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LAST WEEK, TRUMP KNEECAPPED CONSERVATIVE CLIMATE POLICY

BY JERRY TAYLOR

f (<https://www.facebook.com/sharer.php?u=https%3A%2F%2Fniskanencenter.org%2Fblog%2Flast-week-trump-kneecapped-conservative-climate-policy%2F>)

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Lost in the firestorm that followed last week's withdrawal from the Paris climate agreement (<https://niskanencenter.org/blog/from-rio-to-paris/>) is the arresting display of intellectual meltdown within the GOP. Republicans—with Trump at the helm—are gleefully blowing up an

agreement that was everything they have long said they wanted out of international climate talks. They are likewise shredding Obama-era compliance plans that are anchored in everything conservatives *still* say they want out of domestic environmental policy. Republicans have gone from measured resistance to climate action into total, unreasoning incoherence.

The Republican battle cry in the 1990s and 2000s was that no U.S. climate action was warranted unless developing nations were to sign on. That was their main argument for (successfully) opposing the 1997 Kyoto Protocol.

Republicans also looked skeptically on any treaty that might require binding commitments, which conjured up conservative fears of lost sovereignty, global conspiracy, and one-world government. That's one of the reasons (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8426835.stm>) the 2009 climate talks in Copenhagen ended in disaster.

Most importantly, Republicans have long feared that international climate action was a socialist plot to deindustrialize the West and transfer wealth abroad. Republicans were thus constantly putting the breaks on anything that hinted at serious, near-term decarbonization.

The Paris Agreement

(http://unfccc.int/paris_agreement/items/9485.php) was everything Republicans said they wanted. Every nation on earth (save Syria and Nicaragua) pledged to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. To preserve national autonomy, pledges were non-binding. Each nation was left to decide on its own how aggressive it wanted to be and how climate plans would be designed. Finally, the voluntary commitments for global action were modest but meaningful

(<https://www.climateinteractive.org/programs/scoreboard/>). The

United States and the developed world got nearly everything they asked for in the agreement

(http://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/pdf/10.1162/GLEP_a_00361).

Last week, in an astonishing display of political schizophrenia,

Republicans and the conservative commentariat

(<https://www.commentarymagazine.com/politics-ideas/goodbye-paris-accord-climate/>) rejected the agreement on every single one of

those grounds, either oblivious to or ignorant of the fact that the Paris agreement was a direct descendant of a template first proposed by President George W. Bush in Bali

(<http://www.politico.com/story/2015/11/paris-climate-talks-george-w-bush-216214>) during international climate talks back in 2007. The right is now outraged that nations refused to make binding commitments; that climate plans being forwarded were sketchy and opaque; that the promises offered, even if kept, would do little to reduce global temperatures. The fact that every nation on earth signed the agreement (except the aforementioned two) is evidence of a grand international conspiracy to destroy our economy! (<https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4672129/scott-pruitt-white-house-briefing-post-paris-withdrawal>)

For those who want the truth, fact-checking exercises by, among others,

David Roberts (<https://www.vox.com/energy-and-environment/2017/6/2/15727984/deceptions-trump-paris-speech>)

and David Victor (<https://www.vox.com/a/annotation-trump-paris-climate-agreement-speech-victor>) at Vox, Glenn Kessler and Michelle Ye

Hee Lee (https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2017/06/01/fact-checking-president-trumps-claims-on-the-paris-climate-change-deal/?utm_term=.c6a52519484f) at *The Washington Post*, and Emily Holden et al.

(<https://www.eenews.net/climatewire/2017/06/02/stories/1060055454>)

at *E&E News* (alas, behind a paywall) provide all you need to know. The upshot is that while conservative complaints (except the international conspiracy nonsense) have varying degrees of merit, it is hard to imagine that conservatives would be happier had the agreement embraced aggressive emissions reductions, binding commitments, and hard compliance plans subject to international enforcement.

Leaven that with the now-standard dose of abject lying (<https://www.rawstory.com/2017/06/why-you-have-to-deny-science-to-make-jobs-cnns-chris-cuomo-rips-trump-booster-defending-paris-withdrawal/>) (the United States made hard commitments but no one else did! The United States promised more policy ambition than any of our global competitors! For the real story, see this summary of national commitments (<http://climateactiontracker.org/indcs.html>) from Carbon Tracker) and one goes a long way towards explaining the explosion of international outrage over President Trump's withdrawal from the agreement.

So ... the GOP line seems to be that neither binding *nor* voluntary commitments will do. Neither ambitious *nor* modest action will be entertained. The charitable view of all this is that Republicans are so driven by partisan hatred and anti-globalism that *nothing* Europeans or Democrats might embrace can ever be seriously entertained by the GOP. The less charitable view is that Republicans are flatly and unalterably opposed to climate action (<https://www.vox.com/2017/6/1/15726726/trump-paris-climate-agreement-republicans>) (whether via domestic action or international agreement) and will use whatever arguments are handy (and make up other arguments if necessary) to avoid a naked public concession of that fact.

