Copenhagen and Terminal Pragmatism:

Dimensions of a Four Star FUBAR

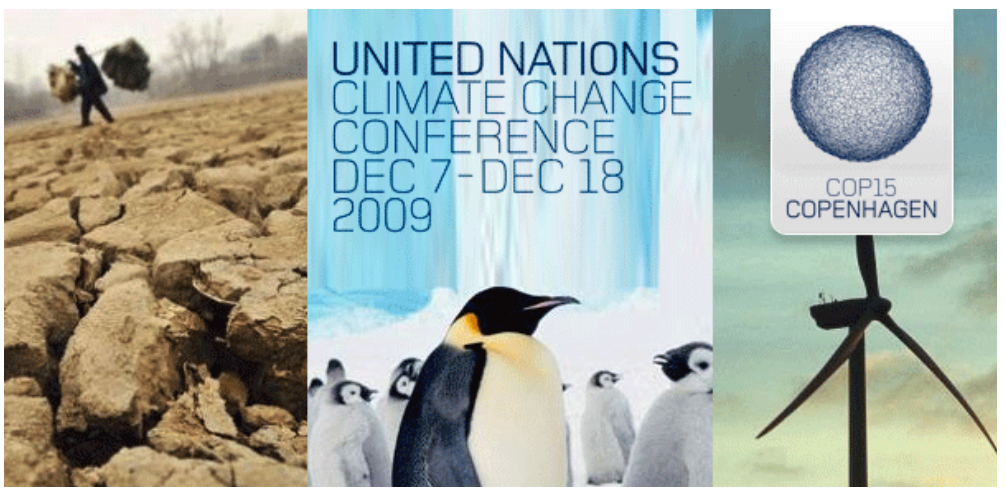
By Scott Thompson

The Copenhagen Conference in December, 2009, was the last hope for humanity to pull back from the abyss. – Clive Hamilton

On a sunny afternoon on May 7, 2010, I nearly got myself killed.

I was driving east on a near-empty interstate highway from Charleston, West Virginia, following a pleasant professional conference. Up ahead I saw a silver cloud of smoke wafting across my lane, rising to a height about 15 feet. I slowed a bit then drove into it.

Instantly I saw only gray. It took me a second or two to gather my wits and brake hard while at the same time avoiding a skid. I came to a full stop in the lane before realizing that someone could smash into me from the rear. Whipping over to where the shoulder might be, I stopped once again. Only then was I aware of my heart pounding. The smoke began to drift away and I drove along the shoulder at quarter speed. Soon the smoke was gone, I guess because the wind had shifted. There was a white tanker truck pulled over well ahead of me, still billowing smoke. As I drove past it the gravity of the error I'd just made hit me like a fist.



I'm a competent enough driver to get low insurance rates not because I think fast (obviously!) but because I've schooled myself to know when and where to place my attention. It virtually always works, but...adaptation is a peculiar thing. In this weird situation a useful habit almost got me (and possibly others) killed.

The habit? I routinely commute over a long, single arch bridge over the New River, across which there are often silvery fog banks rising to a height of 15-20 feet. I learned that even though they appear impenetrable, I can almost always drive through them with only a slight loss of speed. The fatal assumption I made was that the bank of smoke wasn't an altogether different situation. I wasn't uneasy as I approached it because I assumed could handle it the same way I did fog banks.

Here is a summary of what Stern thought "the art of the possible" would yield at Copenhagen: "Rich country emission cuts of 25-40 per cent below 1990 levels by 2020, which are necessary if the world is to aim for a target of 450 ppm [C02 equivalent], were immediately declared politically impossible by...Stern. The 'most ambitious' proposal the United States could aim for would be to return emissions to 1990 levels by 2020 – a 'zero per cent' reduction instead of 25-40 per cent." (p. 27.)

Note - 450 parts per million (ppm) C02 equivalent, or 450 ppm C02e, is roughly equal to: (1) an atmospheric C02 concentration of 350 ppm, in addition to (2) the warming effect of the non-C02 greenhouse gases, most notably methane and nitrous oxide. (Per the table in Hamilton, p. 228.)

It took my brain awhile to process what Stern had said. But finally it all clicked: months before the Copenhagen Conference started, the politicians comprising the Obama administration had already decided that the changes necessary to avert a global catastrophe were not within "the art of the possible."

Trying to subject the laws of nature to a political bargaining process is what I call terminal pragmatism. You can call it other things, too: "the art of self-destruction," collective hubris, or spiritual blindness.

Let's look at how the core strategies of politics-as-usual played out at the Copenhagen climate talks and why they were terminal.

