

**A QUARTERLY
MESSAGE
ON LIBERTY**

**WINTER 2021
VOLUME 19
NUMBER 1**

Cato's Letter

The Peril of Panic

MICHAEL SHELLENBERGER

I am a longtime environmental activist as well as a writer, journalist, and energy expert, and I changed my mind about nuclear power about 10 years ago. I decided that it was mostly good, not bad, and that we needed more of it if we were going to solve environmental problems, including mitigating climate change. I've been frustrated by the fact that many on the left are still very anti-nuclear, including especially those who are very alarmist about climate change. I couldn't understand why this was.

I was working on a book about nuclear energy and the opposition to it last year when the rhetoric about climate change became even more fervent than it already was.



MICHAEL SHELLENBERGER is the founder of Environmental Progress. He spoke at a Cato virtual book forum in September about *Apocalypse Never: Why Environmental Alarmism Hurts Us All*.

CATO
INSTITUTE

There is this idea that billions of people are going to die, and adolescents are experiencing a lot of anxiety and depression because they believe that. My 14-year-old daughter is fine because I talked to her about the science, but her friends are worried that they're not going to live long enough to have kids. So, in addition to covering the case for nuclear power, that became the focus of *Apocalypse Never*.

I don't think it's okay that we're scaring people like that. I think it's wrong. I've also long been bothered by efforts to deprive poor countries of cheap, reliable energy, whether with hydroelectric dams, coal plants, or nuclear plants.

My view on climate change is that it is real and that it's mostly if not entirely being caused by our carbon emissions. It does pose serious challenges, but it's not the end of the world, and climate change is not even our most serious environmental problem, which I think continues to be our use of landscapes and effect on habitats.

Part of my book is about how humans often actually save nature. This is a part of the book that I think many Cato supporters would enjoy. I

“There's a physical reality here with environmental resources.”

make a defense of what you might call a Hayekian view of prices as offering information that no centralized authority could possibly manage. I use the case study of whales, which were saved not once but twice through artificial substitutes—the first time in the 19th century with kerosene to petroleum to substitute for whale oil, which was being used for lighting fluid in lights. It happened again in the 20th century when vegetable oils replaced whale oil for margarines and soaps in Europe. After that, the overwhaling continued in the Soviet Union and to some extent due to overly managed economies in Japan and Norway, where they interfered with the price signal that was being sent that the alternatives were cheaper. I make a defense of that role that free markets can play.

At the same time, I think *Apocalypse Never* is also trying to say that there's a physical reality here when you're dealing with environmental resources that precedes the economy and that we should pay attention to the physics of energy—the environmental impact of food and agriculture production, which

is overwhelmingly our major impact on Earth. These problems are a function of power density and the efficiency of economies of scale.

I point out that the first passages of *The Wealth of Nations* by Adam Smith are about a physical process, about a pin factory that is gaining efficiencies. That physical transformation results in what we call economic efficiencies, and those efficiencies are also important for sparing the natural environment, using fewer natural resources to allow for more nature.

To bring it back to the question of energy: nuclear energy is effectively zero

“ Nuclear energy is effectively zero pollution. ”

pollution—zero air and water pollution, zero carbon emissions, a tiny physical footprint. It has a smaller mining footprint than oil and gas, even, which are themselves smaller than coal. That gets to questions of nuclear energy—and nuclear energy, I point out, is a very special and very different technology from any of the fossil fuel technologies or other technologies because it has always been a dual-use technology and has always been involved in questions of national security.

For me, at a policy level, what really matters is supporting that transition toward energy-dense fuels and paying special attention to nuclear energy’s role as a dual-use technology. It’s one that the United States has long had an interest in being heavily involved in, both at home and abroad, because of the special powers it gives us.

I’m trying to describe in some detail how these market processes are also good for the natural world. I want people to understand, for example, that saving the mountain gorillas is about helping poor farmers get jobs in the city and be able to eat artificial meat rather than bush meat or wild meat. That is important for taking pressure off the forests in the form of reliance on wood fuel.

I also want to bring the reader into these situations to understand how poverty is the big driver of so much environmental harm and that alleviating poverty is often the best thing we can do for the environment. So, I’d like people to see the human suffering in these countries and the environmental opportunity associated with fixing that. I firmly contest the claims that modernization, capitalism, and material progress are bad for nature.

A theme that runs through my work, as a committed environmentalist, is pushing back against the deep sense of pessimism, the negativism, the apocalypticism, certainly the alarmism, that runs so deep among environmentalists—the anti-humanism, the Malthusianism. That’s at the core of what’s



wrong with environmentalism. That is the central thing, and that’s crystal clear in my earlier essay “The Death of Environmentalism,” and that’s clear, I think, in *Apocalypse Never*. That’s the pure line that runs unbroken between that essay and *Apocalypse Never*. What’s changed for me is a huge amount of technology, economics, and policy. I didn’t really know anything about energy and technology back then. We thought that renewables were obvious-

ly the solution because everybody said they were.

