

WONDER LAND  
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# Forget the Planet, Retrofit the Earth

June 19, 2008;

The Wall Street Journal, Page A13

Looking at images of nearly all Iowa underwater got me thinking about the difference in politics between fixing the here-and-now and fantasizing about the future.

One began to suspect our public officials might be drifting toward the clouds when many started referring to Earth as "the planet." Democrats especially of a certain environmental stripe talk only about "the planet."

Of late, one might ask: Which planet are they living on? The Earth is about the here-and-now. The Planet is about the out-there.

This week John McCain sounded like an Earth guy and Barack Obama like a Planet man.

When Sen. McCain said he wanted to open drilling on the Outer Continental Shelf, he was talking about the here-and-now of \$135 oil and \$4 gasoline. When Sen. Obama in his own energy speech spoke of spending \$150 billion over 10 years to create five million new "green energy jobs," he was talking about the out-there.

When House and Senate Democrats last week said their "climate change" bill would collect \$6.7 trillion from polluters over 40 years to save the planet, this too was public policy about the out-there.

"Extreme weather" is the name given to the big rains pouring down on the American Midwest and sending rivers over levees. Extreme weather includes tornadoes, hurricanes, cyclones, floods, drought, blizzards and such. Many of the Planet-centric people would say the Iowa floods are more proof of global warming.

One doesn't have to doubt the sincerity of global warming's advocates to worry that their friends in Congress would throw \$6 trillion of GDP at it, wave acres of windmills into existence and claim to have "addressed the problem." But what about the problems of the here-and-now?

In 2008, the U.S. likely will experience a record number of tornadoes, with more than 115 people killed so far. Some 15 named storms occurred in the 2007 Atlantic hurricane season. If one of them blew down your street and wrecked your or your neighbor's house, you might reasonably wonder: While Washington's gods debate

the future of the icecaps, isn't there something that can be done in the here-and-now to mitigate the effects of these godawful storms?



AP

Flooded homes in Machesney Park, Ill., June 16, 2008.

The answer is yes. Plenty can be done, all the result of smart people figuring out real-world solutions right now to the damage done by extreme weather, even as we wait for President Obama's windmill farms, solar panels and flex-fuel cars to stop hurricanes from happening a generation hence.

In 2004, Hurricane Charley ravaged the Caribbean and U.S. and caused more than \$8 billion in insured losses. According to an analysis of Charley's damage, done by the Wharton Business School's risk management center, residences built to wind-resistance

standards developed since 1996 had a 60% lower claim frequency than pre-1996 buildings; in short, less destruction. The study hypothesized that mitigation strategies would reduce the damage of a 100-year hurricane in Florida by 61%. That's a lot of intact homes.

The array of protective techniques and technologies that engineering science has developed the past decade is astonishing. Scientists have analyzed wind flows across roofs and siding, damage from wind-driven projectiles and water infiltration through windows, roofs, doors and foundations. Building materials and techniques exist now to reduce damage from high wind and water surges. A big reason more vulnerable homes aren't retrofitted is due to distortions in pricing insurance risk, such as the National Flood Insurance Program.

Yes, engineering can do only so much to reduce human suffering from a cataclysmic event, as in Katrina or China's earthquake. Arguably no one on Earth has thought more about this than Lynn Fritz. The former CEO of a major logistics firm that was acquired by UPS, he transferred those skills to the Fritz Institute, which has innovated techniques to integrate the can-do systems of the private sector into large-scale relief efforts, as for the Indonesian tsunami.

His answer: Emphasize "preparation rather than response." It's never anyone's job in a community to be ready for a disaster. "Everyone is too busy," he says. "9/11? They can barely get through the day. Most common-sensical things haven't been prepared before the event."

Mr. Fritz argues that, based on their studies of mega-disasters, what saves people in the crucial first days is "civil infrastructure," by which he means local community groups, private organizations, churches and such. "They know who you are and

where you are. You have trust in them." Waiting for the government or military to show up will always be too late for the first, most vulnerable victims.

I asked if any of this was transferable to, say, Asia. It already has been, he said. India after its awful 2001 Bhuj earthquake addressed disaster readiness, such that it famously refused U.S. help after the 2004 tsunami. This was appropriate, Mr. Fritz said. "The Indians did have better preparedness than all these people slopping in from all over the world to make a mess."

Whatever the reality of global warming, we are not prostrate before extreme nature. A convenient truth is that smart people will find here-and-now solutions before the coming of the climate Apocalypse.

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