

CLIMATE CHANGE: THE NECESSITY OF HAVING, KNOWING AND UNDERSTANDING COMPETING AND OPPOSITE VIEWPOINTS

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Abstract: The issues within the ubiquitous topic of climate change have two competing and opposite viewpoints; there is no widespread general consensus at this time. Both the conservative and progressive approaches need greater understanding of each other. “Keep your friends close and your enemies closer” and other concepts from The Art of War can be useful to reaching the best sustainable decisions and actions for addressing climate change. Key words: climate, change, understanding, conservative, progressive, strategy.

An opinion piece article from February, 2022 in a major U.S. agricultural publication caught my interest in a peculiar way. The article posited that climate change is driving an increase in natural disasters. Reading it, I found myself both strongly agreeing and strongly disagreeing with several stated facts and claims made. A particular reaction I had was “What is wrong with me that I cannot be in either full agreement or full disagreement with the substantive and well-written arguments of a respected agricultural writer?” Thinking further, it struck me that this was instead precisely what is right with me, to be in neither full agreement nor disagreement. And perhaps, just perhaps, the correct approach to the important and ubiquitous issues encased in climate change is to simultaneously approach the battleground, if you will, from both sides.

My general observation is that two distinct and competing viewpoints on climate change certainly exist, with no clear general consensus at this point in time even though some might claim there to be. I label them, for purposes of this discussion, as the conservative view and the progressive view, not implying either one as good or bad, as positive or negative. These labels and the general thesis of this paper, will not be acceptable to the

extreme ends of the viewpoints on climate change, but my life experiences lead me to believe that solutions to problematic issues are seldom if ever, found at the extremes anyway. Neither is it useful to sling extreme labels at either side, such as climate deniers or climate alarmists, with impunity.

In this vein then, I characterize the conservative approach to climate change as tending or disposed to maintaining existing views, conditions, and actions, with changes to actions marked by caution and moderations, believing it is best to not stray far from the status quo. I characterize the progressive approach to climate change as tending to address the issues with new insights, ideas, and actions, and making changes to improve the surrounding conditions by intervening in the status quo, believing that it is unacceptable to maintain things as they currently are.

While acknowledging that these definitions, or labels, are not fully sufficient, they are adequately useful and necessary to productively continue this discussion. And therein lies the theme of this presentation---how to better continue the discussion of climate change and how to come closer to consensus on the best, the most sustainable scientific, economic, political, social, and moral approaches to addressing climate change.

“Keep your friends close and your enemies closer still”. This famous quote is most often attributed to Sun Tzu, a military general around the 5th or 6th century B.C., who wrote the classic treatise on how to fight militarily, The Art of War. In addition to this familiar quote, Sun Tzu detailed other concepts, some of which can be roughly interpreted as:

- a key strategy is being fully prepared by studying the enemy’s weaknesses and strengths.
- be flexible because battles are often unpredictable.
- conflict should be approached strategically to minimize the waste of resources (avoid emotion).
- diplomacy is essential to avoid costly and destructive war (conflict). (*see footnote 1*)

These, and other concepts not listed above from The Art of War, have been applied to numerous areas outside the military; business, education, law, management, sports are examples. It has been related to life in general in the form that it is necessary to know more fully not only our own motives and beliefs but also the motives and beliefs of others who might oppose us, for the best outcome to occur. This can likewise be related to and applied to the debate over climate change.

I am not implying that conservatives and progressives are literally at war over climate change issues; at least I hope not. Nor are they enemies per se. Likewise, my concern here is not that one side or the other of the climate arguments should “win”, even though I personally

am mostly in tune with the conservative approach. Rather, my concern and position here is that the best decisions and actions on climate change issues can be found by each side looking for a closer understanding of the positions held by the opposing side, by examining and exposing not only the weaknesses but also the strengths of the opposition.

There is an “art” to “fighting” over the inherent conflicts among conservative and progressive views on climate change. Extreme views, emotional appeals, or dogged adherence to only one viewpoint, without genuinely examining the other, will not lead to sustainable decisions. Diplomacy emanating from strategic thinking on both sides is the better way to avoid destructive and costly waste of resources.

So what might be some specific examples of how to approach the concept of “...holding your enemy closer still” regarding climate change? As I observe the issues and claims of climate conservatives and progressives, I offer the following imperfect set. (*Note: I do not claim full accuracy nor an exhaustive summary; perhaps others can do so more accurately or can add better examples. Such is the essence of flexibility and diplomacy.*)

First, let us examine what things a climate progressive should know and attempt to more fully understand about the claims of climate conservatives.

1. Climate has always been changing over the long course of history: e.g. the Little Ice Age of the 14th century; the fossilized remains of animals in polar regions; former ocean coverage of current land areas (such as the coastal plain of North Carolina). Some climate changes occurred slowly over long periods of time, but some were rather abrupt and/or short-lived. Thus, it is natural for the climate to change, and mankind must focus on adapting accordingly rather than waste resources attempting to alter it.

As a progressive, what are the strengths of this conservative view? It can't be simply dismissed as nonsense, misinterpretation, or irrelevant to today. How do progressives acknowledge this in their own narrative? To what extent is a changing climate inevitable? Where might resources be better spent to adapt to climate change?

