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Dr. John P. Holdren

“De-development” Advocate is the Wrong Choice for White House Science Adviser

By William Yeatman*

In December 2008, President-elect Barack Obama nominated Dr. John P. Holdren to be White House Science Adviser. The White House Science Adviser heads the Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP), which “serves as a source of scientific and technological analysis and judgment for the President with respect to major policies, plans and programs of the Federal Government,” according to the OSTP web site.

John Holdren’s 40-year record of outlandish scientific assertions, consistently wrong predictions, and dangerous public policy choices makes him unfit to serve as White House Science Adviser. The Senate should not confirm his nomination.

Chronic Alarmist. Holdren earned a doctorate from Stanford for his research on plasma physics, yet he achieved scientific celebrity—or, rather, notoriety—by championing a variety of unfounded doomsday scenarios. Holdren is a chronic alarmist. During his career, he has warned that civilization is threatened by “ecocide,” nuclear winter, and “climate disruption.”

- In 1971, Holdren predicted that “some form of ecocatastrophe, if not thermonuclear war, seems almost certain to overtake us before the end of the century.”¹
- In 1986, he claimed that global warming would cause the deaths of 1 billion people by 2020.²

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- In 1998, he warned that “a ‘business as usual’ energy future ... is so likely to be massively problematic economically, environmentally, and politically that it cannot be achieved even [if] it is attempted.”³

Advocate of Morally Dubious Policies. Holdren’s gloom and doom prophecies are bad enough, but he compounds his folly by advocating radical, morally dubious remedies for his crackpot apocalyptic theories. For example, Holdren has advocated government-funded sterilization programs and the “de-development” of industrialized economies to ward off “ecocide.” And he has complained that “people are the bane of a rational energy policy,”⁴ by which he meant that his energy-rationing schemes to prevent “climate disruption” are politically unpopular.

Early in his career, Holdren warned of “ecocide,” an “ecocastrophe” caused by expanding populations and growing economies that exceed the “finite ability of this planet to support people.”⁵ Holdren became a vocal proponent of population control.

- In 1969, he wrote about the necessity “to convince society and its leaders that there is no alternative but the cessation of our irresponsible, all-demanding, and all-consuming population growth.”⁶
- Two years later, Holdren claimed that “population control, the redirection of technology, the transition from open to closed resource cycles, the equitable distribution of opportunity, and the ingredients of prosperity must all be accomplished if there is to be a future worth living.”⁷

Consistently Wrong. Not for the last time, Holdren’s eco-alarmism proved false.

- **Holdren’s fiction:** In 1969, Holdren claimed: “If population control measures are not initiated immediately and effectively, all the technology man can bring to bear will not fend off the misery to come.”⁸
- **Reality:** Global population growth continued unabated and people today are wealthier and healthier than they were in 1971.
- **Holdren’s fiction:** In 1973, Holdren encouraged a “decline in fertility to well below replacement” in the United States, because “280 million in 2040 is likely to be much too many.”⁹
- **Reality:** Currently, the U.S. population is 304 million.

Holdren also fretted over nuclear Armageddon. As a member of the Pugwash Conference, an international group of scientists for arms control, Holdren’s extremist pacifism undermined the very policies that won the Cold War.

- **Holdren’s fiction:** In 1983, Holdren campaigned against increased defense spending because it might provoke the Soviet Union. Specifically, he criticized President Ronald Reagan’s “supposition that the strain of an accelerated arms race will do more harm to the Soviet economy than our own.”¹⁰

- **Reality:** Today, historians of various ideological stripes credit Reagan’s defense buildup with ending the Cold War precisely *because* it exposed the futility of centrally-planned economies to a new generation of Soviet leaders

Unlike many climate scientists, Holdren never bought into the global cooling scare during the 1970s. In fact, he has been a global warming alarmist since 1969, when he questioned whether it was wiser to spend \$1.8 billion to fund vasectomies or a nuclear power plant that generates electricity without greenhouse gas emissions.¹¹

- **Holdren’s fiction:** In 2006, Holdren suggested that global sea levels could rise by 13 feet by the end of this century.¹²
- **Reality:** The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s Fourth Assessment Report (2007) suggests a potential sea level rise of 13 inches.
- **Holdren’s fiction:** In 2007, Holdren said “As droughts, heat waves, floods wildfires and severe storms intensify, damages to ecosystems and human society are growing apace.”¹³
- **Reality:** Holdren’s statement defies logic, as there has been no warming in almost a decade. How can these phenomena be “intensifying” as a result of global warming if there has been no warming?

