

# NATIONAL REVIEW

## *Merchants of Smear*

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*Conspiracy theorists make an ad hominem attack film about climate-change doubters.*

Why don't more Americans favor environmental regulations? Why don't more politicians take action to stop global warming? *Merchants of Doubt*, a new documentary based on the 2010 book by historians Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway, posits an answer: A clique of mercenary scientists have published deliberately misleading studies meant to raise doubts about dangerous man-made global warming. They sow confusion on behalf of their nefarious masters in the fossil-fuel industry.

*Merchants of Doubt* is conspiracy theory on the order of *The Matrix* or *The X-Files*, except that it is presented as non-fiction. Far-right extremists once evoked a Communist conspiracy to put fluoride in the water supply; now we have the progressive Left evoking a capitalist conspiracy to put dangerous doubts in the idea supply.

Consider *Merchants of Doubt* the [Bulveristic](#) sequel to *An Inconvenient Truth*. Al Gore's 2007 "documentary" [wasn't altogether evenhanded](#), but at least it paid homage to the ideal of presenting "scientific data" about climate change. It aimed to convince the public on rational grounds. Sony Pictures Classics' *Merchants of Doubt* (which opens today in American theaters, following its December 2014 launch in the U.K.) retires this apparently quaint concern and moves directly to the task of demonizing the remaining skeptics. Who needs to debate the scientific merits of the case for global warming when "consensus" has been achieved? Instead, the film concentrates on maligning the motives of skeptics of anthropogenic global warming.

Professional magician Jamy Ian Swiss, backstage at his Los Angeles Magic Castle show, opens the film with a digression on the ethics of deception. Magicians are "honest liars," he says, who have a "moral contract" with their audience, who know they're being fooled. Climate-change "deniers," on the other hand, are closer to the category of "con men" — rent-a-scientists who perpetuate the mirage of debate and enable politicians to delay what director Robert Kenner (*Food, Inc.*) deems urgent climate regulations. As Swiss flips a deck of cards, the cards swirl in midair and revolve to show the faces of some of these scientific hirelings.

The film is well-shot and amusing to watch, with Swiss and his cards serving as a kind of narrator throughout. But *Merchants* itself engages in deception. At the same time that it accuses the public of falling for pseudo-scientific showmanship and believing the safe, soothing messages they want to hear, the film presents a caricature of climate science — one that comforts the choir of climate-change alarmists and ignores serious scientific concerns. The product that *Merchants* hawks is smear.

*Merchants* implies that the scientists in Swiss's deck have sold out to Big Oil. But most of the film's 96 minutes actually focus on the mid-century battle over the health risks of smoking. Kenner, following Oreskes and Conway's lead, traces the stories of tobacco CEOs who knowingly lied on talk shows and radio programs about the carcinogenic, addictive nature of cigarettes. A New York PR firm, Hill and Knowlton, advised Big Tobacco

that to deny outright a growing scientific consensus on the harms of smoking would blow the industry's credibility, and instead they ought to create space for public uncertainty. RG Mills and other tobacco groups hired scientists to write papers that were inconclusive or promoted unrealistic standards of evidence. So long as smoking was actively debated within the scientific and political communities, legislators would refrain from heavy regulation, and customers would continue to purchase Mills's products.

The link from yesteryear's merchants of smoking doubt to today's climate-change doubters is tenuous and depends almost entirely on an argument from analogy. Analogies, of course, can create powerful impressions: Think of Arthur Miller's success in picturing the Salem witch trials as the template for Congress's efforts during the Cold War to uncover Communist subversion. The propagandist is not concerned with whether the analogy is fair, but only with its capacity to mold public perception.

Kenner mashes up clips of tobacco CEOs averring that "there is no consensus" about the harms of smoking with clips of Cato Institute and Heartland Institute scholars swearing that no consensus exists on global warming. Oreskes, in an on-screen appearance, manages to cite S. Fred Singer and Frederick Seitz, two prominent climate-change skeptics who had once contended that smoking isn't necessarily harmful, but admits that she can't prove that they were manipulated by money. (Her own theory is that because both began their careers during the Soviet arms race, they became obsessed with anti-Communism and fought any scientific study whose conclusions seemed to invite government regulation.)

Cue the smear tactic. What *Merchants of Doubt* lacks in evidence, activists have endeavored to make up in public animosity. Last week the *New York Times* [pummeled](#) astrophysicist Wei-Hock "Willie" Soon for linking temperature variations to sunspot changes and accepting research grants from fossil-fuel companies — though Dr. Soon's funding was entirely [above-board](#), and his research has not been challenged on its merits. Representative Raul Grijalva (D., Ariz.) then launched an [investigation](#) of his own into seven professors who have expressed skepticism toward anthropogenic global warming, suggesting that they too had been compromised by money. Surely the synchrony of these investigations and the film's U.S. release is no coincidence.

"Who has bought whom?" is the real question viewers should ask. Climate skeptics receive pennies compared with the billions that go to climate conformists. The EPA alone has spent more than [\\$333 million](#) in the past 15 years sponsoring sustainability fellowships, in addition to another \$60 million in sustainability-research grants. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration records show more than \$3 billion in grants for climate-science research since 1998 (including more than \$89 million in 2014), while the [National Institutes of Health](#) has granted in the past four years alone \$28 million for research on climate change and another \$580 million on "Climate-Related Exposures and Conditions." National Science Foundation records show more than [\\$1.7 billion](#) since 1998 in sustainability research grants. Even the National Endowment for the Arts, not normally associated with scientific research, invested \$2 million over the same period. Virtually all of this money goes to scientists within the "consensus." **And [recent external studies](#) of the EPA, NOAA, and other federal agencies that solicit global-warming research have uncovered evidence of widespread conflicts of interest and incestuous peer-review relationships of the sort Kenner wants to ascribe to the skeptics.**

Perhaps Sony Pictures should consider a follow-up: *Merchants of Doom*.