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'Boiling Point': Who's to Blame for Global Warming?

By AL GORE

BOILING POINT

How Politicians, Big Oil and Coal, Journalists, and Activists Are Fueling the Climate Crisis -- and What We Can Do to Avert Disaster.

By Ross Gelbspan.

254 pp. Basic Books. \$22.

THE blend of passionate advocacy and lucid analysis that Ross Gelbspan brings to this, his second book about global warming, is extremely readable because the author's voice is so authentic. When Gelbspan first encountered the issue as a reporter nine years ago, he writes, he had no inkling of how it would change his life. But as he put together the evidence of the global climate crisis he describes in this book, he found himself pulled inexorably to do more than simply write about it. So he now feels called to a kind of mission: to describe what is happening, to single out the specific failures and misdeeds of politicians, energy companies, environmental activists and journalists who share responsibility for our predicament, and then propose bold solutions that -- unlike more timid blueprints already on the public agenda -- would in his view actually solve the problem.

For a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter at the top of his game, this is a career detour requiring courage I greatly admire. Moreover, he candidly describes how, as he opened himself to the implications of what he was learning in his dogged pursuit of this story, he has undergone something of a personal transformation. He writes that it has become "an excruciating experience to watch the planet fall apart piece by piece in the face of persistent and pathological denial." He describes how mountain glaciers around the world are melting, most of them rapidly. And he cites early examples of environmental refugees like those created in recent weeks in Bangladesh, vulnerable to catastrophic flooding as sea levels rise.

In the course of this transformation, Gelbspan has become a different kind of reporter, one who recalls the great reforming journalists of the first decade of the 20th century -- Upton Sinclair, Ida Tarbell, Lincoln Steffens and others -- who not only reported on political corruption and corporate excesses but connected them to larger destructive patterns that had developed in the economy and politics of their time. They agitated for policy reforms, many of which were enacted into statutes when they became part of the progressive movement's agenda: antitrust laws, the Food and Drug Administration, railroad regulation, wage and hour laws, workmen's compensation and child labor laws, to name a few.

It is in that spirit that Gelbspan pursues solutions for climate change that can "also begin to reverse some very discouraging and destructive political and economic dynamics as well."

Part of what makes this book important is its indictment of the American news media's coverage of global warming for the past two decades. Indeed, when the author investigates why the United States is virtually the

only advanced nation in the world that fails to recognize the severity of this growing crisis, he concludes that the news coverage is "a large reason for that failure."

At a time when prominent journalists are writing mea culpas for allowing themselves to be too easily misled in their coverage of the case for war in Iraq, Gelbspan presents a devastating analysis of how the media have been duped and intimidated by an aggressive and persistent campaign organized and financed by coal and oil companies. He recounts, for example, a conversation with a top television network editor who was reluctant to run stories about global warming because a previous story had "triggered a barrage of complaints from the Global Climate Coalition" -- a fossil fuel industry lobbying group -- "to our top executives at the network."

He also describes the structural changes in the news media, like increased conglomerate ownership, that have made editors and reporters more vulnerable to this kind of intimidation -- and much less aggressive in pursuing inconvenient truths.

Gelbspan's first book, "The Heat Is On" (1997), remains the best, and virtually only, study of how the coal and oil industry has provided financing to a small group of contrarian scientists who began to make themselves available for mass media interviews as so-called skeptics on the subject of global warming. In fact, these scientists played a key role in Gelbspan's personal journey on this issue. When he got letters disputing the facts in his very first article, he was at first chastened -- until he realized the letters were merely citing the industry-funded scientists. He accuses this group of "stealing our reality."

In this new book, Gelbspan focuses his toughest language by far on the coal and oil industries. After documenting the largely successful efforts of companies like ExxonMobil to paralyze the policy process, confuse the American people and cynically "reposition global warming as theory rather than fact," as one strategy paper put it, he concludes that "what began as a normal business response by the fossil fuel lobby -- denial and delay -- has now attained the status of a crime against humanity."

I wouldn't have said it quite that way, but I'm glad he does, and his exposition of the facts certainly seems to support his charge.

Gelbspan also criticizes the current administration, documenting its efforts to "demolish the diplomatic foundations" of the international agreement known as the Kyoto Protocol, and describing its approach to energy and environmental policy as "corruption disguised as conservatism." Again, he backs up his charge with impressive research. Moreover, his critique is far from partisan. He takes on environmental groups for doing way too little and for focusing on their own institutional agendas rather than the central challenges.

When Gelbspan addresses the subject of solutions, he first gives a detailed analysis of all the significant plans that have been offered, and then endorses a maximalist approach called the World Energy Modernization Plan, developed six years ago by an ad hoc group that met at the Harvard Medical School. His basic argument is that it is far too late in the game to waste time on strategies that might be more politically feasible but don't actually do enough to begin to solve the problem.

He may be right, but the plan's authors, though distinguished, remind me of Sam Rayburn's remark that he'd feel a lot better "if just one of them had ever run for sheriff."

THE fact is, many who have worked on this problem believe it may be essential to begin with a binding agreement among nations and then, after governments and industries shift direction, toughen the goals. That is the formula used successfully in the Montreal Protocol in 1987 to begin reducing the emissions that cause destruction of stratospheric ozone. Three years later, the standards were dramatically tightened in the London Amendments, and by then most resistance had dissipated.

The Kyoto Protocol (which may soon become legally effective if Russia ratifies it, even though the United States has not) has been criticized by many, including Gelbspan, for not going nearly far enough to reduce the emissions that cause global warming. But it has simultaneously been condemned from the opposite side for going too far. If Kyoto does take effect, we may find that after industries and countries begin to comply, it will be easier to expand the limits of what is politically possible.

But Gelbspan's point is a powerful one and is well argued. And he has, in any case, performed a great service by writing an informative book on a difficult but crucial subject.

Al Gore, formerly vice president of the United States, is the author of "Earth in the Balance: Ecology and the Human Spirit."

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