Precisely the same dynamic has played out in the Republicans' wild-eyed assault on the main vehicle (<https://niskanencenter.org/blog/president-obamas-dubious-climate-promises/>) by which the United States was to make good on its Paris commitments: the Obama administration's Clean Power Plan (CPP). Conservatives say they don't want the EPA telling industry what to do. That job, they believe, should be given in large part to the states. Conservatives say they don't want command-and-control regulation penetrating every nook and cranny of the economy. Better, they argue (http://www.realclearenergy.org/articles/2017/06/01/centralized_clima to let free markets and innovation achieve emission reductions. And conservatives decry anything that might noticeably raise consumer energy prices or possibly cost a job. Republicans want a very low bar for economic costs.

By those criteria, the CPP was nearly made to order for Republicans. The EPA set emissions targets and left it to states to decide how best to achieve them (<https://niskanencenter.org/blog/cpp-part-iii-the-bottom-line/>). The CPP was written to encourage the market trading of emission rights between the states (<https://niskanencenter.org/blog/the-clean-power-plan-part-i-what-is-it-and-how-does-it-work/>). And emission reduction targets were extremely modest (<https://niskanencenter.org/blog/climate-ambitions-vs-policy-reality/>). To underscore that point, the American Petroleum Institute (API), in a study released last fall (http://www.api.org/~media/Files/Policy/Natural-Gas-Solutions/CPP_National_Results.pdf), argued that the natural trajectory of energy markets, driven by low-cost natural gas, would likely allow the electricity sector to meet the CPP's emission targets with little if any additional regulatory intervention at all. If state plans under the CPP were well thought out, API projected that likely national compliance costs would be ... \$0

[**\(https://www.eenews.net/climatewire/2016/10/28/stories/1060044966\)**](https://www.eenews.net/climatewire/2016/10/28/stories/1060044966)

Less optimistic assumptions suggest that compliance costs would have been near-zero through at least 2025
[**\(http://www.rff.org/files/document/file/RFF-DP-16-21.pdf\).**](http://www.rff.org/files/document/file/RFF-DP-16-21.pdf)

Republican charges that the CPP was executive imperialism without legal authority are likewise nonsense. The Supreme Court ruled back in 2007 [**\(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Massachusetts_v._Environmental_Protection_Agency\)**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Massachusetts_v._Environmental_Protection_Agency) that EPA is *required* to regulate greenhouse gas emissions if they impose risks on human health and the environment (a finding the agency quite rightly made in 2009.)

The legal wrangling over the CPP was primarily about whether the EPA gave the states *too much* discretion regarding how to meet emissions targets. Complainants—such as then-Oklahoma Attorney General Scott Pruitt, now, the EPA Administrator—argued that EPA was authorized to regulate emissions only “within the fence line” of the utility sector. The CPP, on the other hand, allowed states to secure emissions reductions (if they so desired) by going “outside” of the power plant [**\(https://niskanencenter.org/blog/cpp-part-ii/\)**](https://niskanencenter.org/blog/cpp-part-ii/) and promoting energy efficiency, renewable energy production, and carbon sequestration.

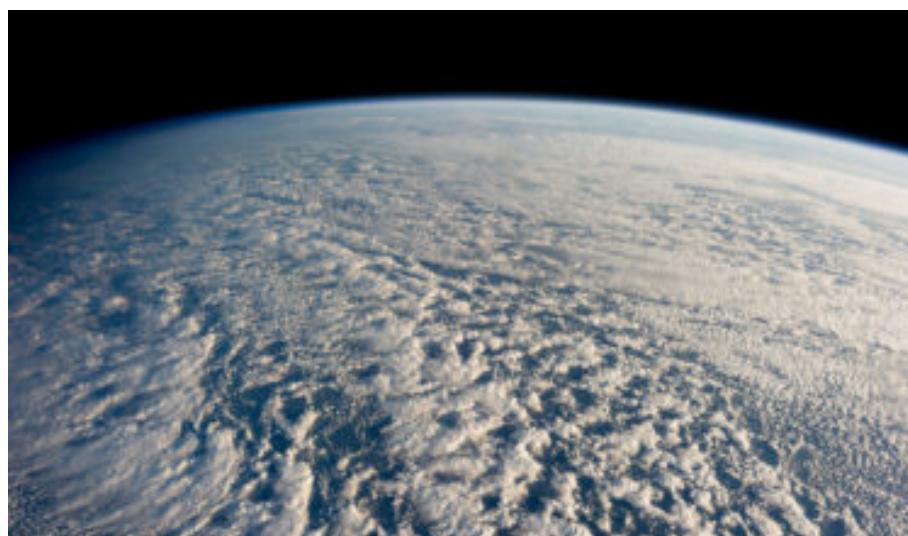
Still, Republicans were not assuaged. Barack Obama, Republicans believe, is an agent of statist, job-wrecking extremism. Barack Obama gave us the Clean Power Plan. Barack Obama gave us the Paris agreement. Hence, the CPP and the Paris agreement are vehicles for statist, job-wrecking policy extremism.

The reason that so many of the major oil and gas companies, the largest public coal companies, and the U.S. corporate community argued that the United States should stay in the Paris agreement is that it was the least

costly, least burdensome, and least regulatory approach one could possibly imagine for global action. But it was Obama's international agreement, and that was enough to do it in no matter what it said.

There are Republicans who know better, but they've been cowed into silence (<http://www.climatechangenews.com/2017/06/02/republican-climate-caucus-offered-little-support-paris-deal/>) while their party drifts ever further into madness.

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