



## **Global Warming and Moral Responsibility**

*Wednesday August 25, 2006*

This summer I had the opportunity to read an essay provocatively titled, “The Death of Environmentalism.”<sup>1</sup> The title is misleading; it’s not a postmortem of the environmental movement, which is reasonably healthy. The subtitle is more accurate, “Global Warming Politics in a Post-Environmental World.” Title aside, the authors make at least three excellent points. First, climate change should not be pigeon-holed as an environmental issue. Second, the debate over climate change should be fundamentally framed in moral rather than scientific, terms. Third, the discussion needs to be positive and forwarding-looking instead of pessimistic and fatalistic.

Climate change is certainly an environmental issue. But rising global temperatures are also a major public health issue. Medical experts predict significant increases in heat related deaths, along with increases in diseases spread by mosquitoes and rats.<sup>2</sup> Climate change is an agricultural issue, as rain patterns may shift. It is a refuge issue, as millions might be forced to move by rising sea levels. It is an economic issue, as an increase in highly destructive storms may cost billions of dollars. Over the last few years, more and more of the feared consequences of global warming have become facts. Clearly, climate change isn’t just about environmental preservation—it’s about preserving our way of life.

In the past, the climate change debate has largely focused on science. Simply put, that issue has been resolved: climate change is happening. Now its time to turn to the ethical issue: what should we be doing about it? Admittedly, it will be difficult for us to begin to see climate change in moral terms. For climate change to become an ethical issue there must be some way to assign responsibility for the problem. “[Moral] responsibility is inconsistent with anonymity.”<sup>3</sup> As I’ve noted, evidence points to the conclusion that humans are influencing the weather. But if this is the case, then we’re all implicated, so it’s still difficult to assign responsibility.

One way for people to accept responsibility is to see the consequences of their actions. One year ago today, a tropical depression began forming in the Atlantic. That storm became Hurricane Katrina. While the destruction of New Orleans and the chaos wrought by Katrina had many sources, many observers—including Time Magazine—have pointed to global warming as a likely contributor.<sup>4</sup>

There is a simple response to questions about the role of climate change in shaping storms like Katrina: we have no way of knowing for sure. There is no single direct link between any particular killer storm and climate change. But while scientists have yet to collect conclusive data, the pattern is striking. Over the last 50 years hurricane wind speeds have increased by 50%. Over the last 30 years storms have grown twice as destructive, and category 3 and 4 hurricanes have become twice as common.<sup>5</sup> Storms derive their energy from heat on the ocean’s surface,

and warmer waters will likely generate more powerful hurricanes.<sup>6</sup> So yes, the human impact on climate change could be causing a greater frequency of terrible storms like Katrina. If this is true, images of New Orleans' poor fleeing the aftermath of Katrina might become the ultimate symbol of the age of climate change.

As of now, there is no absolutely conclusive scientific link, only strong patterns and suspicions. And of course, the uncertainty in the science can be—and has been—used as our “excuse.” Indeed, with climate change it may always be possible to escape responsibility by appealing to uncertainty. But *should* we use scientific uncertainty to escape responsibility? Rather than accept moral namelessness, maybe we should see Katrina as a galvanizing event, and let it prompt us to begin to take responsibility, even if we can't be 100% sure that we are responsible. Perhaps the right thing to do is to reject moral namelessness and inaction, and simply accept responsibility—and then *do* something.

The debate over climate change has been dominated by skepticism and pessimism. But “why is optimism absent from this debate?”<sup>7</sup> As a country we rise to challenges. It's entirely possible that “Action to prevent runaway global warming may prove to be cheap, practical, effective and totally consistent with economic growth.”<sup>8</sup> Hopefully, once we begin to accept responsibility for the potential consequences of global warming, we will get serious about doing something. It may just turn out that transforming our economy away from fossil fuels is not a zero-sum game. Our economy has always been stimulated by challenges that require America's energetic and innovative spirit.

In any case, we have yet to seriously attempt to meet the challenges of global warming. So it's too early to be pessimistic or to hide from an environmental nightmare. It's time to see global warming as a moral and economic challenge and step up.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus, “The Death of Environmentalism, Global Warming Politics in a Post-Environmental World,” (2004).

<sup>2</sup> Environmental Protection Agency, “Climate Change and Public Health,” (1997).

<sup>3</sup> John Lachs, *Intermediate Man* (1985).

<sup>4</sup> “Is Global Warming Fueling Katrina?” *Time*, August, 29, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Hayden, “Super Storms, No End in Sight,” *National Geographic*, (August 2006).

<sup>6</sup> “Katrina and Global Warming,” <http://www.pewclimate.org/specialreports/katrina.cfm>  
Accessed, 8/22/2006.

<sup>7</sup> Gregg Easterbrook, “Some Convenient Truths” *The Atlantic Monthly*, September, 2006.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*