We didn’t really understand that there’s an energy density problem, that it takes 300 to 400 times more land for these renewable options and that land is a finite natural resource too. It takes an enormous amount of land to get the same amount of electricity from a solar or wind farm as from a nuclear plant, and that really matters. The unreliability of many renewables is also an unsurmountable problem. It just makes things more expensive. I think I was myself more apocalyptic about climate change than I am now. But the thing I’m most proud about in “The Death of Environmentalism” is there’s a line where we say, “Martin Luther King didn’t give the ‘I have a nightmare’ speech.”

You can’t make the world a better place if you’re just going around talking about how terrible it is. There’s nothing redemptive or positive in any of that. The last chapter in *Apocalypse Never* in some ways speaks to that original essay. It says, “This [apocalyptic environmentalism] has become the dominant religion of secular elites in the West.” They’re completely unaware of it. They’re in denial of it. They think they’re doing science when they’re really doing religion. It’s kind of obvious to everybody in the room except for the people that are entrapped. I think we were speaking to some of that.

As for which way the social and ideological trends are heading, I unfortunately think alarmism will continue to become stronger. Climate change may not continue to be the main vehicle for apocalyptic environmentalism forever, but there will be some vehicle. Before climate change, the vehicle was,

of course, concerns about overpopulation. In fact, the whole agenda that was once about overpopulation now is basically used as the supposed solution to climate change. Overpopulation hysteria faded away because everybody realized that we're really going in the right direction in terms of human population. The rate of growth peaked in the late '60s, and we're probably going to peak at 9 or 10 billion people by sometime around the middle of this century. That's a problem that more or less solved itself without any of the catastrophic, drastic measures that were once being pushed.

“Alarmism will continue to become stronger.”

But around the same time, there was also the end of the Cold War, which took away nuclear weapons as the main apocalyptic fear. So, with nuclear apocalypse and overpopulation apocalypse off the table, climate change became the new looming apocalypse. Climate apocalypse offers a message that we're all sinners, we're all guilty. We need to make ourselves feel better. It basically bullies moderate liberals into going along with a pretty sinister Malthusian agenda. It is something to worry about because it's trying to make energy and food scarce and expensive around the world. We should be worried about that. It's a direct attack on the basis of progress and of civilization. ■

“Find out why, if you are not an optimist, you should be.”

— VERNON L. SMITH, NOBEL PRIZE-WINNING ECONOMIST



The world is, for the most part, getting better. *Ten Global Trends Every Smart Person Should Know: And Many Others You Will Find Interesting* provides entertaining access to surprising facts about how some of the world's worst problems, from pollution to violence and many others, are trending in the right direction.

CATO
INSTITUTE

AVAILABLE AT CATO.ORG AND ONLINE RETAILERS NATIONWIDE.



CATO PROFILE

Gene Healy

Gene Healy is a vice president at the Cato Institute. His research interests include executive power and the role of the presidency as well as federalism and overcriminalization. He is the author of *False Idol: Barack Obama and the Continuing Cult of the Presidency* and *The Cult of the Presidency: America's Dangerous Devotion to Executive Power*.

How did you come to work at Cato, and what attracted you to libertarian ideas?

I was born with a congenital inability to take politicians seriously and an innate revulsion to the idea of giving them more power. But I also had early exposure to libertarian arguments, swiping my dad's copies of *Reason*. When I got to college, I founded the Georgetown Libertarians. Being in Washington, DC, made it easy to host Cato speakers like David Boaz and trek over to the Institute's old Capitol Hill HQ for "Free Trade, Free Beer." Eventually, I found my way back home. In America, any child can grow up to become a professional presidential scold.

Much of your work has focused on presidential power and executive overreach. Since *The Cult of the Presidency* in 2008, have there been any positive trends in this area? What's gotten worse?

Well, the modern presidency hasn't gotten less absurd or menacing, but I like to think more Americans recognize the pathologies I identified—at least when the faction they oppose holds the ring. For four years, Donald Trump served almost as a "Scared Straight" program for liberals enamored of strong, activist presidencies—and conservatives may be about to get their own refresher course in skepticism toward executive power. Sometimes you've got to hit rock bottom before you can admit to yourself you've got a problem.

You've written about the "broad scope" of the impeachment power and that it's underused. In light of Trump's second

impeachment, do you think we will see impeachment used more often going forward?

I wouldn't hazard a guess based on the Trump experience, which was "not normal" across the board. But twice in one term ought to help dispel the notion that impeachment is either a "national nightmare" or a cure-all for what ails the body politic. It's always good to remind presidents that they serve at our pleasure and—like most other Americans—can be fired when they misbehave. It would be even better to vastly reduce the powers of the office and lower the stakes.

After Watergate, several anti-corruption and presidential power reforms were passed. What do you think are the prospects for something similar happening in the post-Trump era?

