

CLIMATE CHANGE: A COMMUNICATION FAILURE

IN WHICH I LEARN...

- **THE LANGUAGE OF THE CLIMATE MOVEMENT DOESN'T WORK FOR MOST PEOPLE.**
- **NGOS FOCUS TOO MUCH ON POLICY, NOT GETTING THE PUBLIC ON BOARD.**
- **IN THIS PROPAGANDA WAR, WE AREN'T EVEN ON THE BATTLEFIELD.**
- **TV ADS ARE CHEAPER THAN YOU THINK.**

In the next few decades, if we keep heating the planet, civilization risks collapse. Scientists are ringing alarm bells. Yet polls consistently show that most of the public still doesn't recognize the urgency of the climate crisis. Among progressive communications mistakes, this is the biggest and most important failure ever. How has this happened? In part because activists and scientists have ignored the communication principles outlined in this book's introduction. For our civilization's survival, the world must mount a World War II-type mobilization. We must totally and quickly transform the entire energy, built, transportation, and industrial infrastructures to stop polluting the planet with oil, coal, and gas. But how can the public be mobilized for war if they don't even know they are under attack? Unfortunately, only a minority of the global public knows that fossil fuel pollution threatens human life on Earth. We haven't gotten through to them.

It's as if Paul Revere had never made his ride to Lexington. Most people don't know that a disaster is coming quickly. Few can even explain simply what climate change is or what causes it. Forty percent of Americans think climate change is caused by the ozone hole. How can people support the massive changes we need when they don't even know what they're fighting?

If we don't get the public much more informed and engaged, quickly, we are unlikely to save humanity's future on a livable planet.

This is not an exaggeration.



In front of the Trump Hotel in Washington, D.C., at the People's Climate March, April 2017.

How can civilization survive the coming refugee crisis as many of the world's coastal cities are literally swamped and need to be abandoned? This will happen during my adult children's lifetime if we don't change course to 100 percent clean energy in a hurry. All the people of South Florida, Bangladesh, Mumbai, Tokyo, New Orleans, Karachi, Shanghai, New York, Manila, and Boston—where will they go?

How can civilization survive the coming food scarcity crisis from extreme weather in many parts of the world, which will cause price shocks? Or people who are unable to farm outside, like in most of South Asia, due to extreme heat and humidity? Or the looming collapse of the world's fisheries as we acidify the ocean? When carbon dioxide from burning fossil fuels hits the water, it turns into carbonic acid. In acid oceans, shellfish can't make shells and that, combined with increased temperatures, kills the great marine nurseries, the coral reefs.

How can the economy survive when fires, flooding, and storms make it impossible to get property insurance? Or when we have to divert limited resources to build sea walls, raise highways and airports? How can China and India cope with famine affecting billions when the Himalayan glaciers no longer provide reliable irrigation water and coastal rice fields are swamped by the sea? What happens in Nevada, Arizona, and California when the water runs out? It's starting to now, and the drying out will only get worse if we don't change course fast.

Climate change is COVID-19 in slow motion, only much more severe in its impact on health and the economy. Mosquito- and tick-borne illnesses are currently increasing with the temperatures,

