Reagan’s Road to Climate Perdition

Exclusive: History can be seen as crossroads where people pick paths and live with the consequences, with some paths leading to grave dangers. Election 1980 was one such crossroad as Americans made the feel-good choice of Ronald Reagan over the eat-your-peas option of Jimmy Carter — taking a path to climate catastrophe, says Sam Parry.

By Sam Parry

The documentary “A Road Not Taken” chronicles the story of the 32 solar panels that President Jimmy Carter installed on the roof of the White House in 1979, the same solar panels President Ronald Reagan unceremoniously removed.

After being taken down in 1986, the solar panels were stored away in a government warehouse, like that scene at the end of “Raiders of the Lost Ark.” They were mostly forgotten until 1991, when Unity College, a small private school in central Maine that promotes sustainability, acquired them and put them to use on the roof of the school’s cafeteria.

Later, one of the panels was donated to the American History Museum in Washington, DC, and another found its way back to Jimmy Carter, given to the Carter Presidential Library in Atlanta, Georgia, where it was made a permanent exhibit in 2007, recalling Carter’s early commitment to renewable energy.

Yet, besides following the fate of these particular solar panels, the 2010 documentary reflects on the lost opportunity for the United States and the world in the change of direction that the solar panels represented, the fateful turn on energy issues from Carter’s presidency to Reagan’s.

The documentary depicts the 1979 installation of the solar panels to heat water for the staff cafeteria at the White House as one of the most visible symbols of the energy policies of the Carter administration, which did more than any other before or since to promote the goals of alternative energy and conservation. And, for Carter, the dual causes of renewable energy and energy independence were always high on his agenda. In early February 1977, just two weeks into his presidency, Carter gave a national televised fireside chat, wearing a yellow wool sweater and promoting a national energy policy as a top priority for his administration.

Over the next four years, Carter turned this commitment into a multitude of programs and initiatives. Carter created the Department of Energy, taxed oil company profits, improved automobile fuel efficiency, invested heavily in the
Solar Energy Research Institute (the precursor to the National Renewable Energy Laboratory), cut America’s oil imports in half, and increased U.S. use of renewable energy like solar power with a goal of generating 20 percent of all energy consumed in America from renewable sources by 2000.

Carter laid out a route for America’s energy future that — while still needing traditional fossil fuels — promoted cleaner alternatives and conservation. In his last State of the Union address, given just days before President Reagan’s inauguration, President Carter reflected on what he hoped his legacy would be on this crucial issue of energy:

“The Administration’s 1977 National Energy Plan marked an historic departure from the policies of previous Administrations. The plan stressed the importance of both energy production and conservation to achieving our ultimate national goal of relying primarily on secure sources of energy. In 1978, I initiated the Administration’s Solar Domestic Policy Review. This represented the first step towards widespread introduction of renewable energy sources into the Nation’s economy.

“As a result of the Review, I issued the 1979 Solar Message to Congress, the first such message in the Nation’s history. The Message outlined the Administration’s solar program and established an ambitious national goal for the year 2000 of obtaining 20 percent of this Nation’s energy from solar and renewable sources. The thrust of the federal solar program is to help industry develop solar energy sources by emphasizing basic research and development of solar technologies which are not currently economic, such as photovoltaics, which generate energy directly from the sun.

“At the same time, through tax incentives, education, and the Solar Energy and Energy Conservation Bank, the solar program seeks to encourage state and local governments, industry, and our citizens to expand their use of solar and renewable resource technologies currently available. As a result of these policies and programs, the energy efficiency of the American economy has improved markedly and investments in renewable energy sources have grown significantly. It now takes 3 1/2 percent less energy to produce a constant dollar of GNP than it did in January 1977. This increase in efficiency represents a savings of over 1.3 million barrels per day of oil equivalent, about the level of total oil production now occurring in Alaska.”

However, after Carter was out of the White House, President Reagan not only removed the solar panels from the roof, he systematically dismantled Carter’s alternative energy and conservation initiatives. Reagan became the anti-Carter in almost every way on energy policy. Reagan slashed the National Renewable Energy Laboratory’s budget by 90 percent, halved the Energy Department’s
conservation and alternative fuels budget, eliminated the wind investment tax credit, reduced spending on solar photovoltaic research by two-thirds, slashed energy tax credits for homeowners, and reduced fuel-efficiency standards for cars.

Due largely to Reagan’s policy reversals on alternative energy, the United States fell far short of Carter’s goal of getting 20 percent of its energy from renewable sources by 2000, achieving about only one-quarter of that target, even less than what Carter’s policies had achieved by the early 1980s. In retrospect, it is clear that Reagan made reckless policy choices that had grave consequences for American energy security, for the environment and for the future survivability of life on planet Earth.

