

**Jonathan Schechter – “Corpus Callosum” Column**  
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Growing up, the most inviolate of my parents’ rules was that we were never, ever, to smoke cigarettes.

Both my parents smoked; my mom occasionally; my dad heavily. However, in the late 1960s, both kicked the habit. Their motivation? Even then – over 40 years ago – it was clear that smoking was a tremendous health hazard, and they wanted to set a good example for their kids.

My dad is one of the mentally-toughest people I know, and it took every ounce of that toughness for him to quit. To further the point we should never even start smoking, at one point he showed me an insurance company’s magazine ad, one as simple as it was powerful. On a plain background was a photo of a cigarette, surrounded by a dotted line. The text read: “1. Cut out this cigarette. 2. Light it. 3. Tell us it’s the first cigarette you’ve lit in a year, and we’ll lower your life insurance premium.”

I recalled that ad when I read the recent *News&Guide* story in which Senator John Barrasso disputed that humans are responsible for global warming. Sen. Barrasso’s opinion contradicts that of most credible climate scientists, as well as the CIA, the U.S. military, the domestic and international insurance industries, and most other thoughtful observers. Given that he’s trained as a scientist, one can only assume Sen. Barrasso’s position is politically-motivated – after all, he belongs to the self-styled “conservative” party, and represents a self-styled “conservative” state that’s also the nation’s leading producer of greenhouse gas-emitting coal.

Sen. Barrasso’s stand strikes me as similar to those taken by tobacco state legislators during the last few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Despite overwhelming evidence, tobacco state officials and companies insisted tobacco did not pose health risks. Through spin, obfuscation, and flat-out lying – all bolstered by dubious research it just happened to fund – Big Tobacco was able to preserve the legal status quo for a full generation after insurance companies started offering non-smoker discounts. Given that no other industry is as cold-bloodedly fact-based as insurance, the saga of tobacco shows how politics can trump reality, sometimes tragically so.

The tragedy of cigarettes was that, thanks to Big Tobacco’s denials, hundreds of thousands of people died earlier than they should have. Millions more became sicker than they should have, burdening society with enormous and totally avoidable additional healthcare costs. True, not everyone who smokes contracts lung cancer or emphysema or the other dread diseases closely linked to smoking. But an exception here or there does not invalidate the larger point, and that larger point was well established decades before Big Tobacco finally acknowledged in 1998, that, oh yes, there did seem to be a link between their products and some pretty bad stuff.

Why did Big Tobacco fight reality? Economics. In particular, Big Tobacco feared that, once everyone agreed cigarettes were harmful, consumption would drop. And they were right – since Big Tobacco came clean, U.S. cigarette sales have fallen around three percent annually. But even with declining cigarette sales, tobacco companies have continued to do just fine, producing nice profits and keeping their shareholders happy (e.g. in March 2000, \$14 would have bought you a share of stock in both of America’s biggest cigarette manufacturers; today those two shares would cost you over \$100).

Tobacco companies’ economic success is a perfect example of one of two things that drive me nuts about self-styled “conservatives”: they lack faith in both America’s people and its economic system. As the post-confession success of the tobacco firms demonstrates, America’s people and economic system are incredibly adaptable and incredibly resilient. Yet for decades, Big Tobacco and its toadies – self-styled “conservatives” all – argued that doing anything to regulate or otherwise restrict tobacco use would cause

economic devastation. Not only were they wrong, but their argument showed zero confidence in America's people or our system. Pretty ironic for a group prone to wrap itself in the flag.

This phenomenon isn't isolated to Big Tobacco either. Indeed, my favorite example is that of Dubois, Wyoming. For much of the 1980s, the state propped up Dubois's Louisiana-Pacific timber mill, because local elected officials – another group of self-styled “conservatives” – argued that Dubois would dry up and blow away if the L-P mill closed. Eventually the mill did close, because even with the subsidies, it simply wasn't making money – as with tobacco, facts ultimately won out. Yet last time I checked, Dubois was still there and doing just fine. Why? Because its people, like Americans as a whole, are resilient. And because its economy, like America's as a whole, is marvelously adaptable. But rather than embrace and celebrate these transcendent realities, self-styled “conservatives” instead choose to fight reality. All I can assume is that, in the struggle between politics and reality, these folks make the political calculation that fear wins elections.

The parallels between tobacco and climate change are discouragingly similar, but there's one key difference: Who suffers.

With smoking, the tragedy occurred at the individual level. Because Big Tobacco fought reality for so long, millions of individuals needlessly suffered. But they were doing it to themselves. With climate change, we'll all suffer. The tragedy will occur at a systems level, specifically the harm it will cause the natural and human systems which have evolved in sync with Earth's climate. Because we're changing the climate faster than those systems can evolve, our actions are putting those systems in peril. And as we do, we're ultimately threatening ourselves.

Which leads to the second thing that drives me nuts about self-styled “conservatives,” namely how thoroughly unmoored from its definition the term “conservative” has become. According to the Random House dictionary, “conservative” is an adjective which, under its first definition, means “disposed to preserve existing conditions, institutions, etc., or to restore traditional ones, and to limit change.”

By definition, there can be nothing more conservative than preserving the systems which allow life on earth to exist. Yet leading the fight against such a truly conservative goal are self-styled “conservatives.” Knowingly taking steps that threaten the Earth's fundamental systems is not conservative at all, but radical.

This isn't to say there's anything wrong with wanting to conserve an industry or way of life or belief system – each can be worthy of conservation. But conserving such things in a way which might compromise the foundations of the planet's health is a little like destroying the Vietnamese village in order to save it: There's an internal logic there, but it's also fundamentally wrong.

Both true and self-styled conservatives agree that, in a perfect world, conservation would be taken care of by individuals and organizations alone; no governmental systems would be required. But sadly, ours is not a perfect world. Contrast, for instance, the effects of the recent earthquakes in Haiti, where building codes were lax and destruction high, to those in Chile, where the opposite was true. Ditto the damage wrought to America and Canada by the financial recent meltdown: the U.S. had a much more laissez-faire approach to controlling its systems, while Canada's was more controlled. Today, America's financial system is a wreck, while Canada, which took a truly conservative approach, is in far better shape.

In his *News&Guide* interview, Sen. Barrasso stated: “We're talking about a major remake of the global economy, and we ought to have scientific facts that are not so much in dispute.” So much is wrong with that statement, not least of which the fact that the global economy has remade itself several times over in the past 50 years (e.g. the shift of the world's manufacturing base from America to Asia), and regardless of what Congress does about global warming, it will remake itself again several times again during the next 50. That's what modern economies do, whether state, national, or global.

What exactly that future economy will look like isn't entirely clear, but pieces certainly are. For instance, because of the pesky facts surrounding global warming, the economy of the future will be carbon-constrained. Congress and Wyoming can encourage this, or they can fight it. Either way, though, it's going to happen.

Given this reality, the only real question is how to deal with it. A truly conservative approach would be to identify what we really care about – for instance, preserving Wyoming's lifestyle and economy for future generations – and then ask what it will take to achieve this goal in a carbon-constrained world. Far better that than to ignore reality until it overwhelms us (as it did, say, in Haiti).

Those of us who believe in this state, this nation, and the resilience of our economy and people are excited about the new economy, for no system in the world is better able than America's to capitalize on new opportunities. What's disheartening is that so many people fear the challenge, or lack faith in our ability to capitalize on it. Just as with the cigarette in the ad my father showed me decades ago, the dots are there to be connected. Here's hoping that, with climate change, we'll not take an entire generation to connect them.