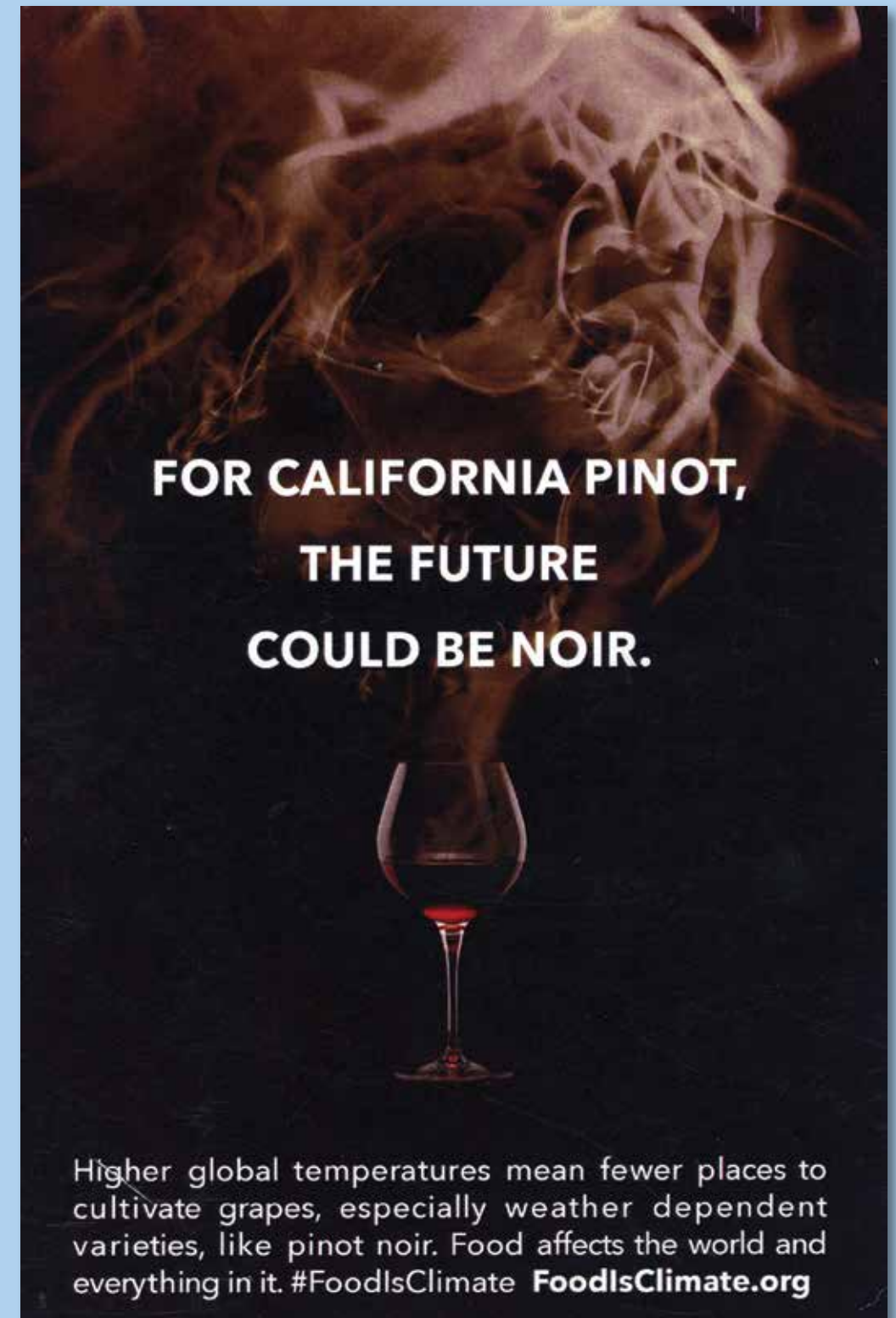
along with insect range. New viruses will likely emerge from habitat destruction and melting permafrost. Even allergies will worsen with increased carbon dioxide levels, as there will be more pollen.

Unfortunately, most of the public does not appreciate the urgency of the climate emergency. If we hope to avoid the worst consequences, time is rapidly running out. And few people understand that solving it will create greater, lasting prosperity and health for all.

As I write, only 45 percent of Americans think climate change will affect their lives. Only 35 percent believe the climate issue is extremely urgent. Only 54 percent accept that humans are the cause. And only 24 percent know that literally all the climate scientists agree we are heating the Earth catastrophically. (These findings are from the authoritative Yale Project on Climate Change Communication). Asked to rank twenty issues in order of importance, most Americans put climate well behind other issues. Although these figures are better than a few years ago, they are not nearly enough to win.

A group I advise, the Potential Energy Coalition, recently surveyed the owners of middle-class coastal homes in Florida. Their homes now flood regularly, but only 20 percent identified sea level rise from climate change as the cause—most blamed “bad sewage systems” or “overdevelopment.” This, in the most climate-threatened state in the nation. In California, in the counties most ravaged by wildfire, the majority of the public still doesn't think climate change will affect their lives. Clearly, climate activists are not reaching the public.

Climate postcard series by Josh Gold.



Among Republicans, the figures are even worse. A small minority believes climate change is caused by humans and threatens our way of life. According to Gallup, this number has actually declined in the past few years. We can't solve this without some conservatives, yet climate activists have mounted no serious effort to convince them.

Although there is scientific consensus on climate change, why do most people think there is enormous disagreement among climate scientists about whether humans are warming the planet? The fossil fuel industry did this. It intentionally and falsely spread doubt about the science, as outlined in the great book and documentary by sociologist Naomi Oreskes, *Merchants of Doubt*.

But it's not enough for progressives to blame the fossil fuel industry's disinformation campaign. Of course, that's a big part of the problem. So is the television news media's failure to cover the issue prominently. And it's not enough to blame the corruption of politicians by the biggest, most corrupting and dirtiest industry on Earth.