Indeed, for those who understand the dire threat of catastrophic climate change and the curse of America’s continued addiction to fossil fuels, “A Road Not Taken” can be a painful documentary to watch. It may be even more painful for our kids and grandkids to watch this film in a world that already is on its way to **11 degrees F warming** (or more) by the end of the century. Scratch that. It won’t be painful to watch a movie. It will be painful to live in such a world.

But first, some good news. America is currently in the midst of a mini-boom for renewable energy, the likes of which we haven’t seen since, well, the Carter administration. In 2010, 8.21 percent of all energy consumed in America came from renewable energy – i.e. not fossil fuels and not nuclear. That’s up from 5.37 percent in 2001. [See U.S. Energy Information Administration.]

Yet, before we start patting ourselves on the back, it should be noted that President Carter’s energy policies (along with the oil crises of the 1970s) helped get the United States to 8.9 percent renewable in 1983. And all the way back in 1949, renewables accounted for 9.3 percent of our total energy consumption. So, the United States is not yet back to where it was in 1983 or 1949, but at least the nation finally is turning back onto the right road. The only question is, after such a long delay, is there any chance of getting to a carbon-free world – or even a low-carbon world – in time to avert the devastating threat of runaway global warming?

The hard truth is the answer is probably not. It’s hard to write those words. I have kids. I’d like to have a greater sense of hope. But I’ve read the science. Runaway global warming means the destruction of life as we have known it, probably not the destruction of all life on Earth, but the words “global catastrophe” is a soft way of putting it. Human civilization’s inability to seriously confront this crisis is akin to knowing that a giant meteor is on a collision course with Earth in 50 to 100 years and doing nothing about it – besides questioning the mathematics that charts the trajectory of the meteor.
Without doubt, the reality of climate change is difficult for people to accept. Numerous studies have examined the human mind to try to understand why we don’t take seriously the demise of our entire way of life. These studies have achieved some interesting — though ultimately not very helpful — insights. Harvard Psychology Professor Daniel Gilbert has noted that global warming is not intentional, immoral, imminent or instantaneous, but that only makes it more insidious. “Global warming is a deadly threat precisely because it sneaks in under the radar that we’ve evolved,” Gilbert said.

At least that helps explain why, as Elizabeth Kolbert, journalist for The New Yorker and author of Field Notes from a Catastrophe, puts it, “a technologically advanced society could choose, in essence, to destroy itself.” But analysis is not action. And we need all-out action now.

If you want to get a sense of what a planet that is 11°F warmer will look like, consider this: The planet has already warmed about 1.4°F since the Industrial Revolution. This level of warming has done this to the world’s glaciers:
And it’s done this to Arctic sea ice:

And it’s helped cause our seas to rise this much:
This is what the warming looks like:

But that’s nothing compared to what’s in store.

At 11°F warming, the climate of New Hampshire looks something like the climate of the Carolinas. At 11°F warming, we’ll be measuring sea level rise in feet and meters, not inches and centimeters. At 11°F warming, you can no longer grow corn in Iowa and the number of people around the world dying from starvation every year will increase from millions to hundreds of millions, possibly billions.

The crisis won’t be something that can be addressed through benefit concerts or even government aid programs. We will be facing a permanent dust bowl across most of the western half the U.S. — from Kansas to California. A third of Florida will be under water. We’re talking about hundreds of millions of people around the world becoming environmental refugees. We’re talking about Mad Max doomsday time.

Why will this happen? Well, the physics are actually pretty straight-forward.
Carbon dioxide is a heat trapping gas. We’re emitting around 33.5 billion metric tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere every year. Carbon dioxide lingers in the atmosphere for decades. The concentration of carbon dioxide in the Earth’s atmosphere has increased from pre-industrial levels of around 280 parts per million (ppm) to about 392 ppm today. We’re adding roughly 2 ppm per year to that total. And, in spite of the mountain of scientific warnings over the last 30 years, instead of reducing our CO2 emissions, we’re increasing them.

On our current path, the planet will get warmer and warmer and warmer and warmer with virtually no end in sight. It couldn’t be more straight-forward. There are no real questions about the physics. But national and global policies are not made in the realm of physics or science. They are made in the realm of politics. And when it comes to politics, especially modern U.S. politics, it is infinitely easier to do nothing than to take even the smallest steps toward doing the right thing, especially when billions of dollars in profits from fossil fuel corporate behemoths are at stake.

Especially when to this day you can go on Fox News and Rush Limbaugh’s radio show – or even some of the so-called left-wing chat shows – and demonstrate how witty you are as you chuckle at Jimmy Carter’s yellow wool cardigan sweater and his roof-top solar panels.

As a nation, the United States may finally be turning back onto Jimmy Carter’s road to renewables, but the painful reality is it may be too late. The three-decade detour begun by Ronald Reagan – and the continued slow pace of action even today – may guarantee that the road the United States remains on is the road to climate perdition.

Sam Parry is co-author of *Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush.*