The great merit of the congressional reformers of the '70s was that they didn't stop at forcing Richard Nixon from office. They tried to make it harder for future Nixons to abuse presidential power. We now have a historic opportunity to improve on their work. The danger is that reformers will get sidetracked on Trump-focused anti-corruption measures tailored toward the rare president who owns a hotel chain and won't release his tax returns. Even so, the past four years had the effect of concentrating the mind wonderfully on the dangers of concentrated power. Prospects for a major effort aimed at deimperializing the presidency are better now than they've been at any time since Watergate. ■

Marc's Property Benefits Cato

Marc Biales is a longtime Cato Sponsor and has been active in the liberty movement for decades. So when Marc recently approached Cato with his idea to contribute an apartment building, we were grateful for his decision to make a major gift at such an important time for our mission.

“A lot of people do planning for after they pass, but it seems to me you ought to give it away before you pass. That way you can see what’s going on with it,” says Marc. “I’d had enough of that building and thought it was time to sell it. But I support what Cato does, so I spoke to my accountant about donating the property, which ended up making sense for me and Cato.”

Ultimately, Marc was able to help Cato while benefiting from a tax deduction for the full value of the property and avoiding paying capital gains taxes that would have accompanied a sale of the property.

Marc grew up in suburban Cleveland Heights, Ohio, in the 1950s and ’60s. Today, he recalls becoming weary of authority and “the chain of command” early in life and credits the influence of his entrepreneurial parents. Marc’s father was in business for himself as a repairman, and his mom stayed at home to manage the business and family. Marc remembers his dad being overburdened by the government simply because he needed a truck for his business.

“One of the things that drew me to the Cato way of thinking—less government—was that it always seemed like there were bureaucrats harassing people for no good reason,” says Marc. “When the city came by to give my dad a citation for having the wrong tag to park in his own driveway, it seemed to me that made no sense.”



Marc said his mother gave him an appreciation for differing viewpoints and a curiosity about how other people think.

“My mom would always say, ‘What does the other guy think?’” he recalls.

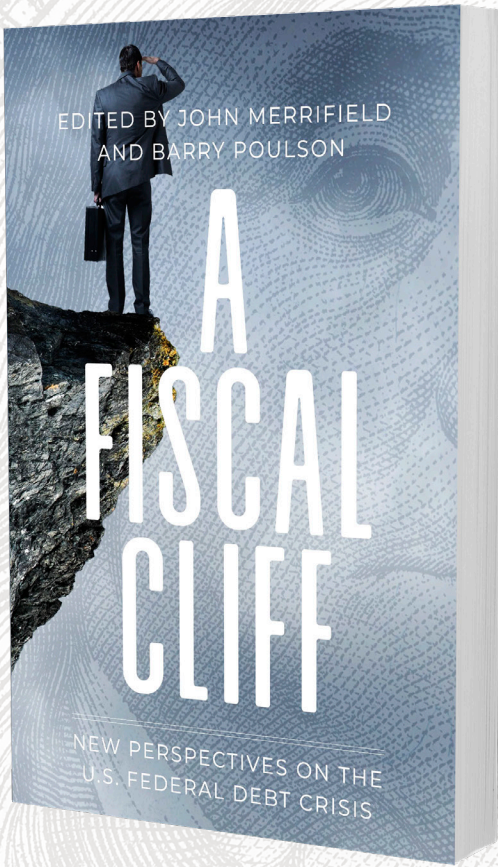
After graduating from Miami University, Marc stayed in Oxford, Ohio, to open his first business. The Wild Berry was founded in 1971 as a leather shop specializing in Marc’s handmade belts, bracelets, sandals, purses, and incense.

“As the business grew, I realized I couldn’t make everything by hand and began to bring in other people’s stuff, but always from the start, I was making incense,” Marc says. “After I couldn’t find another company who could make the incense as well as we did, a light bulb went off, and I thought, ‘well, I’ll just sell this to other people.’”

Combining a superior product with insights from years as a retailer enabled Marc to build Wild Berry Incense into a major success. And over the years, that success has allowed him to continue increasing his support for the causes that are most important to him.

“What I like about Cato is its focus on the story behind the story—what’s really making things happen,” he says. “I’m preaching to the choir, but I believe a person can make their own best decision.” ■

FOR QUESTIONS OR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT BEING A CATO SPONSOR, PLEASE CONTACT BRIAN MULLIS AT BMULLIS@CATO.ORG OR 202-789-5263.



It's Time for New Perspectives on the U.S. Federal Debt Crisis

Despite numerous congressional committees, bipartisan commissions, and votes, we are no closer to a solution to the U.S. federal government debt crisis than we were more than a decade ago. In this timely volume, scholars and policymakers assess the United States' fiscal constraints and provide new perspectives that are desperately needed. Previous recommendations focused on the outcomes of fiscal policy, but perhaps we should take a step back and ask whether the fiscal and budget process rules themselves should be reformed.

CATO
INSTITUTE

AVAILABLE AT CATO.ORG AND ONLINE RETAILERS NATIONWIDE.

Nonprofit
Organization
U.S. Postage
PAID
Cato Institute

CATO
INSTITUTE

1000 Massachusetts Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20001
www.cato.org