We also have to blame ourselves. So far, our climate movement has not reached the public successfully. We have failed to move them on the most important issue we face.

We have never had a campaign large enough to reach the public with the truth. So, they don't know. Dr. Anthony Leiserowitz, head of the Yale Project on Climate Communications, has shown repeatedly that when you inform almost any group that all the climate scientists agree, many more people conclude that we must address the issue.

So, what is the problem? Dr. Leiserowitz says, "We are in a propaganda war with the fossil fuel industry, but we aren't even on the battlefield."

THE ENLIGHTENMENT FALLACY

Linguist George Lakoff explains that progressives look down on selling ideas. They view selling as a dirty, slimy business, something beneath them.

As I mentioned in the introduction, people who study the humanities, arts, law, and sciences are trained to believe that the facts by themselves are persuasive. Lakoff calls it "the enlightenment fallacy." They honestly believe if they make one good presentation to someone in power, the world changes. But the world doesn't work that way.

We fact-obsessed progressives are up against people who went to business school, who advance their careers by mastering marketing, communications, and cognitive science to sell products and services. They learn the essential communications principle that the only way to change public opinion is to repeat simple messages, ideally those embedded in moral stories that tug at emotion. They also learn they have to *guarantee* that their messages reach audiences and do so *repeatedly*.

In my fifty years of experience, I've observed over and over again that progressives—NGOs, scientists, the college educated—love complexity and hate to simplify things or repeat themselves. This means they recoil from the very approach that's been proven to work. As I keep saying, we may understandably hate simplifications like the incessant "Make America Great Again." But, sorry folks, that *worked*. All too often, what progressives practice is the "telepathic theory of communications." Somehow, magically, when we know something, everybody finds out about it!

In the United States, the major environmental NGOs spend over \$2 billion a year. Yet, the percentage of their budgets devoted to preaching beyond the choir is less than 1 percent of that. This

guarantees failure. Almost none follow the rule that now, with media fragmentation, you have to buy advertising to reach the public effectively. These groups use social media mostly to raise money, not to win hearts and minds.

Plus, the climate messages they promote often miss the point. They focus too much on polar bears, not how climate change affects human beings. That doesn't work. They tend to preach sacrifice, which doesn't sell. In fact, we can have cars, planes, vacations, and well-heated homes—they just need to be powered differently and can be. Economically. With existing technology.

Unfortunately, many environmental groups have fallen prey to bureaucracy. They practice paralyzingly slow consensual decision-making, which produces an inbred subculture out of touch with the public. Of course, I'm simplifying and there are exceptions. I can't tell you how many meetings I have attended that go all day yet make no decisions. Too often, the result of progressive meetings is to schedule more meetings. Now, there are many wonderful, committed people in these organizations, but I'm afraid something is broken in the nonprofit model.

In the 1970s, the major environmental groups—then newly formed—were quick moving, entrepreneurial, bold, and willing to take risks. In 1970, after the first Earth Day, when a car was buried as a symbolic act seen round the world, their creative activism forced President Nixon to create the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The groups successfully lobbied Congress to pass landmark legislation, including the Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act, Endangered Species Act, National Environmental Policy Act, and many others. The groups were in touch with the public and mobilized. That's much less true now.

Hardly any new environmental laws have been passed since then, even as the constituency for action has grown enormously. And under recent Republican administrations, enforcement of the existing laws has waned, without sufficient organized public outcry. The Trump administration literally was moving to poison people's air, water, and even food—but the public rarely heard much about it.

Maybe NGO leaders and board members should face term limits. Some have stayed in their positions far too long, as if granted tenure. Sadly, this does not foster creativity and innovation.

On the Right, and in business, if people fail repeatedly, they're fired. On the Left and in the Democratic Party, repeated failure is often no obstacle to retention and promotion. Once a member of the tribe, always a member. I know this sounds harsh, but it is frequently the case.

Lakoff also explains why liberal foundations and philanthropists spend so little money on transforming public opinion. "At conservative foundations," Lakoff once explained to me "the mission is to 'preserve the system at all costs because we benefit from it.' But at progressive foundations, the dominant view is 'engage in as many individually meritorious acts of charity as possible.'" No wonder the other side is winning. Our funders often fail to concentrate resources on the most important strategic goal—power. Their funding is often scattered about in mostly small grants. And they barely fund communications at all.

The climate foundations devote the bulk of their funding—a lot of money—to what I call the "supply of policy" commissioning studies, think tanks, reports, conferences, meetings, offices abroad, etc.