First, the art of delay. Mostly politicians maneuver to avoid change, only making a deal when their instincts and experience tell them that conditions are right and favorable to their interests. Yet because they're in the public eye they must avoid perceptions that they're passive or weak-willed. Consequently, crafting plausible rationales for inaction is a critical survival skill. Whether such an explanation is true or fair is of course a secondary concern. What's important is whether constituents perceive it as a sincere, indeed a heartfelt, attempt to place the responsibility for action where it belongs; always on somebody else.

The fatal assumption made by world leaders and their advisors on site during the climate talks in Copenhagen in December, 2009, was that they were dealing with a political situation instead of taking orders from the laws of nature. They assumed they could rely on the backslapping rituals of politics-as-usual to which they were adapted.

On this score consider the following from Todd Stern, the U.S. Special Envoy for Climate Change at the talks, in March, 2009: "'At the same time [that] we are being guided by the science and doing the math...we cannot forget that we are engaged in a political process and that politics, in the classical formulation, is the art of the possible.'" (quoted in Clive Hamilton's book Requiem for a Species, p. 27.)

At Copenhagen China faced pressure from developed countries to agree to a compulsory ceiling on its C02 emissions. It couldn't any longer rely on its status as a developing country in order to avoid such a commitment because in 2006 it had become the world's largest C02 emitter, due to the gargantuan expansion of its economy, fueled by its massive torching of coal (Hamilton, p. 89; "China Now No. 1 in C02 Emissions; USA in Second Position," PBL Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency; date uncertain, probably 2007). Any viable deal to reduce atmospheric C02 had to include China as a substantive partner.

According to a story in Spiegel Online ("How China and India Sabotaged the UN Climate Summit", 5/5/10), after intense haggling among the honcho na-

tions, a written proposal emerged that among other things would have required the United States, China, and India to halve their greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. Given that China had no intention of slowing its economic juggernaut, this was an unfavorable deal in spades.

Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao had already holed up in his hotel room and chose to remain there during the crucial Friday meeting of two dozen heads of state, including leaders of European Union countries and President Obama. While snubbing the other leaders was a violation of diplomatic protocol, doing so insulated Wen Jiabao from pressuring. The job of rejecting the proposal and delivering the excuse fell to China's deputy foreign minister He Yafei, who first said no and later added: "I am trying to...debate about historical responsibility."... "People tend to forget where it [the climate crisis] is from. In the past 200 years of industrialization, developed countries contributed more than 80 percent of emissions. Whoever created this problem is responsible for the catastrophe we are facing."

The criticism was unfair in part. While America and certain developed countries are sure as hell responsible for the harmful consequences of their greed and gross environmental negligence, they hadn't intended to bring human civilization to its knees or wipe out a huge fraction of the planet's species. In fact, the scientific findings of catastrophic consequences had surfaced only during the previous few years and crystallized only the year before. This must have been obvious to the leaders present but that didn't matter. The issue was whether this explanation would play well in China.

Sure it did.

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A second core tactic of politics-as-usual is finding a resonant minimal goal, which is invaluable in making the politician look like he or she is accomplishing something. It gives him or her latitude to speak in large, confident tones, both about what will be done and then later what has been achieved, secure in the knowledge that few voters are familiar enough with the details to know the difference. At the same time, the politician has avoided the risks of significant change, especially rapid change, namely offending powerful people who are invested in the way things are and also unintended side effects: the unknown unknowns that can end a political career or even destabilize a regime.

Todd Stern's comments, depicted above, are a good example of this strategy. But the following from Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in November, 2009, is a classic rendition: "If we all exert maximum effort [we'll be accomplishing stuff!] and embrace the right blend of pragmatism and principle [but not very much stuff], I believe we can secure a strong outcome [we know how to make it sound big] at Copenhagen, and that would be a steppingstone [which ain't big] toward full agreement." [Translation is mine.] ("Clinton Calls Climate Talks in Copenhagen a 'Steppingstone,'" New York Times, 11/11/09).

Note the difference in content and tone between Clinton's remarks and the testimony of eminent climate scientist James Hansen before Congress a year and a half earlier: "I argue that a path yielding energy independence and a healthier environment is, barely, still possible. It requires a transformative change of direction in Washington in the next year." ("Global Warming Twenty Years Later: Tipping Points Near," www.columbia.edu/~jeh1). Also note the following from Hansen and nine fellow scientists in an article they submitted for publication in May, 2008: "Continued growth of greenhouse gas emissions, for just another decade, practically eliminates the possibility of near-term return of atmospheric composition beneath the tipping level for catastrophic effects." ("Target Atmospheric C02: Where Should Humanity Aim?" The Open Atmospheric Science Journal, 2008, p.229).

