

A Rebuttal to “Jason and the Secret Climate Change War”

Nicolas Nierenberg, Victoria Tschinkel, Walter Tschinkel

The article “Jason and the secret climate change war” completely, and we feel deliberately, misrepresents the early years of climate research as well as the contributions of Dr. William Nierenberg. There are a remarkable number of errors for such a short article, but in our experience this is typical of the work on this subject by Dr. Naomi Oreskes who is one of the authors.

The Times has acknowledged the central error, which is that the report, “Changing Climate” was not “commissioned” by the Reagan Administration, but was actually requested by an act of Congress under then President Jimmy Carter. The report was in fact a product of the independent National Academy of Sciences. The chair of the committee, which produced the Academy report, was Nierenberg, and the members of the committee were some of the most distinguished scientists of the time. The committee membership was in place by October 1980 prior to Reagan’s election.

Oreskes knew all of these facts when she authored this article since they are stated quite clearly and directly in her own academic paper on the subject. We understand that she has since acknowledged these errors but claims that she wrote it this way because of space considerations. This hardly seems credible because the claim that the conclusions of the report were the product of one scientist working for the Reagan administration is the central premise of the article.

Oreskes also misrepresents the contents and nature of “Changing Climate.” Unlike the JASON and Charney reports, which focused solely on atmospheric temperature sensitivity to CO₂ increases, “Changing Climate”, as the US Congress mandated, was the first comprehensive look at climate change. As such it dealt with a broad range of issues. One chapter dealt with forecasts of future fossil fuel emissions, another with the carbon cycle, and the likely timing of CO₂ increases, still another estimated future sea level rise based on the forecasted increase in temperatures. In addition Nobel Laureate Thomas Schelling wrote a final chapter on the potential societal impacts of these physical changes. Since the topics were so diverse the committee decided that different authors would be responsible for the contents of the different chapters and that each would be separately peer reviewed.

To bring all this together the committee decided to create a synthesis, which would include the key points from the various chapters. These were also considered to be the conclusions to which, as they put it, they could all “wholeheartedly agree.” A staff member of the committee, Jesse Ausubel, wrote the synthesis with some editing by Nierenberg. A review of the synthesis shows that it simply follows the contents of the various chapters. It did not, as Oreskes claims, play up positive effects of climate change, play down the likely effects or emphasize the uncertainties. It reported fairly and accurately the scientific and social conclusions of the separately written chapters. It also included a brief set of policy recommendations that were the conclusions of the committee.

An Executive Summary was created from the synthesis, and printed essentially verbatim on the front page of New York Times the day after the report was officially published. There is no record of any dissent from climate scientists, or anyone else for that matter to the published contents of the report. The obvious conclusion is that the report's conclusions and recommendations were considered absolutely mainstream at the time.

It is unclear why the Times article claims that the JASON report was never officially published. Oreskes' own academic work references the published version of the paper. In addition the Oreskes article is misleading in implying that either the Charney or the Jason report made any policy recommendations. In fact the JASON report questioned whether future policy actions would be desirable, and the Charney report disclaimed sufficient scientific knowledge to predict the impacts on society.

It is difficult to prove a negative, but we know of no case where Nierenberg stated that CO₂ increases were not a problem. We also are not aware of his stating that there were no temperature changes or that all the changes were due to natural variability. Later he did become skeptical of the ability of large-scale climate models to accurately predict the impacts of increasing CO₂, and it was his opinion that the likely warming would be on the lower end of the ranges typically discussed. He was also highly skeptical of the political solutions that had so far been proposed at the time of his death in 2000. We feel that he had earned the right to those opinions even if many, or even most scientists disagreed.

Characterizing JASON as a secret or shadowy organization is just silly. Every year when they meet there are signs all over La Jolla, where Oreskes works, indicating that they are in town. This has been true throughout their history. In addition the membership is well known. It is true that in many cases they work on classified reports, but the climate report referenced in this article was never a secret, and eventually was published in book form. Copies can be obtained easily on the Internet.

William Nierenberg was a remarkable scientist and administrator. He served as an advisor to both Republican and Democratic Administrations. He deserves better than to have his memory tarnished with the type of false and misleading information in the Times article. We also feel that as a Professor of History, Naomi Oreskes has a special responsibility to the public to report the facts accurately rather than distort them to fit some narrative that she wants to create. We are disappointed that a professor at the prestigious University of California would let us down in this way.

For readers who are interested in more details about this subject, as well as a discussion of the broader academic issues involved we refer them to our web site www.nicolasnierenberg.com.

Nicolas Nierenberg is a technology entrepreneur who currently serves on the board of several companies, he is also a former chairman and currently member of the board of trustees of the Burnham Institute for Medical Research and is a member of the Director's Council at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography. Victoria Tschinkel is Chairman of 1000 Friends of Florida, former Director of the Nature Conservancy in Florida, and former Florida Secretary of Environmental Regulation. Walter Tschinkel is an R. O. Lawton Distinguished Professor in the Department of Biological Science at Florida State University in Tallahassee.