Today, we have no shortage of great policy ideas. We largely know what to do. We need a slowly rising price on carbon, so fossil fuels pay their true cost to society. We need to require utilities to switch to clean energy, and we need laws increasing appliance, building, and mileage efficiency. All new cars sold need to be electric starting in 2030. Homes need to be built with solar panels and with electric heating, not oil and gas. Low-cost loans need to be available to renovate and insulate all existing buildings, with new super windows to save energy. We need regenerative agriculture and the end of tax-subsidized meat production. And we need to pull enormous amounts of carbon out of the air through both natural and probably mechanical systems.

We lack *demand* for these policies, otherwise known as *political will*. There isn't enough public pressure on elected officials, so they ignore us, capitulating to polluting industries instead. We also need to elect new leaders who will change laws and transform the marketplace for clean energy products and services.

Alas, the climate funders hardly fund demand for change. Where is the massive public education at the scale needed? Where is widespread climate advertising to persuade the public? There isn't even a mass digital climate organizing platform, a MoveOn for climate, an obvious gap that could become self-supporting as well. (The recent launch of Families for A Future aims to fill the gap.)

TV ADS ARE CHEAPER THAN YOU THINK

The issue isn't mostly money. It's how the progressive community thinks, compared to our dirty-energy-promoting opponents.

Here's an example.

If you live in Washington, D.C., pretty much all you see on television are ads touting how wonderful fossil fuels are. Oil, coal, and gas will bring us prosperity, jobs, and energy independence, all of it explained by beautiful people.

But you almost *never* see TV ads explaining that if we keep using those fossil fuels, the National Mall, National Airport, and the Lincoln Memorial will be underwater, with the Potomac River flooding a big part of town. Why the paucity of progressive—and *true!*—messages? Because the climate and environmental groups don't buy much advertising. So, in one of the most important cities in the world for this issue, the consequences of climate change are largely *invisible*.

When I give presentations, I ask the audience how much they think it costs to buy a thirty-second television ad on Fox, CNN, or MSNBC in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area. Most people answer \$100,000. The real answer is \$2,000. That's right, only about \$2,000, a bit more for prime time.

So, the reason we don't counter the fossil fuel propaganda in our nation's capital isn't that we can't afford it. It's that *we don't think that way*. Our enemies do. They know from their business backgrounds that perception is reality, and perception can be manufactured and manipulated. They do it for evil, using falsehood. When are we going to do enough of it for good, with the truth?

This is a debate I have had several times with philanthropist George Soros. He hates advertising and marketing. It reminds him of his childhood

growing up under the propaganda of Hitler and Stalin. "You're manipulating people," George often says. I reply, "No, we are *undoing* the manipulation the forces of evil have already accomplished. We need to do this, or falsehood will reign." George's main philosophy is that we are all imperfect, and none of us can see reality by ourselves. So, at this point, he'll accuse me of being too sure of myself.

Fortunately, it's not too late. As noted earlier, there's a hopeful new climate marketing effort called the Potential Energy Collation. It's run by John Marshall, who left a top corporate branding job to work on climate full-time. He is attracting significant foundation funding—finally! In the past, environmental groups were much better at using advertising and other PR techniques to define the terms of debate, thrust issues into the news agenda, or force polluters to play defense. Environmental legend David Brower, who ran the Sierra Club from 1952 to 1969, used advertising frequently. Fighting a plan that would have flooded portions of the Grand Canyon, he bought ads in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* asking, "Should we also flood the Sistine Chapel so tourists can get nearer the ceiling?" I hope the leading environmental groups will return to their roots and do more of this once again. (David Brower broke with the Sierra Club when the board voted to support nuclear power, later founding Friends of the Earth, another leading environmental group.)

Which brings me to nuclear power. Many people alarmed about climate change wonder if we should build more nuclear plants, saying they don't release carbon dioxide. I respect their climate concern. But ever since I produced the 1979 No Nukes concerts at Madison Square Garden, nothing has changed my mind about the dangers of

nuclear power. As I explained in the chapter about the concerts, it's simply too dangerous. And poisonous. A millionth of a gram of plutonium waste in your lungs and you're dead. And now it's the most expensive form of power. Increasingly, its economic clock is being cleaned by the rapidly falling pieces of solar, wind, batteries, and energy efficiency. And those price reductions will only accelerate as we build more of them. As energy expert Amory Lovins has shown, every dollar invested in increasingly expensive nuclear is worse for the climate, as it snatches funding from far cheaper energy that's actually clean. Plus, nuclear plants take at least ten years to permit and build—we can build many gigawatts of solar and wind far faster and cheaper.

