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Intelligent Design?

Noam Chomsky

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President George W. Bush favours teaching both evolution and “Intelligent Design” in schools, “so people can know what the debate is about.” To proponents, Intelligent Design is the notion that the universe is too complex to have developed without a nudge from a higher power than evolution or natural selection.

To detractors, Intelligent Design is creationism — the literal interpretation of the Book of Genesis — in a thin guise, or simply vacuous, about as interesting as “I don’t understand,” as has always been true in the sciences before understanding is reached. Accordingly, there cannot be a “debate.”

The teaching of evolution has long been difficult in the United States. Now a national movement has emerged to promote the teaching of Intelligent Design in schools.

The issue has famously surfaced in a courtroom in Dover, Pa., where a school board is requiring students to hear a statement about Intelligent Design in a biology class — and parents mindful of the Constitution’s church/state separation have sued the board.

In the interest of fairness, perhaps the president’s speechwriters should take him seriously when they have him say that

schools should be open-minded and teach all points of view. So far, however, the curriculum has not encompassed one obvious point of view: Malignant Design.

Unlike Intelligent Design, for which the evidence is zero, malignant design has tons of empirical evidence, much more than Darwinian evolution, by some criteria: the world's cruelty. Be that as it may, the background of the current evolution/intelligent design controversy is the widespread rejection of science, a phenomenon with deep roots in American history that has been cynically exploited for narrow political gain during the last quarter-century. Intelligent Design raises the question whether it is intelligent to disregard scientific evidence about matters of supreme importance to the nation and world — like global warming.

An old-fashioned conservative would believe in the value of Enlightenment ideals — rationality, critical analysis, freedom of speech, freedom of inquiry — and would try to adapt them to a modern society. The Founding Fathers, children of the Enlightenment, championed those ideals and took pains to create a Constitution that espoused religious freedom yet separated church and state. The United States, despite the occasional messianism of its leaders, isn't a theocracy.

In our time, the Bush administration's hostility to scientific inquiry puts the world at risk. Environmental catastrophe, whether you think the world has been developing only since Genesis or for eons, is far too serious to ignore. In preparation for the G8 summit this past summer, the scientific academies of all G8 nations (including the US National Academy of Sciences), joined by those of China, India and Brazil, called on the leaders of the rich countries to take urgent action to head off global warming.

"The scientific understanding of climate change is now sufficiently clear to justify prompt action," their statement said. "It is vital that all nations identify cost-effective steps that they

can take now, to contribute to substantial and long-term reduction in net global greenhouse gas emissions.”

In its lead editorial, The Financial Times endorsed this “clarion call,” while observing: “There is, however, one holdout, and unfortunately it is to be found in the White House where George W. Bush insists we still do not know enough about this literally world-changing phenomenon.”

Dismissal of scientific evidence on matters of survival, in keeping with Bush’s scientific judgment, is routine. A few months earlier, at the 2005 annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, leading US climate researchers released “the most compelling evidence yet” that human activities are responsible for global warming, according to The Financial Times. They predicted major climatic effects, including severe reductions in water supplies in regions that rely on rivers fed by melting snow and glaciers.

Other prominent researchers at the same session reported evidence that the melting of Arctic and Greenland ice sheets is causing changes in the sea’s salinity balance that threaten “to shut down the Ocean Conveyor Belt, which transfers heat from the tropics toward the polar regions through currents such as the Gulf Stream.” Such changes might bring significant temperature reduction to northern Europe.

Like the statement of the National Academies for the G8 summit, the release of “the most compelling evidence yet” received scant notice in the United States, despite the attention given in the same days to the implementation of the Kyoto protocols, with the most important government refusing to take part.

It is important to stress “government.” The standard report that the United States stands almost alone in rejecting the Kyoto protocols is correct only if the phrase “United States” excludes its population, which strongly favours the Kyoto pact (73 per cent, according to a July poll by the Program on International Policy Attitudes).

Perhaps only the word “malignant” could describe a failure to acknowledge, much less address, the all-too-scientific issue of climate change. Thus the “moral clarity” of the Bush administration extends to its cavalier attitude toward the fate of our grandchildren.