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Interview: Competitive Enterprise Institute's Fred Smith, Natural Resource Defense Council's Jon Coifman discuss "The Day After Tomorrow" film

GLORIA BORGER, co-anchor: And welcome back. "The Day After Tomorrow" hits theaters this Memorial Day weekend, sending a tidal wave of political debate on global warming to the forefront.

Unidentified Reporter: (From "The Day After Tomorrow") Car accidents, at least 200 and Lower Manhattan, I am told, is virtually inaccessible.

BORGER: So is this just election-year Hollywood hype? Or an environmental wake-up call? joining me now to debate this is Fred Smith, president of the Competitive Enterprise Institute, and Jon Coifman, spokesman for the National Resources Defense Council.

Thanks to both of you for being with me this evening.

Let me start with you, Fred Smith. Doesn't a movie like this just sort of scare people? I mean tornadoes in LA, the Eiffel Tower under ice, New York City gets hit with a tidal wave and then freezes over. What's the purpose of this?

Mr. FRED SMITH (Competitive Enterprise Institute): I guess they don't want to have the Republican Convention in New York City. That's the only thing I can figure out. It's obviously designed to be a scare movie, to make money, disaster film scare. It's interesting though, as a science of global warming, as man-caused catastrophic warming weakens, we turn not to more science but to movies. Not a very smart policy for America.

BORGER: So, Jon Coifman, is any good that comes out of this or just scary movie for a long weekend?

Mr. JON COIFMAN (Natural Resources Defense Council): Well, first of all, nobody should mistake the "Day After Tomorrow" for a scientific textbook. This is a summertime adventure movie. It's all about special effects and the fun in the studios. Now, what we're seeing over the past few days here is this actually sparked quite an interesting and we think lively and intelligent debate about what global warming really is about, what we know about the issue and what we ought to be doing about it. And that's good news.

BORGER: But don't you think this can just confuse the issue rather than spark a debate? I mean, if people see, you know, a tidal wave in New York, that can confuse the issue or turn it into a cartoon even.

Mr. COIFMAN: We should be...

Mr. SMITH: It already has turned into a cartoon. And one of the real interesting things about that as it becomes more and more of a cartoon, serious debate, maybe, but I didn't think Al Gore came across that seriously. What I think we're really seeing is, is an attempt to create a political agenda, piggyback on fears that people have, then try to put a prediction so terrible out there that, if this is the truth, the best thing you can do is to say a novena and go away.

BORGER: So does this help you? You, for example, want more environmental regulation. Does a movie like this help your group at all, Jon Coifman, get its point across?

Mr. COIFMAN: Well, nobody should be concerned that New York City is going to have a glacier problem any time soon or that we have got a tornado problem in Los Angeles. If people are interested in global warming because they're afraid of tidal waves, it's probably the wrong way to be looking at the problem. But what we found is that the film has actually created an opportunity like this to have these discussions, much livelier debate than we have seen in the past couple years on this. Now, what we do know about the issue and, you know, where there is no dispute, is that burning fossil fuels are pumping millions of tons of carbon dioxide, which is a heat-trapping pollutant, into the atmosphere, and that the earth is getting warmer as a result. The scientists say that the earth is warming at a rate that is much faster than any natural factors could possibly explain today.

Mr. SMITH: Well, wait, wait, wait. Wait, Jon. We're not in movie land now. We're...

BORGER: Let him finish.

Mr. COIFMAN: And that if the trend continues as they are today, that we will be seeing serious issues over the course of the next century that are going to be real challenges to our health, to our economy, Fred, and to our environment.

BORGER: OK, Fred.

Mr. SMITH: Jon should actually have been in the movie. He would have had a lot more reason to be there. Seriously, what's happening is, as we realize that climate is much more complicating than we thought it was, that non-man causal factors are dramatically bigger, and we see that the trends up and down on weather...

BORGER: You say non-man causal. Speak English.

Mr. SMITH: Well, for example, it's essentially not driving our SUVs around.

BORGER: OK.

Mr. SMITH: It's effectively the sun's radiation, it's wind currents, incredible complex issues which aren't in the movie, of course, because they don't fit into a—science fiction is not science. A science debate on this would be very important. We have been trying to mount that. We aren't getting much discussion from Jons of the world.

Mr. COIFMAN: Yeah.

BORGER: Do you agree it is non-man causal, as Fred says, that we have to worry about?

Mr. COIFMAN: I'm not sure I would put it that way. But the—and Fred probably wouldn't have put it that way either. But, you know, again, what we have seen from the National Academy of Sciences, the intergovernmental panel on global climate change, most mainstream climate researchers say that the...

Mr. SMITH: Jon.

Mr. COIFMAN: ...rate of climate change...

Mr. SMITH: Jon, the scientists...

Mr. COIFMAN: ...that we have experienced in the century has exceeded what the natural factors

now...

Mr. SMITH: Jon, no. Jon, we've got to—we know that carbon dioxide levels are rising. We know, all things equal, but the trouble is all things aren't equal. What we're finding out today is that essentially two things are happening. It doesn't look like the earth is going catastrophically warming, and it looks like if we're concerned about that, the solution is not more regulation, it's freeing up the economy to produce the wealth to produce the knowledge that we can address that.

BORGER: OK, Jon, last word.

Mr. COIFMAN: We can agree that we're not going to see a catastrophic climate change, but we do think we need to start moving the solutions, start cleaning up emissions. The good, sensible, bipartisan, market-based solution...

Mr. SMITH: Market-based.

Mr. COIFMAN: ...like the McCain-Lieberman...

Mr. SMITH: Higher energy tax.

Mr. COIFMAN: ...bipartisan global warming bill.

Mr. SMITH: Higher energy tax. This is not a solution to world's problem.

BORGER: OK, guys. Guys, we're going to have to end it there.

Mr. COIFMAN: All right.

BORGER: Thanks so much, Fred Smith and Jon Coifman. Thanks so much.

Mr. SMITH: All right, thank you.

Mr. COIFMAN: Good to be here.

BORGER: And coming up, the Atkins' food fight got nastier here in Washington today. Did the diet cause one man's health problems.

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