Back to the Spiegel story about the crucial Friday meeting. After China had said no - more or less blowing compulsory targets for C02 emissions into splinters - President Obama spoke for several minutes, during which he suggested that such targets be tabled. And so they were. A month later he told newsman Jim Lehrer the following: "People are justified in being disappointed about the outcome in Copenhagen...I...didn't make any claims going in, that somehow that was going to be everything that we needed to do to solve climate change...rather than see a complete collapse in Copenhagen, in which nothing at all got done and would have been a huge backward step, at least we kind of held ground and there wasn't too much backsliding from where we were." ("Obama Frustrated With Outcome of Copenhagen Climate Talks," 12/25/09, www.enn.com).

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A third core tactic of politics-as-usual is the legacy goal. In this case the politician has decided to place her or his reputation and political muscle on the line in order to attempt a substantive accomplishment. While a typical motivation is to establish a legacy, sometimes a politician's personal convictions come into play.

A legacy goal of the European Union, which it adopted in 1996, is to keep global warming below 2 degrees C above the pre-industrial level. Another way to say this is that 2 degrees C was selected as the border between "acceptable" and "dangerous" warming; 1.99 degrees C still being "acceptable." The emissions targets the European Union proposed at Copenhagen were aimed toward this end.

The goal is catchy and appealing. It's easy to remember and the low number subconsciously implies a low level of danger. It's also called the "guardrail," which reinforces the suggestion of safety. And because atmospheric temperature has thus far risen only 0.8 degrees C, it also implies that there's leeway for economic growth.

But by the time this goal became entrenched, maximizing its political value, the science had evolved well beyond it. Specifically, James Hansen, in his Congressional testimony in June, 2008, cited above, said, "The oft-stated goal to keep global warming less than two degrees Celsius (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit) is a recipe for global disaster, not salvation." And in their landmark article published online in August, 2008, UK scientists Kevin Anderson and Alice Bows concluded that, "...the rhetoric of 2 degrees C is subverting a meaningful, open, and empirically informed dialogue on climate change...it is a dangerously misleading basis for informing the adaptation agenda." ("Reframing the Climate Change Challenge in Light of Post-2000 Emission Trends," Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society A, 2008, p. 3880.)

Still, politicians find it difficult to surrender a well-formed legacy goal they've put themselves on the line to establish. Here's an example, vintage March, 2009: "When told by a scientific panel that even a 2 degrees C target might allow too much warming, with serious damages and possible tipping points occurring below 2 degrees C, the Prime Minister [of Denmark] expressed frustration: 'It was a hard battle to get agreement on two degrees, a real challenge, and now you tell me it's not enough and we need less than two.'" (See Mark New et al, "Four Degrees and Beyond: the Potential for a Global Temperature Increase of Four Degrees and its Implications," Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society A," 2011, pp. 7-8).

No surprise then that the political advocates of this goal refused to surrender it. Thus the first paragraph of the formal Copenhagen Accord, dated December 18, 2009, proclaims: "...we shall, recognizing the scientific view that the increase in global temperature should be below 2 degrees Celsius...enhance our...action to combat climate change." (Italics added.)

So let's see: ignoring the best science in the name of science, with the world's ass on the line. That's terminal pragmatism.

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My purpose in writing about politics-as-usual at Copenhagen isn't simply to excoriate the attending politicians for practicing their standard tactics. Indeed, none of them would've made it to Copenhagen without such skills except on a cruise ship. I believe what this fiasco reveals is far more disturbing: that at the critical moment for action we saw how unprepared humans are to do what it takes.

Indeed, the climate talks in Cancun in December, 2010, also failed to produce legally binding targets. ("Does the Cancun Agreement Show Climate Leadership?" 12/13/10, www.guardian.co.uk). Nor is there much optimism for a binding deal from this year's talks in South Africa. Meanwhile every year that the peak for C02 emissions is delayed the more extreme the rates of reduction will have to be thereafter in order to avoid a planetary calamity. Already in mid-2008 Anderson and Bows had questioned whether such rates of reduction are compatible with uninterrupted economic growth (Cited above, pp. 3879-3380).

What's sobering is that while modern societies are well adapted to emergencies defined by warfare, they've shown little capacity to adapt to the emergency of global warming. I suspect that if Copenhagen had been a secret meeting to address a worldwide military crisis and if the politicians had been listening to four star generals the chances for workable results would have been much greater.

While avoiding global climatic devastation may still be possible, at least in theory, I think the odds are that by the time those suckers finally grind out a binding agreement and the American public wakes up from its global warming coma, we'll be fried. So it may be more useful, at least for some of us, to focus on what a difficult future will entail, and what processes, such as overcoming psychological denial and dissociation, will be helpful to people in coping and then looking ahead.

In this vein, studying the growth, collapse, and re-integration of cultures in the past, thanks to the offerings of archaeology and anthropology, will give us much to consider.

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