



The First Stone *By Joel Bleifuss*

Listen to the Canary

'Saying you don't believe in global warming is like saying you don't believe in the second law of thermodynamics.'

THE *DAY AFTER TOMORROW* tells the story of a planet suddenly beset by catastrophic weather. Yes, the movie is hyperbolic but not entirely off the mark. Contrary to conventional wisdom, global warming could well make its presence felt suddenly and catastrophically, unless humans do something about climate change soon.

About 10 years ago, Richard Alley, a professor of geosciences at Penn State University, went up to the middle of Greenland and collected a core of ice that contains the annual ice deposits of the last 100,000 years or so. Alley found that about 12,000 years ago Greenland's climate changed within the space of 10 years from a climate that was cold, dry and windy to one that was warmer, wetter and less windy. It was, he told National Public Radio's Richard Harris, as if in one decade the weather in Chicago became like that of Atlanta.

"What we know is that there are threshold points, there are flipping points, in the Earth's climate," he said. Alley provided this analogy: "If you sit in a canoe and you lean a little bit, not much happens, and you lean a little more and not much happens, and you lean a little—and you're in the water."

Are we approaching such a tipping point?

The '90s was the warmest decade on record and probably the warmest in the last 1,000 years and probably longer, says Mark Lynas, author of the just released *High Tide: The Truth About our Climate*

Crisis. The top five warmest years ever recorded are 1998, 2002, 2001, 1997 and 1995.

The U.N.-sponsored Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has examined several scenarios and predicted a rise in

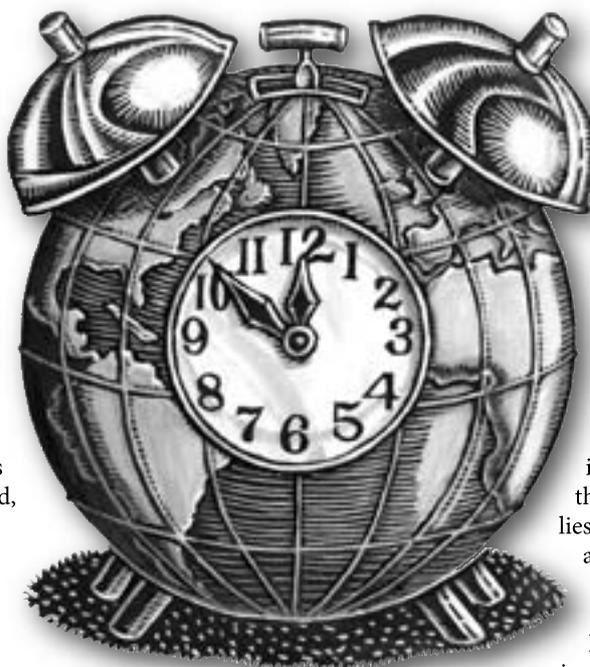
enced thunderstorms. "Some Native American elders thought that the loud bangs of thunder were bombs going off," he writes.

The permafrost in Fairbanks, 125 miles south of the Arctic Circle, is disappearing and the wooden houses in the town are sinking into the melting soil. Vicki Heiker's house is totally lopsided. She told Lynas, "When you spill something it's like you don't have much of a chance. You've got to clean it up fast otherwise it will get away from you."

Indeed, the Arctic is experiencing temperatures that are rising 10 times faster than the rest of the world. "In many ways Alaska is the canary in the coal mine, showing the rest of the world what lies ahead as global warming accelerates," writes Lynas.

So what does global warming portend? The IPCC predicts that hurricanes will get stronger and floods and droughts will become endemic. Tropical diseases will move northward. (West Nile virus anyone?) Billions of people will lose their supply of potable water. Ecosystems will unravel. The agricultural economy will become chaotic as food supplies are endangered. And the safer, northern climes, writes Lynas, will become the destination of "environmental refugees, when millions will be made homeless by extreme weather and seawater flooding of low-lying areas."

"The most realistic aspect of *The Day After Tomorrow* isn't its scientific basis but its portrayal



temperature in the 21st Century between 3 and 10 degrees Fahrenheit. The lower estimate is more than double the change in the 20th Century, while the higher projection is in the catastrophic range—a point at which civilization, indeed life, on Earth as we know it ceases to exist.

Lynas traveled the globe to chronicle the climate changes humans are already experiencing. He went to Barrow, Alaska, 340 miles above the Arctic Circle, where average wintertime temperatures have shot up an average of 11 degrees Fahrenheit. For the first time in recorded history the people of Barrow have experi-

of a country and a vice president in denial about global warming,” says Lynas. “The Bush administration is trying to shy away from the scientific consensus and the reality that it represents a catastrophe worse than the one portrayed by Hollywood. Global warming is taking us into a world that hasn’t been seen for at least 50 million years. This will drive the majority of plants and animals over the edge to extinction and also likely lead to the collapse of human civilization as well.”

