

RONALD E. DOEL

# Polar melting when Cold War was hot

**P**EOPLE WERE surprised, even a little shaken, when recent news reports claimed that Arctic ice is melting.

The real surprise should be that we were surprised at all. Conservative pundits talk as if Arctic melting and its disturbing implication — that global warming is well underway — are just hot-off-the-press "scare stories" from the liberal propaganda mills, promoted by nervous-Nellie scientists and industry-hating environmentalists.

In fact, fears of Arctic warming first emanated a half-century ago from a citadel of conservative values: the U.S. military. Melting of the Arctic Ocean was already predicted in 1953, when military leaders viewed polar climate change as a national security concern.

**A**FTER World War II, as the Cold War strained relations between Moscow and Washington, Pentagon officials grew anxious about the Arctic. Alaska shared a common boundary with Siberia along the Bering Strait, and the shortest route for Soviet bombers targeting U.S. cities lay across the Pole.

In the late-1940s, the Strategic Air Command's fleet of B-29s began patrolling North America's northern borders high above the polar ice. But while the Soviets were undisputed masters of the far north (they had begun exploring the Arctic intensely already by the 1930s), the unending ice fields overflown by U.S. pilots were a frightening terra incognita.

Civilian scientists advising the Pentagon were themselves troubled by reports from the noted Swedish scientist Hans Ahlmann that glaciers in high northern latitudes were receding at a rapid clip. Already meteorologists were noticing that the world had been getting warmer since the turn of the century.

Ahlmann believed polar warming was equally real. Addressing a closed-door Pentagon meeting on June 17, 1947, Ahlmann insisted that studying

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arctic climate variation was "to America's interest."

Several months earlier, American scientists had pressed for new research on Arctic ice — pointing out its value for improving weather forecasts and military communications, rescuing stranded pilots, detecting (and hiding) proposed polar-crossing submarines and predicting changes in Soviet fishing harvests and shipping routes. But Ahlmann's evidence made climate a "strategic" concern.

**P**ROMPTED BY civilian advisors, Pentagon leaders funded hundreds of new cold weather research programs. The Naval Arctic Research Laboratory was established near Barrow, Alaska. Military interest heightened after CIA intelligence sources reported large Soviet military exercises above the Arctic Circle.

In 1952, two years after the outbreak of the Korean War, U.S. scientists finally gained a high Arctic foothold by establishing a camp on an enormous glacial splinter named Ice Island T-3.

Arctic climate studies expanded dramatically in the late 1950s, through the International Geophysical Year. Aware that Pentagon officials were intrigued by this huge multi-national program (and its promise to secure critical data from countries behind the Iron Curtain), defense-savvy oceanographers and meteorologists urged new climatic measurements.

The no-nonsense Arctic scientist Paul A. Siple, a veteran of Admiral Richard E. Byrd's famous pre-war Antarctic expeditions, made the case forcefully. "(I)f the climatic trend continues as at the current rate," Siple wrote to International Geophysical Year organizers in 1953, "it is conceivable that the North Polar basin might be an ice-free ocean in mid-summer within another 50 years . . . The significance of major climatic changes within the next few decades to our modern civilization is not to be taken lightly."

Secretary of the Navy T.H. Smith Jr. agreed, musing that "future [Arctic] military operations are a real possibility."

**T**HE International Geophysical Year marked an important turning point for climatic stud-

ies. Researchers did confirm that many (not all) high latitude glaciers were receding, and polar sea ice seemed thinner. By then a new generation of nuclear-powered submarines, including the USS Nautilus and Skate, were making sea-ice measurements directly, by surfacing.

These submarines carried missiles able to reach Soviet targets more quickly than SAC bombers — faster still when launched from the high Arctic. (T-3 scientists watched the Skate punch through nearby sea ice in August 1958, a vivid demonstration that polar climate was a matter of military concern.)

Military fascination with the thinning ice of the North Pole is a forgotten story today, a victim of Cold War secrecy and still-classified documents (as well as a pause in the worldwide warming trend from the 1950s through the 1970s).

Pentagon officials deserve credit for grasping early on the importance of climate research. Yet historians are discovering that funds for studying the biological and social consequences of global climate change — rising sea levels, shifts in climatic zones and altered agricultural regions — were paltry.

Far more was spent to understand the environments in which soldiers or ballistic missiles would operate. In official Washington, global warming was a utilitarian problem, a secret instrumental knowledge needed to combat Soviet military threats.

**R**ESearchers are now debating how novel this season's sighting of blue water at the pole actually is. Still, most climate scientists insist that global warming remains an important issue. But our surprise at this finding is a reminder of how quickly Americans forget their past.

By ignoring the early history of this polar drama, we may calmly assume that the latest Arctic news is just another environmental "scare story" (akin to the Alar scare and other flash-in-the-pan eco-sagas of yesterday).

But polar melting isn't a new concern at all. On the contrary, the recent news from the far north might be just the latest hint of an unfolding climatic disaster. Our national memory of polar warming sadly vanished along with the Cold War.



HUEY D. JOHNSON

## Blair courageously took the

**T**he Hague, Netherlands **HOUGH MOST** people accept global warming as a real problem, getting global policy action in order to do something about it will be rough work.

The angry demonstrations in Europe — by truckers, taxi drivers and farmers — are just a first joust in the struggle toward world energy management.

The United States, with our multi-million dollar political campaigns bankrolled by oil and gas interests, remains at the bottom of a deep black hole of non-energy policy. A good example is the U.S. Senate's inability to consider the Kyoto Global Warming conference accords, even though most other nations were comfortable with them.

Serious quality-of-life issues are at stake — water clean enough to drink and for fish to live in, air clean enough to breathe without getting an asthma attack, forests and crops not stressed by air pollution and sea levels allowed

their own good time to rise and fall. Without leadership in the United States, these issues will be decided elsewhere first.

The lesson so far is the importance of leadership and its risks and rewards. The French government, faced with demonstrations, quickly surrendered. Enter British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who stood up to the crisis with courage and took it on as a matter of principle.

He firmly challenged the gas industry when it raised prices; he challenged the demonstrators; he challenged the public.

He took the risk knowing that the public is attached to its cars and unlimited gas supplies. The English political polls predicted ruin as a result. But, whether the public wanted it or not, Blair defined the issue of quality of life as basic for England and the integrity of government itself.

I believe his political enemies will not gain in the end. The people are aware of the problems of burning fuel. One third of England's children have asthma symptoms related to poor air quality. Over time the people will support the difficult decisions that need to be made.

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## Ruling may lead to con's f

**M**ILL VALLEY lawyer Jerry Schwartzbach hasn't earned a dime working to free Buddy Nickerson of San Jose from state prison, where the convict is serving a life sentence for two drug-related murders he says he didn't

pens regularly. This is standing operating procedure," said Michael Pescetta, a longtime California public defender who now heads the federal government's habeas corpus unit in Nevada.

"From their point of view, everybody in jail is guilty. They (inmates) deserve nothing, and all of this litiga-

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# Misinformation campaign on RU-486

**A**S IS always the case when the issue is abortion, anti-choice folks have floated some

medical experts, the Knights of Columbus.

The mission: to intimidate the drug's manufacturer, Roussel-Uclaf

It took seven more years and a mountain of legal battles to win final FDA approval last week. As late as June, in fact, the agency was proposing