

Climate Change: The 'Warm War' Is Upon Us

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The world is in their hands: British Prime Minister Gordon Brown (right) hands the GLOBE Award for International Leadership on the Environment to Mexican President Felipe Calderon in Copenhagen. (Olivier Morin / AFP/Getty Images)

By Marcelo Gleiser

There is something both tragic and exciting going on in the global warming talks in [Copenhagen](#). The exciting part is that it appears the political leaders of the world are finally waking up to the fact that global warming is not simply a topic of debate; it's really here, it's happening, and the consequences are dire.

For the past decade, and to the bafflement of the vast majority of scientists, the science of global warming became a topic of political debate. In the name of the "fairness of considering all points of view" (there are obvious echoes of the intelligent-design debate here), the minority opinion of a few scientists was inflated beyond any measure of decency to represent a legitimate contrary opinion flushed with supporting data and the like. Nonsense.

As the thousands of scientists from around the world that contribute to the [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#) have argued through many different avenues of research and data gathering, global

warming is not only a reality, but it is also caused by human action. In other words, we are the major players in what is going on and we better do something about it.

Unfortunately, and here is where the tragic part comes in, we humans are very bad at thinking ahead. Unless the threat is at the door, we do nothing.

The main obstacle to convincing people of the urgency of global warming is that it happens at a pace that is too slow and (for now) in places too remote to scare most people. Also, it goes beyond the political horizon of the next election.

"So, ice is melting in the Arctic at an alarming pace, and the temperature may rise by a few degrees by century's end. But look, it's a beautiful day out, and at least here in Northern New England it's freezing today. Can't be that bad, really." So goes the complacent view of many. Do we need the absurd Himalaya-sized tidal waves of the recent movie [2012](#) to get scared?

It's the second time in the history of the Earth that a single species is promoting a global change that promises to redefine life as we know it.

The first happened between roughly 3 and 1.5 billion years ago, when the first living forms, single-celled blue-green algae, discovered photosynthesis. They started to consume CO₂ and pump oxygen into the atmosphere. We should thank our prokaryotic ancestors for creating the environmental conditions that allowed for multi-cellular life to evolve and, eventually, for us to be here. Now, here we are, reversing the process, choking the planet once more. We are behaving as the deadliest of parasites.

The difference between us and parasites is that we can think. There seems to be only one thing that can unite us as a species: a common enemy. In Hollywood movies, it's the aliens.

Now we have a very real common enemy, one that must be fought globally. As with the nuclear arms race of the Cold War, some

countries are more to blame than others. Yet the whole world could be paying a price. We now have a global "Warm War" to fight.

I agree with what Adam Frank [wrote here on 13.7](#): This may be our decisive test as a species. Either we unite and win or we polarize and lose. We are our worse enemy but also our only hope.