Advocate of Misplaced Priorities. Over the years, Holdren has advocated a view of development that equates human well-being with that of plants and animals. In 1971, Holdren he said that the threat of “ecocide” meant that, “only one rational path is open to us—simultaneous de-development of the overdeveloped countries and semi-development of the underdeveloped countries.”¹⁴ And in a 1995 paper that explains his model for “sustainable” development, Holdren noted that “humans are included as just one species and are not treated specially.”¹⁵ In his model, biosphere “Damage” is directly proportional to economic growth.

Holdren’s priorities are out of whack. In any definition of development, humans should take precedence over plants and animals. Economists have demonstrated that beyond a certain low level of per-capita GDP (such as China is now overcoming), a society’s environment improves. That’s why the wealthiest countries have the highest environmental quality.

Economic development is the key to human well-being. De-development would cause just the sort of human suffering that Holdren has—incorrectly—asccribed to unabated population growth and global warming.

Now Holdren is warning of “climate disruption,” (aka “global warming”) which he calls “the biggest environmental issue of our time, and indeed of any time.”¹⁶ He has been consistently wrong before, and he is wrong now. That and his cavalier disregard for human well being make him thoroughly unsuitable to be White House Science Adviser.

Notes

- ¹ John Holdren and Paul Ehrlich, “What We Must Do, and the Cost of Failure,” in Holdren and Ehrlich, eds., *Global Ecology* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), p. 279.
- ² Ehrlich attributes this claim to Holdren in *The Machinery of Nature* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1986), p. 274.
- ³ Holdren, “Federal Energy Research and Development Challenges of the 21st Century,” in Lewis Branscomb and James Keller, eds., *Investing in Innovation: Creating a Research and Innovation Policy That Works* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1998), p. 309.
- ⁴ Holdren, “Coal in Context: Its Role in the National Energy Future,” *University of Houston Law Review*, July 1978, p. 1089.
- ⁵ Holdren, “Global Thermal Pollution,” in Holdren and Paul Ehrlich, eds., *Global Ecology*, p. 85.
- ⁶ Ehrlich and Holdren, “Population and Panaceas A Technological Perspective,” *Bioscience*, v 19, no. 12, 1969, p. 1071.
- ⁷ Ehrlich and Holdren, “Impact of Population Growth,” *Science*, v 171, No. 3977, 1971, p. 1217.
- ⁸ Ehrlich and Holdren, “Population and Panaceas,” p. 1070.
- ⁹ Holdren, “Population and the American Predicament,” Caltech Population Program, Occasional Papers Series 1, No. 4, 1973, p 41.
- ¹⁰ Holdren, “Why Does Reagan Say America Is Behind?,” *Christian Science Monitor*, April 12, 1983, p. 23.
- ¹¹ Ehrlich and Holdren, “Population and Panaceas,” p. 1071.
- ¹² Jonathan Leake, “The War on Hot Air,” *The Sunday Times* (of London), 3 September 2006.
- ¹³ Juliet Eilperin, “Scientist Group Warns of Warming ‘Threat,’” *Washington Post*, 19 February 2007.
- ¹⁴ Holdren and Ehrlich, “Introduction,” in Holdren and Ehrlich, eds., “*Global Ecology*,” p. 3.
- ¹⁵ Holdren, Gretchen C. Daily, and Paul Ehrlich, “The Meaning of Sustainability: Biogeophysical Aspects,” in Mohan Munasinghe and Walter Shearer, eds., *Defining and Measuring Sustainability—The Biogeophysical Foundations* (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 1995)
- ¹⁶ Barret Sheridan and George Wehrfitz, “The New Green Leaders,” *Newsweek*, 5 May 2008.