

BOB DOPPELT

Long, cynical campaign fuels climate denial

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The Republican Party and its presidential nominee, Donald Trump, have claimed human-induced climate disruption is a hoax. If elected, Trump apparently will dismantle federal efforts to address the climate crisis. It is important to understand how this came about, and what it means for the future.

I'm not endorsing Hillary Clinton. Like others, I hope a viable third party candidate enters the race. Instead, my purpose is to describe some of the behind-the-scenes maneuvering that produced the GOP's current denial of climate science.

I spoke with Jeff Nesbit, author of the new book "Poison Tea: How Big Tobacco and Big Oil Invented the Tea Party and Captured the GOP." Nesbit was communications director for former Republican Vice President Dan Quayle and now runs Climate Nexus, a communications group.

The anger expressed by Trump's predominantly older, white, blue-collar base is often presented by the media as resulting from job losses in manufacturing and extractive industries, and also from changes in society and culture. Such anger is understandable. However, Nesbit said that few people realize that a cynical effort has long been underway to deliberately intensify their distress, direct it at government, and shield certain moneyed and corporate interests from any responsibility for social, economic and environmental problems.

This is the decades-long campaign by the oil billionaires Charles and David Koch, the tobacco industry, and other uber-rich conservatives to systematically pull the Republican Party to the extreme right and fundamentally undermine our system of government.

Parts of this story are already public. Nesbit's book adds a personal angle by describing meetings he participated in as a consultant for the Koch-founded Citizens for a Sound Economy, which helped launch the effort. He also adds insight into the important role of Philip Morris and other tobacco companies by analyzing internal industry documents that were recently released in a court settlement.

In his book, Nesbit describes how the Koch brothers were influenced by their father, a founding member of the far-right John Birch Society, and reacted to regulatory actions affecting their businesses by developing a fierce hatred of government. Big tobacco got

involved to create a backlash against government to prevent further regulation of its products.

Years before the tea party appeared, these players initiated a campaign to create what would look like a spontaneous grass roots uprising against regulation and taxation. Their role and funding was to be hidden behind numerous front groups. The goal was to legitimize their pursuit of unconstrained profit and power by making government actions to protect public health and the environment and develop a more equitable tax system appear as “job killers” and tyrannical attacks on “freedom.”

The tea party has faded. But the strategy of this far-right cabal succeeded — its ideology is now firmly embedded in the Republican Party platform. The denial of climate science is a necessary corollary of this dogma. Trump has called it “bulls---.”

Some Republican leaders seem to want to distance themselves from this position. For instance, I asked Cindy Land, chairwoman of the Lane County Republican Party, whether the local party supports Trump’s stance on climate science. She refused to say yes or no, and instead invoked the talking point “we are not scientists.” This position would disqualify them from having an opinion on almost everything.

Despite what could be uncertainty among some about their party’s stance on climate science, the Koch-tobacco collaborative generated palpable anger among some of the GOP base. Trump capitalized on it to get himself nominated. But he does not strictly adhere to their script. This created a rift. Even though Trump selected one of their favorite sons, Indiana Gov. Mike Pence, as his vice-presidential nominee, the Kochs might not back him.

If Trump loses, Nesbit said the Koch cohorts will undoubtedly double down on their efforts to move the GOP further right by claiming defeat was due to a failure to faithfully follow their doctrine.

Win or lose, the GOP’s efforts to deny climate science and block climate policies will likely intensify.

Nesbit’s research shows that the GOP’s shift to the far right and denial of climate science are the result of a long-term campaign whose central goal is to free billionaires and big oil and tobacco from their responsibility to protect public health and the environment and pay their fair share for public services. We are all worse off as a result.

Our democracy needs a credible and thoughtful GOP. Let’s hope Republican leaders quickly come to their senses, and, at the very least, stop denying climate science and turn their attention to debating how to rapidly reduce carbon emissions.

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