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Subject: Sullivan and Kaus critiques of NYT coverage of climate story

I thought all of you might find these two online columns by Mickey Kaus and Andrew Sullivan interesting -- they examine the Times' coverage of the climate change Report recently submitted to the UN.

<http://slate.msn.com/?id=2066517>

Kausfiles

Tuesday, June 4, 2002

Global Heat or Heavy Raines? Is the two-day global warming controversy an example of Raines Power -- the ability of the new populist, activist, bigfooting editor of the NYT to singlehandedly shape the national debate? That's what Andrew Sullivan suggests:

A reporter finds some tiny and insignificant change in the wording of administration policy, and Raines puts it on his front page. Drudge takes the bait and Rush follows.

Sullivan's on to something, I suspect. The original NYT story, written by Andrew Revkin, does have a lot of artificial story-heightening language ("stark shift ...sharp contrast") seemingly designed to justify front-page placement -- including this prize-winning attempt to manufacture confrontation from ambiguity:

Despite arguments by oil industry groups that the evidence is not yet clear, the report unambiguously states that humans are the likely cause of most of the recent warming

If it's only "likely," then the evidence isn't really unambiguous, is it? (Actually, the report said "likely mostly"!) ... Two qualifications to Sullivan's Raines theory:

1) Signs suggest it wasn't a lone reporter finding some tiny and insignificant change in the wording of a report, but rather a tacitly coordinated campaign by enviros to embarrass the Bush administration with the

report of its own EPA. The smoking gun for this theory? The NYT ran an editorial on the global warming report the same day as Revkin's news story. Normally, when a lone reporter gets a scoop, he doesn't call up the editorial page to let them steal some of his glory. Rather, once the story is out, the ed page follows a day or two later. In this case, everyone in the enviro community apparently knew the report was due, including the NYT ed board.

2) The main (likely!) bogus, aspect of Revkin's story -- a selling point that helped get it on the front page and that sold it to Drudge -- was the idea that the EPA's report represented some sort of deliberate attempt by Bush to go a bit green to enhance his political appeal. Revkin offers basically no evidence of this, aside from his own speculation that

The distancing could be an effort to rebuild Mr. Bush's environmental credentials after a bruising stretch of defeats on stances that favor energy production over conservation, notably the failure to win a Senate vote opening the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to exploratory oil drilling.

Indeed, it's hard to believe that Revkin didn't know this "green shift" angle was phony (as Bush now says it is). Revkin himself noted that the report proposes no change in policy and has "alienated environmentalists." Plus a "senior administration official involved in climate policy played down the significance of the report" to Revkin himself. When the Bush administration wants to make a deliberate credential-burnishing shift to the left or the right, they leak it to the Times, but also call a press conference and maybe stage an event to get the word out. They don't quietly put a report on the Web and then, when the Times calls, pooh-pooh it. ... So why is the bogus angle in there? It's just as likely to be Raines bigfooting -- exhibiting the I-instinctively-know-what's-really-going-on-so-stick-this-in-your-piece arrogance described in Ken Auletta's New Yorker profile. Or it could be a reporter doing what he had to do to get his story on Page A-1. The least likely possibility is that Raines, pursuing a liberal environmentalist agenda, stuck in the bogus angle in order to get the story on the front page (where it could enrage Limbaugh, etc.) Raines didn't need a phony angle to put the piece on the front page -- he could have stuck it there anyway. He's editor of the paper! And a more accurate angle of "Bush's own EPA contradicts his global warming position" would be just as anti-Bush, and more in keeping with the goal of enviro activists, than a piece giving Bush points for having deliberately shifted in a green direction when he hasn't. ...

P.S.: If the Times really is going to use the A1-to-Drudge-to-Limbaugh megaphone in an attempt to actually influence administration policy, it may find itself running into the Dowd Effect, which is George W. Bush's

instinctive tendency to react against any idea suggested by the libs at the NYT. The effect is familiar to Mary Matalin, whose favorable mention in a Dowd column hurt her standing in the White House. In this case, if Bush was ever going to embrace the E.P.A. report, he isn't going to now. ... Of course, that may mean the Times story was a bit of fiendishly clever reverse psychology on Raines' part to maneuver the President into un-burnishing his environmental credentials. But I doubt it. And a real enviro would want Bush to actually embrace the conclusion that humans are causing global warming. That would shift the baseline of the debate and raise more powerfully the question, "what are you going to do about it?"

P.P. S.: If you are looking for something to do about it (that doesn't involve embracing the onerous Kyoto Protocol), Gregg Easterbrook lays out an effective, do-able, non-Kyoto agenda in this excellent New Republic piece.

Mickey Kaus, a Slate contributor, is author of *The End of Equality*.

<http://www.andrewsullivan.com/>
Wednesday, June 5, 2002

RAINES WATCH: Looks like I was right about Bush and global warming. Mickey Kaus adds some persuasive nuances. This, indeed, looks like a set-up. Some enviro groups figure out a way to embarrass the president, by finding minuscule discrepancies between presidential statements last year and a bureaucratic report this year, feed it to their friends at the Times, who then run an editorial and a cover-story on the phony "news." Rush and Drudge fall right for it. Is Raines a left-liberal ideologue, Mickey asks? I don't think so. He's just a big-footing Democratic partisan, who wants the Times to wound the president and wage populist or liberal campaigns. Remember the Enron poll that said the public was blaming Bush? Exactly the same scenario. There's a theme here, surely.

Monday, June 3, 2002

WHAT U-TURN? I know I'll be excoriated as a Bush toady for saying this, but I don't actually get the notion that the Bush administration has done a palpable U-turn on global warming. Check out this story. "Last year, the

White House described climate change as a serious issue after seeking opinions of the National Academy of Sciences but was undecided about how much of the problem should be blamed on human activities," the Associated Press reports. This year, in a report to the U.N. no less, the administration argues that "The changes observed over the last several decades are likely mostly due to human activities, but we cannot rule out that some significant part of these changes is also a reflection of natural variability." Wow. What a change. And no one is claiming that the Bush administration has shifted actual policy. It's also a grotesque distortion to say that most conservatives completely rebut the notion of some human effect on global warming. Certainly Bjorn Lomborg acknowledges it. My own view of this weird little summer story is that it's a major Howell Raines coup. A reporter finds some tiny and insignificant change in the wording of administration policy, and Raines puts it on his front page. Drudge takes the bait and Rush follows. Chill, guys. It seems to me that the Bush administration has long held the sensible skeptical position (which does not preclude taking human impact on global warming seriously). The difference between them and Al Gore is that they don't take this as a certainty or buy the notion you have to throw the economy into reverse to prevent it.

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