Putting the brakes on global warming is only possible if the United States, the world’s largest emitter of greenhouse gases, takes action. But that is not likely to happen unless public opinion shifts dramatically. Lynas writes:

As a result of a devastating combination of greed and denial, the American people have been subjected to one of the most pervasive misinformation campaigns ever undertaken. The executive branch of government, in tandem with powerful far-right think tanks and a woefully compliant media, has labored to convince every citizen that climate change is either not happening, not dangerous, or merely in need of more research.

Which brings us to the leaked NASA directive that instructed its scientists “not to do interviews or otherwise comment on anything having to do with [*The Day After Tomorrow*].”

“It’s just another attempt to play down anything that might lead to the conclusion that something must be done,” an unnamed government climate scientist told the *New York Times*. He and other federal researchers can speak only off the record, given the Bush administration has, in effect, banned federal climatologists from talking to the press.

NASA rescinded the order once it became public, and then did *Day After Tomorrow* damage control on its Web site, which informs any concerned citizen:

Most climate experts agree that climate change is occurring now and may accelerate in the future,



A sign of things to come. Twenty-two of the warmest years in recorded history have taken their toll on this glacier in Peru’s Jacamba Valley, shown here in 1980 and 2002.

although not as drastic as some fiction might portray. Scientists agree that a sudden shift in our climate such as flipping from today’s slowly warming planet to an icebox is bogus and does not obey fundamental rules of physics. ...

A more realistic scenario might include regional disruptions in climate, spanning over decades not days. ... One thing is for certain: the climate system is extremely complex, and many questions remain.

Yes questions remain, yet the underlying facts remain the same. Global warming is already with us and it will get much worse unless we cut back on global greenhouse gas emissions radically within the next two decades. Lynas is troubled by the fact that, when researching his book, many U.S. atmospheric scientists would speak with him only off the record. He writes in *High Tide*, “A very powerful section of the U.S. media and political establishment are in total denial about the reality of global warming and as long as this situation continues it is going to be impossible for the United States to join

a global effort to bring down greenhouse gas emissions.”

“Climate change is a matter of atmospheric physics, it is not something you can believe in or not believe in,” says Lynas. “Saying you don’t believe in global warming is like saying you don’t believe in the second law of thermodynamics.”

James E. Hansen, Director of NASA’s Goddard Institute for Space Studies, first sounded alarms about global warming back in the late ’80s. In the March 2004 *Scientific American*, he writes that even though the Earth’s climate is “closer to the level of ‘dangerous anthropogenic interference’ than has been realized,” he is “optimistic” because he knows it is possible to reduce and stabilize greenhouse gas emissions.

“I am optimistic,” he writes, “because I expect empirical evidence for climate change and its impacts to continue to accumulate, and that this will influence the public, public interest groups, industry, and governments at various levels. The question is: Will we act soon enough? It is a matter of time.” ■



MAKING EN

Politics, Profit & Bush's North Korea Policy

THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION'S NEOCONSERVATIVES purport to seek security through military might. But last year, the administration surrendered its dominance over North Korea when Pyongyang separated enough plutonium to deter any U.S.-threatened regime change.

In addition to destabilizing East Asia, Pyongyang's advances in nuclear warhead and long-range missile technology spur Star Wars missile defense spending here at home. And that raises a question: Will this national security decision allow President George W. Bush to keep his 2000 campaign pledge to deploy missile defense?

Relations between the United States and the Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea declined precipitously in 2002 when the Bush administration claimed that Pyongyang had admitted to a secret nuclear weapons program and Washington cut off bilateral talks. Predictably, North Korea expelled International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors and rushed to reprocess its spent nuclear fuel rods into plutonium for nuclear weapons.

Bush had earlier announced that he "loathed" North

Korean head of state Kim Jong Il, stationed the U.S.S. Kitty Hawk in the Sea of Japan, readied a bomber squadron in the South Pacific and threatened regime change. The administration trained intercontinental ballistic missiles with nuclear warheads on Kim's isolated republic shortly after taking office.

Ambassador Charles Pritchard was President Bush's Special Envoy for Negotiations with North Korea. He resigned last August, after the State Department barred him from attending crucial meetings with North Korean representatives. Speaking of Bush's North Korea policy, Pritchard told *In These Times*: "At best it can be described only as amateurish. At worst, it is a failed attempt to lure American allies down a path that is not designed to resolve the crisis diplomatically. The Bush administration needs to reassert itself ... responsibly [and] bring sanity and adult supervision to the administration's infighting."

Along with its bellicose stance, the Bush White House overlooked intelligence that North Korea was building nuclear weapons for use against the United States and its allies. In effect, the Bush administration reversed nuclear proliferation policy successes that had been years in the making.