

Climate change 'fraud' letter: a Martin Luther moment in science history

Esteemed physicist Harold Lewis is calling global warming the 'most successful pseudoscientific fraud I have seen.' His resignation letter could mark the unraveling of one of the great scientific mistakes in history and the beginning of a needed reformation of the scientific community.



In this 1872 painting by Ferdinand Pauwels, Martin Luther nails his '95 Theses" to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg, Germany on Oct. 31, 1517.

(akg-images/Newscom)

By Anthony Watts

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Five centuries ago, a German priest challenged the reigning theological "consensus" about the clerical sale of indulgences, unraveling one of the great religious scams in history and inspiring the Protestant Reformation.

This month, a senior American physicist challenged the reigning scientific "consensus" about global warming. His action may prove to be the unraveling one of the great scientific mistakes in history and the beginning of a greatly needed reformation of the scientific community.

Revulsion over fraud

Just as Martin Luther paid the price for his dissent, Dr. Harold Lewis is experiencing a sharp backlash in the wake of his Oct. 6 resignation letter from the prestigious American Physical Society (APS). After 67 years as a member, Dr. Lewis – emeritus professor of physics and former department chairman at the University of California, Santa Barbara – parted ways because of his "revulsion" over the climate change "fraud" perpetrated by what he felt was science distorted by money.

Other esteemed scientists have in recent years put forward compelling critiques of the technical and scientific case for anthropogenic climate change. Dr. Lewis's resignation letter is not such a critique. Rather, it is a condemnation of the way ideology, politics, and money have suppressed dissenting viewpoint and distorted the very nature of scientific inquiry. Like the so-called Climategate controversy, in which hacked emails from a group of climate scientists revealed political and personal factors influencing scientific work, Lewis' letter lays bare the less-than-noble motivations that seem to be driving discussion of climate-change research today.

The APS position: 'incontrovertible'

To understand Lewis's letter, you first have to understand the APS position on climate change. The APS, like several other major scientific organizations, supports the theory of man-caused global warming. Its official statement from 2007 read, in part: "The evidence is incontrovertible: Global warming is occurring. If no mitigating actions are taken, significant disruptions in the Earth's physical and ecological systems, social systems, security and human health are likely to occur. We must reduce emissions of greenhouse gases beginning now.... The APS also urges governments, universities, national laboratories and its membership to support policies and actions that will reduce the emission of greenhouse gases."

This statement troubled Lewis deeply. These key excerpts from Lewis's resignation letter explain why:

"[T]he money flood has become the raison d'être of much physics research, the vital sustenance of much more, and it provides the support for untold numbers of professional jobs. For reasons that will soon become clear my former pride at being an APS Fellow all these years has been turned into shame, and I am forced, with no pleasure at all, to offer you my resignation from the Society.

It is of course, the global warming scam, with the (literally) trillions of dollars driving it, that has corrupted so many scientists, and has carried APS before it like a rogue wave. It is the greatest and most successful pseudoscientific fraud I have seen in my long life as a physicist. Any who has the faintest doubt that this is so should force himself to read the Climategate documents, which lay it bare.... I don't believe that any real physicist, nay scientist, can read that stuff without revulsion.

1. About a year ago a few of us sent an e-mail on the subject to a fraction of the membership. APS ignored the issues, but the then President immediately launched a hostile investigation of where we got the e-mail addresses. In its better days, APS used to encourage discussion of important issues, and indeed the Constitution cites that as its principal purpose. No more. Everything that has been done in the last year has been designed to silence debate

2. The appallingly tendentious APS statement on Climate Change was apparently written in a hurry by a few people over lunch, and is certainly not representative of the talents of APS members as I have long known them. So a few of us petitioned the Council to reconsider it. One of the outstanding marks of (in)distinction in the Statement was the poison word incontrovertible, which describes few items in physics, certainly not this one. In response APS appointed a secret committee that never met, never troubled to speak to any skeptics, yet endorsed the Statement in its entirety. (They did admit that the tone was a bit strong, but amazingly kept the poison word incontrovertible to describe the evidence, a position supported by no one.)...

3. In the interim the Climategate scandal broke into the news, and the machinations of the principal alarmists were revealed to the world. It was a fraud on a scale I have never seen, and I lack the words to describe its enormity. Effect on the APS position: none. None at all. This is not science; other forces are at work.

4. So a few of us tried to bring science into the act (that is, after all, the alleged and historic purpose of APS), and collected the necessary 200+ signatures to bring to the Council a proposal for a Topical Group on Climate Science, thinking that open discussion of the scientific issues, in the best tradition of physics, would be beneficial to all, and also a contribution to the nation....

5. To our amazement, Constitution be damned, you declined to accept our petition....

APS management has gamed the problem from the beginning, to suppress serious conversation about the merits of the climate change claims. Do you wonder that I have lost confidence in the organization?...

Some have held that the physicists of today are not as smart as they used to be, but I don't think that is an issue. I think it is the money, exactly what Eisenhower warned about a half-century ago. There are indeed trillions of dollars involved, to say nothing of the fame and glory (and frequent trips to exotic islands) that go with being a member of the club.... As the old saying goes, you don't have to be a weatherman to know which way the wind is blowing. Since I am no philosopher, I'm not going to explore at just which point enlightened self-interest crosses the line into corruption, but a careful reading of the Climategate releases makes it clear that this is not an academic question.

I want no part of it, so please accept my resignation. APS no longer represents me, but I hope we are still friends.

Hal

This is an important moment in science history. I would describe it as a letter on the scale of Martin Luther, nailing his 95 Theses to the Wittenburg church door.

Lewis is no lightweight

Most people don't know who Lewis is. He's a quiet man, and he hasn't sought publicity in his career. He was a student of Robert Oppenheimer, "father" of the atomic bomb, and was active in the field of safety of nuclear power plants, where being wrong had grave consequences. He worked with (the late) noted climatologist Stephen Schneider when he chaired a 1985 task force on nuclear winter.

In short, he's no lightweight, and he's well respected in the field of physics.

Lewis and 260 other members of APS signed a petition, and battled within the organization, following the APS constitutional rules, in an attempt to get the APS position statement on global warming considered for revision. The effort was ignored, stonewalled, and rebuked. After years of trying, he finally had enough.

Lewis must have been wrestling with his conscience for a considerable time before concluding that resignation was his only option.

And like Luther, with all other options extinguished, he figuratively nailed his letter to the door of the organization that had become so entrenched in its own consensus that it couldn't even address the concerns of its own members.

Luther's brave act started the Reformation of the Catholic church. Lewis's act could very well begin the reformation of climate science.

Anthony Watts is a former television meteorologist and editor of the blog "Watts Up With That?"