

The No. 1 salesman for sanity

by Lionel_Van_Deerlin

Al Gore is going to San Diego to tie up some loose ends on global warming. The occasion will mark a happy linkage of science and politics. Scripps Institution of Oceanography, a center of learning with unchallenged claim to leadership in exposing a threat to all humankind, honors a man who - more than any other - has made the scientists' cause winnable.

If our democracy decided all things by popular vote, Scripps would likely be hosting a president of the United States. Gore beat George W. Bush by exactly 539,947 popular votes in 2000. Put in easily understood terms, the number of Americans constituting Gore's lead that year would fill every seat in San Diego's baseball stadium more than a dozen times over.

It was in the Electoral College, of course, that Bush prevailed. As is well remembered, the U.S. Supreme Court decided by a 5-4 vote that the Florida recount should be halted.

In accepting that verdict, Al Gore exhibited a more gracious spirit than Samuel J. Tilden of New York state had shown in 1876 - the last previous occasion in which a popular-vote winner was so deviously done in. Although disagreeing with the court decision that cost him the presidency, Gore said, "For the sake of our unity as a people and the strength of our democracy, I offer my concession."

(Rutherford B. Hayes' contrived victory over Tilden came at the height of post-Civil War differences concerning treatment of erstwhile secessionists - and only after all electoral votes from Florida and Louisiana had been disqualified. Continuing bitterness was inevitable.)

One may speculate that if Gore now occupied the White House, the history of America's response to terrorism through the past six years would have been decidedly different. It also goes without saying that if Gore had been saddled with the full range of presidential duties, he would not have found time to deal with the looming peril of global warming as effectively as he was able to do while in private life.

This is surely not the first time a celebrated loser has won plaudits for contributing richly to human advancement. California voters rejected the muckraker author Upton Sinclair's Depression-era campaign for governor - but Sinclair's literary expose of conditions in U.S. meat-packing plants ("The Jungle") made life safer for future generations. How many schoolchildren know that Lincoln lost a U.S. Senate campaign only two years before Providence positioned him to save our Union from dismemberment? Or that the Vatican waited nearly four centuries to forgive Galilei Galileo for asserting that Earth revolves around the sun?

History will record that the fight to validate theories of global warming was every bit as intense as

once-wrenched scientific and ecclesiastical leaders over discoveries in the universe. Studies at Scripps helped resolve uncertainties about climate change with far greater speed - if barely in time, as is now hoped, to avert catastrophe.

Scripps' involvement can be traced from a concern its late director, Roger Revelle, felt more than 50 years ago - about a potential "greenhouse" effect that the use of fossil fuels might be causing. He established a research program to monitor carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. The early evidence seemed persuasive - prompting Revelle to recruit a young researcher from Caltech, Charles David Keeling.

Keeling had drawn attention for devising a precise way to measure the rise of atmospheric carbon dioxide - a procedure to become known as "the Keeling Curve." His was the first evidence that a portion of the dangerous CO₂ inevitably remains above Earth, its density increasing year by year. Before Keeling died in 2005, his findings had prompted alarm across the world of science.

Meanwhile, commercial entities dependent on fossil fuels reacted with predictable self-interest. President Bush, who had pledged steps to reduce CO₂ emissions, was prevailed upon to abandon the cause, thereafter surrounding himself with advisers unfazed by a threat of steadily mounting temperatures and rising ocean waters.

But recent pictorial evidence of Arctic meltdown has been making believers. Political stalwarts from California's Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger to New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg are setting goals that assure cleaner industrial emissions.

Yet Al Gore has proved the No. 1 salesman for sanity. From the moment it became apparent that his film, "An Inconvenient Truth," would catapult Gore onto the red carpet among Hollywood's Oscar winners, the battle was won. Science's doubting Thomases are left in full retreat.

Appropriately, Scripps has invited the ex-veep to look in for a curtain call.

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