



## A Matter of Fact

### The Washington Post Should Correct George Will's "Dark Green Domsayers" Column

Brad Johnson February 23, 2009

Prominent conservative George F. Will has challenged the scientific basis of man-made global warming for years in his columns for *The Washington Post*, nationally distributed by the Washington Post Editors Group. These columns have been cited for errors before [FAIR, 10/03; *Bulletin of the American Meteorological Society*, 10/08]. The most recent, "Dark Green Domsayers," published February 15, 2009, is no exception.

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#### A Suggested Correction for "Dark Green Domsayers"

George Will's Feb. 15, 2009 column claimed that experts cited a 2008 decline in "global sea ice" as evidence of man-made global warming. Scientists cited the observed decline in Arctic, not global sea ice. Will's column claimed that the University of Illinois' Arctic Climate Research Center said that global sea ice levels are "now equal to those of 1979." At the beginning of January, the center said that global sea ice levels were "near or slightly lower than those of late 1979," but global sea ice levels are now 8 percent below their levels in February 1979. Will's column claimed the U.N. World Meteorological Organization said, "there has been no recorded global warming for more than a decade." According to the WMO, global warming is continuing, with the past decade the warmest on record. Will's column argued that imminent global cooling was a predicted planetary catastrophe in the 1970s. There was no scientific consensus in the 1970s that the Earth was headed into an imminent ice age. Will's column cited articles from *Science* magazine and *Science News* to imply the authors expected an imminent ice age. The *Science* article instead predicted an ice age within several thousand years, "ignoring anthropogenic effects." The *Science News* article described climatology as an "infant science" and discussed predictions of man-made global warming that have since proven to be accurate. *The Washington Post* and George Will regret the errors.

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## George Will's Global Warming Columns

Chicken Littles: The Persistence of Eco-Pessimism [5/31/1992]; Al Gore's Green Guilt [9/3/1992]; More Government By Therapy [12/11/1997]; Ever the Global Gloomster [11/18/1999]; Global Warming? Hot Air. [12/23/2004]; Let Cooler Heads Prevail: The Media Heat Up Over Global Warming [4/2/2006]; Fuzzy Climate Math [4/12/2007]; March of the Polar Bears [5/22/2008]; Carbon's Power Brokers [6/1/2008]; Dark Green Doomsayers [2/15/2009].

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## Post Defends "Dark Green Doomsayers"

Hours after George F. Will's column "Dark Green Doomsayers" was published on February 15, the University of Illinois Arctic Climate Research Center published a statement correcting one of Will's claims, writing: "It is disturbing that the *Washington Post* would publish such information without first checking the facts." [ACRC] When contacted for a response on this and other errors by TPM Muckraker's Zachary Roth on February 16, George F. Will and Washington Post editorial page editor Fred Hiatt refused comment. [TPM Muckraker, 2/17/2009]

On Thursday, February 19, the *Washington Post* ombudsman, Andy Alexander, and Washington Post Writers Group editorial director Alan Shearer responded to inquiries from the Wonk Room's Brad Johnson. According to Alexander, "I was told the Post has a multi-layer editing process and checks facts to the fullest extent possible." Will's column was checked "by people he personally employs, as well as two editors at the Washington Post Writers Group, which syndicates Will; our op-ed page editor; and two copy editors." [Wonk Room, 2/19/2009]

Shearer challenged the Arctic Climate Research Center, saying, "We have plenty of references that support what George wrote, and we have others that dispute that. So we didn't have enough to send in a correction." [Wonk Room, 2/19/2009].

*The Washington Post* has staked the reputation of their "multi-layer editing process" on the veracity of George Will's column. However, as *Albuquerque Journal* science journalist John Fleck wrote, "George Will is entitled to his own opinions. He is not entitled to his own facts." [Albuquerque Journal, 2/18/2009]

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## Errors in “Dark Green Doomsayers”

### 1. Sea Ice as a Measure of Global Warming

George Will writes:

As global levels of sea ice declined last year, many experts said this was evidence of man-made global warming.

