

John Holdren: The Scientist Who Cried Wolf

Who is John Holdren? If you're Jonathan Chait, the answer seems to be: I don't really know.

Writing this weekend on his blog at *New York* magazine, Chait offered a **point by point rebuttal** of recent comments by Charles Krauthammer and George Will regarding the recently released National Climate Assessment introduced by President Obama's Science Advisor John Holdren. While I've resisted the urge to do my own point by point reply to Chait's fiscing of Krauthammer and Will's rebuttal, I do want to address a recurring theme in Chait's piece, which is that he really doesn't know much about President Obama's Science Advisor, John Holdren.

For example, Chait begins his critique by quoting Krauthammer to the effect that folks in the Administration have taken to blaming all different sorts of bad weather on climate change: "If it's very cold in the winter, they blame it, here in the northeast, they blame it on global warming, and the report says that global warming makes summers hotter and winters are generally shorter and warmer."

Chait is incredulous. "In one sentence, Krauthammer claims 'they' blame every cold winter on climate change, but does not identify who 'they' is. In the next sentence, he correctly says that the climate assessment links climate change with shorter, warmer winters in the United States, negating his previous point. "

Who, Chait wants to know, would be so absurd as to blame cold weather on global warming, especially when the National Climate Assessment says that global warming will lead to warmer winters? Answer: John Holdren, President Obama's Science Advisor. During the unusual cold spell at the beginning of this year, Holdren took to the web to argue that **"a growing body of evidence suggests that**

the kind of extreme cold being experienced by much of the United States as we speak is a pattern that we can expect to see with increasing frequency as global warming continues.” (Needless to say, other scientists have thrown cold water on this idea).

Holdren reappears later in Chait’s piece, when he is critiquing comments on the National Climate Assessment by George Will. As Will notes, the credibility of the NAC is somewhat undercut by the fact that “Mr. Holdren, who introduced this report, has his own record of very interesting failed forecasts.”

Chait’s retort: “It is not clear what failed Holdgren [sic] forecasts Will is referencing.”

If Chait was curious what failed forecasts Will was referring to, he might have just googled Holdren (admittedly this would require being able to spell his name correctly). If Chait had done so, he would’ve discovered that John Holdren originally came to fame in the 1970s warning of the impending catastrophe that would result from overpopulation and natural resource depletion. Writing in 1971, Holdren claimed that, because of overpopulation, “some form of ecocatastrophe, if not thermonuclear war, seems almost certain to overtake us before the end of the century.”

When he wasn’t worried about overpopulation, Holdren was worried about global cooling, claiming that pollution could push us into a “new ice age.” And when he wasn’t worried about global cooling, he was worried about global warming, suggesting that “carbon-dioxide climate-induced famines could kill as many as a billion people before the year 2020.”

To avert this catastrophe, Holdren called for “a massive campaign... to de-develop the United States,” and for a program of “population control, limitation of material consumption, redistribution of wealth, transitions to technologies that are environmentally and socially less disruptive than today’s, and movement toward some kind of world government.”

Holdren mused about adding sterilizing agents to the water supply, argued that

“compulsory population-control laws, *even including laws requiring compulsory abortion*, could be *sustained under the existing Constitution* if the population crisis became sufficiently severe to endanger the society, and suggested that “*It would even be possible to require pregnant single women to marry or have abortions*, perhaps as an alternative to placement for adoption, depending on the society.”

In reality, none of Holdren’s dire warnings have come to pass (though they did help to inspire **campaigns of forced sterilization and abortion** in the developing world). But from Holdren’s perspective, making wild predictions of doom that fail to materialize isn’t such a bad thing. As Holdren **later argued** “[t]o put too much emphasis on the correctness or incorrectness of particular predictions, however, is to miss the main point of writing usefully about the future. The idea is not to be ‘right,’ but to illuminate the possibilities in a way that both stimulates sensible debate about the sort of future we want and facilitates sound decisions about getting from here to there.”

This, presumably, is what George Will was referring to when he mentioned Holdren’s record of failed forecasts. It’s the sort of record that might make someone with a historical memory (like Krauthammer and Will) a bit skeptical of whatever doomsday scenario Holdren is now promoting. Jonathan Chait, it seems, doesn’t know about any of this. And that’s a pity.

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