I'm confident we are unlikely to see a nuclear resurgence. Accidents could threaten millions, a risk we don't need to take. The plants produce poisonous wastes that need to be guarded for literally hundreds of thousands of years—talk about expensive! The plants themselves are terrorist targets. So are their adjacent waste pools.

When journalists call nuclear power "clean," I get an Orwellian cringe. Yes, nuclear power is low-carbon. But the waste products it creates are the most toxic substances ever created. There is no such thing as "clean cesium" or "clean strontium" or "clean plutonium." Any more than there is "clean coal."

Meanwhile, numerous studies have shown we really can become 100 percent renewably powered in time to ensure our survival. Studies also upend the claim that because solar and wind are variable, we need nuclear for "baseload" power. With an extended smart grid, various forms of storage, and demand-side management, truly clean energy can do the job.



Promoting "Fee and Dividend" in Washington, D.C., April 2017.

TAX POLLUTERS AND GIVE THE MONEY TO YOU

If civilization has a future, no doubt Dr. James Hansen will be one of its biggest heroes, for sounding the climate change alarm since the 1980s. He has been arrested several times, including at the White House, to raise attention to the dangers. (Of course, he's been attacked by the Right saying "scientists shouldn't be activists.") Like most economists, Hansen favors placing a price on carbon to solve climate change. The social costs of pollution from fossil fuels needs to be reflected in its price to influence consumer and investment decisions in our complex economy. It can't all be accomplished with top-down rules.

The form of carbon pricing Hansen supports looks to me like the only kind of carbon tax

Americans will ever support. It's a fee and dividend proposal and offers giant rebates to the American public. The idea was invented by Peter Barnes in his seminal book *Who Owns the Sky?* It involves charging a fee (you could call it a fine) on oil, coal, and gas, and then paying 100 percent of the combined fees equally divided to every legal US resident. Eventually rising to \$100 a ton of carbon, the fee would add \$1.00 a gallon to the price of gasoline. But it would also pay out almost \$4,000 a year to a family of four, more than offsetting the higher gas costs for most people. The fee and dividend proposal is highly progressive, taking money from big polluters and corporations (who get no dividend) and giving it entirely to the public.

The fee and dividend proposal adheres to the principles of communications I listed in the

introduction. It is simple to explain. We're going to tax polluters and give the money to you. It lends itself to simple terminology we can repeat—cash back, cash back to you. It occupies the moral high ground, as it makes polluters pay for their pollution. Properly and simply explained, it should have wide appeal.

Meanwhile, some prominent Republicans have endorsed the carbon fee and dividend idea. This has made some people on the Left of the climate movement recoil from it. What a shame. We won't solve climate change without some conservative support. This approach could be very powerful.

In recent years, I've worked with a number of Republicans to combat climate change. Some, like Jerry Taylor of the Niskanen Center and former Republican Congressman Bob Inglis, used to be massive climate deniers, but the evidence changed their minds. We need to welcome people like this to the cause. I'm shocked more funding isn't going to help raise their visibility. If they were better known, it would create safe political space for more Republicans to come forward on this most important issue.

One prominent Republican I have tried hard to convert, who made this very point to me, has so far refused to come forward himself. His name is Grover Norquist, the effective but notorious conservative organizer who got every Republican member of Congress to swear never to raise any taxes, ever (sadly, starving the nation of badly needed investments in its future). I brought Dr. James Hansen to spend half a day with him. Norquist clearly became convinced of the science. Grover knows the truth, but won't come forward.

LIKE EXPLODING 600,000 ATOM BOMBS A DAY

People learn from metaphors, and climate scientist James Hansen has created a very effective one. It happened while I was helping him write a 2012 TED Talk in Vancouver with clean tech investor Dan Miller. Hansen wanted to explain how very out of energy balance the Earth had become. "So much more energy is now coming into the Earth's atmosphere in the form of heat from the sun than is able to go back out to space, like it used to," he said.

I asked "How much extra energy is it?"

"It's an enormous amount," he answered. "It's a quarter of a watt per square meter."

"Jim, that doesn't sound like very much."

"What do you mean?" he said, a bit irritated. "There's a lot of square meters on the Earth!"

