



Global warming: Dire warnings are no joke

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So I want to start with Genesis 8, verse 21 and 22. 'Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done. As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease.' I believe that's the infallible word of God, and that's the way it's going to be for His creation."

— U.S. Rep. John Shimkus (R),
chair of the Subcommittee on Environment and Economy, denying global warming.

The pages of the New Yorker magazine and other publications have for decades featured the final crisis of human civilization as farce. Cartoon images of religiously inspired ascetics carrying terse placards announcing the end time provide comic relief in a world full of real troubles by invoking our commonsense scientific rationality. But the quote from Rep. Shimkus illustrates something else in the pronouncements of some pundits.

For Shimkus, explaining human history as an act of providence is both inspirational and politically convenient — where rapid action to prevent accelerating climate change is highly irksome to politically influential corporate constituents. At this critical moment, selective quotes from Scripture do not inspire confidence in our representatives — particularly given other contemporary prophets who,



unlike Shimkus, see global warming and Middle East wars as signs that, indeed, the end is near. Miraculously, Scripture supports all points of view, however contradictory.

Climate scientists, by contrast, use geophysics, measurement and continuous confirmation through time to model the speed and impact of global warming. They conclude that severe environmental consequences are imminent — not indefinite — byproducts of our carbon based and ever expanding consumer economy. In fact, there is not much time, perhaps a Biblical seven years, for policy makers to confront an urgently needed transformation of society if the worst consequences of global warming are to be avoided.

Members of Congress increasingly avoid the hard choices. They have three prevarications. Some, like Shimkus, try to avoid science by invoking religion. Others attempt to use science against itself by exaggerating doubt as scientists debate and refine their models. This has prevented urgent change ever since tobacco companies recruited a scientific minority to foment confusion about smoking and cancer, and continues today via companies fearing profit loss in carbon reduction. Finally, lack of decisiveness can be attributed to "the art of compromise" — endlessly.

We are reminded that New England Town Meeting embodied the religious intentions of our Puritan founders — but, slowly perhaps, Town Meeting has become more rational than Congress. Still, emotional response, biased opinion posing as objectivity, and endless compromise may yet surface as debate continues through the phases of Amherst Town Manager John Musante's proposed solar installation atop an aging landfill.

We do not have limitless choice. Panels on landfills, panels in sight of backyards and panels on roofs — these and much more will be required even just to mitigate the worst impacts of climate change. Polluted land, like the old landfill, must be utilized and unpolluted land should not be wasted. Both time and land are in short supply. Fortunately, there are sound reasons to believe the old dump can be fortified and made even safer by the solar installation.

We applaud Town Meeting's vote for solar energy — phase one of the process. It would otherwise be unfortunate if debate about the risks of engineering this array should be used as a delaying tactic. Defeat of the proposed solar installation could embolden opposition and stultify other, more far-reaching, transformations: 1) the North Amherst village center featuring clusters of solar buildings, 2) shifting from wasteful passenger cars to buses, carpools and bike paths, and 3) reducing sprawl by eliminating big-box shopping and exurbs.

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