2. As an extension of #1, it is doubtful, or at least minimal, that humans are driving the current changes being observed. The evidence that human activity is a primary driver of climate change is weak. The correlations have not been sufficiently proved to be causal. Furthermore, mankind can neither stop nor reverse climate change.

Progressives make oft repeated statements that “Science is conclusive about.....” or “There is scientific consensus that...”. However, making such statements does not establish them as fact. There are numerous scientists, though in the minority, who strongly refute those claims. Science is not infallible and needs to be continually and legitimately challenged.

As a progressive who agrees with the assertions of conclusive scientific evidence and consensus on such science, what possible blind spots are you not acknowledging? Where are conservative scientific counterclaims legitimate? Where do they merit further consideration, or at least diplomatic rebuttal rather than simple dismissal?

3. Many of the progressive calls to action, policy, government control and mandates for addressing climate change are driven to a great extent by political motivations, goals, and agendas. Climate change is a convenient proxy for moving further towards a socialist society, more governmental control, and the removal of individual freedoms.

As a progressive, do you indeed have a political belief system that influences your views more than you recognize? Are you totally unbiased or neutral politically in arriving at your calls to action? Does the need to enact rules, mandates, etc. to address climate change override individual rights and freedoms? To what extent? Sustainable solutions require widespread social, political, and personal, not only scientific, support. Where do these concerns of conservatives have genuine merit that could override what you believe are necessary actions to address climate change?

4. Other conservative views and examples exist. As a progressive, do you know any of them? Which of them might better inform you about your own progressive view of things?

Now let us examine what things conservatives should know and attempt to more fully understand about the claims of climate progressives.

1. Scientific evidence is substantial and, in numerous areas (including human-induced change), overwhelming enough to demand decisive changes to the status quo towards climate issues. There is indeed general scientific consensus on numerous issues; consensus does not require full agreement before it is the valid position.

As a conservative what scientific evidences are substantial enough that you are blind to or are unwilling to accept under a near-impossible standard of total agreement. Where do you deny scientific evidence under the guise of “this scientific finding needs to be examined further”? What level of agreement must exist before you can accept a claim as being the consensus? As you claim there is not a consensus on the evidence that progressives present, is it also the case that your counterclaims are even farther from any consensus?

2. Climate changes are happening more rapidly now than ever before, due in large part to unprecedented human activities that affect climate. This time is different, and time is limited to reverse, halt, or at a minimum to slow the changes . Otherwise, we will soon reach a “tipping point” of irreversible damage with catastrophic consequences. We cannot wait to act until we actually see such consequences. We do not have the luxury of waiting and being reactive to climate change; we must be proactive. Major examples of this include the rapid melting of the Antarctic ice shelf and the ice fields of Greenland, along with the accelerating retreat of glaciers world wide, all of which are contributing to the rise in sea levels.

As a conservative, where should you not so easily dismiss these claims as being alarmist or as mere repeats of similar changes in the past? Indeed, can this time be different, or different enough, that intervening action now is justifiable? How much time do we have to wait and see before taking action? Is there truly unlimited time to let climate changes play out before deploying effective counter measures? Conservatives need to present a stronger case for why a more cautious approach and slower adoption of actions to combat climate change is the better strategy.

3. There is a moral obligation, especially to future generations and to poor people/countries/societies which suffer the most from climate related catastrophes. We do not have the moral luxury to sit idly by and watch climate consequences occur when it is within our ability to act positively. We are obligated to be good stewards of the earth’s resources and to act thusly.

As a conservative, to what extent do you have to agree with this moral argument, since you too have moral motivations for your positions? Where is the moral common ground? Dismissing or refuting the progressives’ call of moral

obligation and stewardship is probably a losing proposition. Strong moral arguments for a conservative approach need to be clearly established and articulated.

4. The progressive push toward making decisions and implementing actions motivated by climate concerns in the past have yielded useful innovations apart from direct effects on climate. New technology for the more efficient use of resources has developed in numerous areas. One example is the push for reduction in air pollution from internal combustion engines that has accomplished that and more in the overall efficiency of engines. There are numerous other examples of efficiency side effects.

As a conservative, where can you acknowledge the positive side effects of policies and innovations driven by progressives' push for actions on climate change? Where can you join in on embracing such technological change? What legitimate counter arguments can you make that greater efficiencies are not always the outcome when a fuller consideration of indirect costs is employed (for example, a fuller analysis of the costs of developing solar energy)?

5. Other progressive views and examples exist. As a conservative, do you know any of them? Do you care to know? Which of them, and in what way, might they better inform you about your own views on climate change?

Conclusions:

Climate change is an important enough and big enough issue that deserves full scrutiny from both conservative and progressive viewpoints. An approach from only one side is dangerous at best. Both sides would do well to embrace concepts from The Art of War as they might apply to the battle over climate change. This approach can support the best outcomes from both sides while simultaneously acting as a checkmate on the worst outcomes from both sides. Not everything is a weakness on the opposing side, and not everything is a strength on the side you support.

Is it possible, if both sides of the climate change debate approach it by examining the weaknesses and strengths of their opposition, by holding close the enemy with whom they disagree, that diplomatic, efficient, and sustainable solutions (peace) can be found? Can both sides gain the victories needed that will promote the overall good of society on earth?

Footnote 1: General reference to material published by The National Geographic Society, online Resources Library, The Art of War, August 31, 2020.

www.nationalgeographic.org/encyclopedia/art-war