**FACT:** Will is confusing global sea ice with Arctic sea ice. In 2008, scientists reported dramatic declines in both area and volume of Arctic sea ice from historical levels—not global sea ice. [*Washington Post*, 8/27/08] Saying that “Arctic sea ice is a keystone indicator of greenhouse-gas induced climate change, which is expected to be amplified in the Arctic,” a 2008 scientific paper found that “decreasing Arctic sea ice”—not global sea ice—“mirrors increasing greenhouse gases.” [O.M. Johannessen, et al. Decreasing arctic sea ice mirrors increasing greenhouse gases. *Geophysical Research Abstracts*, 2008] Furthermore, the “evidence of man-made global warming” includes a wide array of scientific observations, including historical climate data, increased levels of man-made atmospheric greenhouse gases, the degree and structure of oceanic warming, the degree and structure of observed atmospheric warming, and computer simulations of the climate system with and without man-made contributions. [Climate Change: The Scientific Basis. IPCC, 2001; The Physical Science Basis of Climate Change. IPCC, 2007]

George Will continues:

According to the University of Illinois’ Arctic Climate Research Center, global sea ice levels now equal those of 1979. [*Washington Post*, 2/15/09]

**FACT:** The University of Illinois’ Arctic Climate Research Center, or ACRC, reports that global sea ice levels are now well below those of 1979. On January 1, 2009, according to the ACRC, global sea ice levels were “near or slightly lower than those observed in late 1979.” [ACRC, 1/08] However, by the publication of Will’s column, this comparison was no longer close to being accurate. As ACRC explained, “on February 15, 1979, global sea ice area was 16.79 million sq. km and on February 15, 2009, global sea ice area was 15.45 million sq. km,” an 8 percent difference. [ACRC, 2/08]

*The Washington Post should correct these errors.*

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## 2. Past Decade of Global Warming

George Will writes:

Besides, according to the U.N. World Meteorological Organization, there has been no recorded global warming for more than a decade, or one-third of the span since the global cooling scare.

**FACT:** According to the U.N. World Meteorological Organization, or WMO, global warming is continuing, with the past decade the warmest on record. On April 4, 2008, the WMO released the following statement “for use of the information media”: “The long-term upward trend of global warming, mostly driven by greenhouse gas emissions, is continuing. Global temperatures in 2008 are expected to be above the long-term average. The decade from 1998 to 2007 has been the warmest on record, and the global average surface temperature has risen by 0.74C since the beginning of the 20th Century.” [WMO, 4/4/2008]

*The Washington Post should correct this error.*

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## 3. Historical Predictions of Global Warming

George Will writes:

Chu likes predictions, so here is another: Nine decades hence, our great-great-grandchildren will add the disappearance of California artichokes to the list of predicted planetary calamities that did not happen. Global cooling recently joined that lengthening list.

**FACT:** “There was no scientific consensus in the 1970s that the Earth was headed into an imminent ice age. Indeed, the possibility of anthropogenic warming dominated the peer-reviewed literature even then.” [*Bulletin of the American Meteorological Society*, Sept. 2008]

Will continues:

Although some disputed that the “cooling trend” could result in “a return to another ice age” (the Times, Sept. 14, 1975), others anticipated “a full-blown 10,000-year ice age” involving “extensive Northern Hemisphere glaciation” (*Science News*, March 1, 1975, and *Science* magazine, Dec. 10, 1976, respectively).

**FACT:** The cited *Science News* and *Science* magazine articles referred to uncertain trends, not threats “no later than 10 years away.” The *Science* article specifically describes a “long-term trend over the next several thousand years” that excludes “anthropogenic effects”: “A model of future climate based on the observed orbital-climate relationships, but ignoring anthropogenic effects, predicts that the long-term trend over the next several thousand years is toward extensive Northern Hemisphere glaciation.” [J.D. Hays et al. “Variations in the Earth’s Orbit: Pacemaker of the Ice Ages.” *Science*, 12/10/76]

The *Science News* article refers to climatology as an “infant science” and explains that, “not enough is known about the underlying causes” of the “cooling trend observed since 1940” “to justify any sort of extrapolation.” Furthermore, the article reports on the emerging evidence for man-made global warming: “According to the academy report, atmospheric carbon dioxide has been rising by four percent a year since 1910, because of industrialization. Stephen H. Schneider of the National Center for Atmospheric Research says that by the turn of the century, enough carbon dioxide will have been put into the atmosphere to raise the temperature of earth half a degree.” [John H. Douglas. “Climate Change: Chilling Possibilities.” *Science News*, 3/1/75] Schneider’s prediction was correct. [GISS]

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