

Guest Viewpoint

Treat climate change like a nuclear weapon

By Dale Lugenbehl

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Citizens in this country are divided on the issue of climate change: Some believe that the threat is real and huge; others are not convinced. It would seem that scientists are also not in complete agreement. How can we, as nonscientist citizens, know what policies to support?

All of us can learn something very useful from Vice President Dick Cheney. (If you are a liberal or progressive, please keep reading.) In November of 2001, Cheney articulated a useful principle in connection with the need to protect ourselves against a devastating terrorist attack on the United States using a nuclear weapon.

Cheney said that even if there was only a 1 percent chance of such an event, the consequences would be so horrific that we need to “treat it as a certainty in terms of our response.” We need to take every precaution and spare no expense in taking the necessary steps to remove the possibility of what he called a “low-probability, high-impact event.” This has been called “The 1 percent Doctrine.”

Preventing a terrorist attack is not a political issue — it affects us all, regardless of our political affiliation. Now let’s apply the 1 percent Doctrine to climate change.

If climate change is real, we can all agree that the consequences would be horrific: flooded coastal cities, failed food crops, more frequent and stronger hurricanes, severe drought, extreme heat, hundreds of millions of “climate refugees” forced to leave their countries, and more.

It must be acknowledged that there are some scientists who say the evidence for climate change is insufficient. However, the majority of climate scientists think otherwise.

On Sept. 20, an open letter on climate change was published and signed by 376 members of the National Academy of Sciences, including 30 Nobel Prize winning scientists. The letter states that “Human-caused climate change is not a belief, a hoax, or a conspiracy. It is a physical reality.”

Additionally, the leaders of 190 countries at the Paris climate talks in 2015 agreed that climate change is a huge threat requiring a strong response.

It seems clear that there is a far greater chance than 1 percent that the threat of a climate change disaster is real. If more than half the experts from the various intelligence gathering agencies in this country were totally convinced that a nuclear attack on a U.S. city was going to happen, wouldn't we respond strongly and without hesitation? It would seem terribly foolish to wait until there is 100 percent certainty. Isn't our situation in regard to climate change precisely the same?

Climate change does not threaten one country, or one race, or the members of one political party — it threatens all life on Earth. Facing this problem and taking steps to minimize the threat is something we all need to do together because we all share and depend on this same home that we call Earth. Working together on climate change, the critical issue of our time, can be the beginning of ending the severe divisiveness afflicting our country today.

It can also be the beginning of restoring positive U.S. leadership in the world. As stated in the open letter on climate change, "The United States can and must be a major player in developing innovative solutions to the problem of reducing emissions of greenhouse gases.

Nations that find innovative ways of decarbonizing energy systems and sequestering CO₂ will be the economic [and moral] leaders of the 21st century." If the U.S. fails to assume that leadership, some other nation will — while also gaining the high-tech jobs that such leadership generates.

Benjamin Santer, of Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory and one of the signers of the open letter on climate change has said, "If you know the road ahead is washed out, you don't keep driving down it... . This is an issue that will define us. How we respond to climate change will be the legacy of our generation."

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