"Can you come up with a simpler figure that people can understand to show it's a lot of energy?" I asked. At that point Dan Miller whipped out his calculator and announced, "It's the same amount of energy as exploding 450,000 Hiroshima-size atomic bombs in the Earth's atmosphere *every day.*"

"Bingo," I said. "People can understand that." You gotta love scientists and their sometimes nerdy ways of explaining things.

So, under the pollution blanket we have put around the Earth, there are 450,000 atomic bombs going off daily, whose energy remains on Earth, fueling stronger storms, more severe droughts, melting polar and glacial ice, increasing rainstorms, and flooding. Pretty simple, right? Actually, it's now 600,000 atom bombs a day, as even more energy is being trapped on Earth now than when we wrote the TED Talk in 2012.

I submit that if the entire climate movement used this kind of language, in a unified way,

people would understand the danger far better. Instead, the language is complex and difficult to understand, and we have the Tower of Babel, with everyone explaining it differently.

Consider President Biden. This clearly well-meaning, good person cares about climate change. Yet he talks about it as “an existential threat,” a term few Americans understand. He mostly discusses climate in terms of all the good jobs solving it will create—and that is certainly true. However, that’s just one side of the message equation. People have to understand *why* we need to create those jobs—and they largely do not. Biden almost never talks about the threat from extreme weather. He never uses the term “pollution,” nor does he ever mention the cause of climate change—burning oil, coal, and gas. I so wish the president should make better use of what Teddy Roosevelt called his bully pulpit, his unique daily access to the public mind, to *teach* people the truth about climate change.

Biden and Democrats have made many language mistakes. First, they allowed their big social



Is this the best message? Climate March, April 2017.

policy and climate bill to be known as “reconciliation.” Nobody knows what that means. Then they allowed it to be characterized as the “\$3.5 trillion plan,” which sounds too costly. Actually, that amount was \$350 billion a year for ten years, half the military budget. Meanwhile, it would have been far better to use language about what was *in* the bill, which people widely support—child care, paid family leave, climate protection, etc. Perhaps it should have been called the Protect American Children and Families Act.

HOW TO HELP VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES

The climate movement is making another language error, and this is a delicate subject.

I have been involved in the fight for civil rights and racial justice for decades, working with criminal justice reform activists Bryan Stevenson, Nelson Mandela, Rev. Jesse Jackson, and many others. But I think the climate movement has made a big mistake in *overfocusing* on the disproportionate impact climate change has on racial minorities and low-income “frontline communities.”

The racial element of climate justice is really important. But hardly anybody knows what the slogan “climate justice” means, so it will never be a mass rallying cry. Plus, we need everyone—rich, poor, Black, white, Latinx, Asian, Indigenous, everyone—to see that *everyone* is going to be hurt by climate change. Until the vast majority of people understand that, we won’t have enough public support to solve the problem. Yes, minority and low-income communities are being disproportionately affected, but our rallying cry should be that everyone is on the frontlines of climate change.



Jane Fonda arrested for climate civil disobedience at the U.S. Capitol, October 11, 2019.

We can only help frontline communities if we get the majority of people to demand policies that stop climate change fast. This takes broad, mainstream majority appeal. When President Franklin D. Roosevelt introduced the concept of Social Security in the early 1930s, imagine what would have happened if he had proposed that a disproportionate amount of the benefits should go to elders who were poor and Black. It would have been a just proposal, but *it never would have passed*. The reason Social Security made it through Congress was that it benefited everyone. And nothing has done more to alleviate poverty in elderly Black Americans than Social Security. We have to be smarter about selling the changes needed to prevent climate catastrophe.

Of course, focusing only on the destructive impact of climate change can be a real downer. I’ve ruined dinner parties that way. People’s nervous systems shut down if you don’t mostly stress that *we can solve the crisis* and create a much greener and more prosperous world for all.

The leading proponent of that view is Amory Lovins, a truly inspirational climate and energy visionary going back to the 1970s. He founded the Rocky Mountain Institute, the preeminent clean energy think tank whose reports have consistently shown how solar, wind, batteries, electrified transportation, and energy-efficiency investments can largely mitigate the climate problem, while saving everyone loads of money.

But Lovins does more than write reports. In the 1980s, he built a house in Snowmass, Colorado, elevation seven thousand feet, that has never used one drop of fossil fuels in that cold, gray, snowy climate. Not one drop. And he did it using the technology of that time, which has advanced considerably since then. Amory calls his house “the banana farm.” In his greenhouse, he grows two banana crops a year using only renewable energy and efficient design. Amory is truly an inspiration.

We really can have a clean, prosperous, green future in harmony with nature. But only if we communicate effectively *and hurry up*.