avoidance of anything remotely resembling physical work must change its life. If you want an inconvenient truth, there it is: that the very notion of convenience upon which our civilization rests is a lie that is killing us. And if you want to see how quickly green can turn yellow, make mention of that abundant, renewable fuel source whose chief emission is human sweat.

But that is only half a meaning, less than half. We're told that "the science is all in on global warming" and that it's just about unanimous. I believe it. We owe a debt to Al Gore that most people now believe it. But the science has also been in, and in for a while, and is every bit as unanimous in concluding that we are members of a single species, descendants of common ancestors—*family* in every conceivable sense of the word. How can we imagine that we will address one overwhelming consensus of scientific opinion without having acted fully on the other? The question is not sentimental. If one can be forgiven for applying base political considerations to such a sublimely moral issue: you do not repair the climate of an entire planet without staggering sacrifices, and people will not elect to make staggering sacrifices unless the burden is shared with something like parity.

To put that as succinctly as possible, the days of paradise for a few are drawing to a close. The game of finding someone else in some convenient misery to fight our wars, pull our rickshaws, and serve as the offset for our every filthy indulgence is just about up. It is either Earth for all of us or hell for most of us. Those are the terms, those have always been the terms, and any approach to climate change that begins on those terms can count me as a loyal partisan. Otherwise, don't expect me to get overly excited as to which side of a golf-course heart attack shows the affluent, the educated, the suburban, and the wired a world much hotter than the one they were banking on. ■

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