

## ENVIRONMENT

# The Climate-Change Doomsday Trap

*Given human nature, claims of a looming Armageddon are likely to move humanity closer to an environmental tipping point.*

❖ BY RICHARD B. MCKENZIE

Climate scientists have long pressed a climate-change narrative of self-perpetuating and potentially irreversible global warming. If the science and economics of climate change are right, this narrative leaves precious little hope for the adoption, in a timely manner, of corrective emission-abatement policies on a global scale.

Indeed, this policy trap—call it the “Climate-Change Doomsday Trap”—affords less hope of long-term survival for humanity than a person chest-high in quicksand, miles from the nearest town and without a cellphone. Moreover, just as struggling in quicksand can worsen a person’s fate, so can climate scientists’ dire warnings of a coming environmental Armageddon make its advent self-realizing and even more binding. The human race’s best hope of survival is that climate science and/or the economics of global warming have been exaggerated or are wrong in some fundamental and unrecognized way—which could be a long shot at best, given the binding economics of climate change.

The message for humanity hidden in the arcane details of the climate science narrative is one largely unacknowledged by climate scientists themselves: “Brace for doomsday.”

## CLIMATE SCIENTISTS’ GLOBAL WARMING ARGUMENTS

Climate scientists start their case for abatement of greenhouse-gas emissions by establishing the chemical tie between those emissions and global warming. They then show that since the late 19th century, human-emitted greenhouse gases—mainly carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>)—have continued on a steep upward trend. To date,

emissions-abatement programs have had little to no effect on the upward trek of global emissions, as apparent in Figure 1. This is complemented by the historical upward trek in global temperatures, shown in Figure 2. Most climate scientists express confidence in the causal tie between the data series in the two graphs, supported by the laws of chemistry and their many statistical models.

Having established a causal tie between emissions and global warming, climate scientists and climate-change policy advocates then enumerate a lengthy and growing list of the environmental and human consequences from past and future emissions. Among their claims:

- Earth’s average temperature has risen 1–2° Fahrenheit since the late 1800s, when humans began relying heavily on fossil fuels. Today, the planet is warmer than it has been in 120,000 years. The atmosphere has more CO<sub>2</sub> in it than in tens of millions of years. Earth could warm another 2–3° by the end of this century. Global warming has been, and will continue to be, largely human-caused.
- The rise in the global temperature may not seem like much, but it has caused:
  - glaciers around the globe and ice shelves and sea ice in the Arctic and Antarctic to retreat, melting at an escalating rate (although glaciers can ebb and flow in thickness with short-term cooling and warming with local temperatures) and threatening a “multi-meter rise” in sea level by the end of the century.
  - sea levels to rise by three inches between 1993 and 2017 from melting ice and from heating of the oceans’ water. The rate of annual sea-level rise is also accelerating, putting tens of trillions of dollars of coastal properties around the globe in jeopardy and causing small, low-lying South Pacific islands to disappear below the waves.

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- coral reefs to die and turn white, destroying vital habitats for sea life in the process, and
  - polar bears, trees, butterflies, and other species to retreat in numbers, making more precarious their survival.
- Global warming has also fueled more frequent extreme and unpredictable global weather-patterns, realized in more frequent and powerful hurricanes and tornadoes, as well as more frequent and deadly droughts, floods, and forest fires that, in turn, have caused more deaths and property destruction.
  - Global warming has also caused more tribal and national conflicts because of a growing scarcity in productive resources and more suicides because of mounting economic and emotional distress.

The list of harms from climate change lengthens with the escalating growth in climate-science studies. Climate scientists attest that the issue is no longer *if* human emissions are to blame for the various climate changes, but rather the extent to which they are at fault and the extent of the enormous damage that will befall the planet.

### **THE CURSE OF THE “TIPPING POINT”**

The gremlin in climate scientists’ gloomy narrative is the prospect of a “tipping point”: an abrupt worsening in environmental

change, looming in the next dozen years or (at most) the next few decades—*if the tipping point has not already been reached*. Once climate change has “tipped,” global warming (and an array of other changes in the global climate) will be self-perpetuating, self-accelerating, and irreversible, no matter how drastic the adopted future emissions-abatement policies are.

Climate scientists point to how reductions in sea ice and snow packs, past and future, will mean less of the sun’s rays will be reflected into space and more rays will be absorbed as heat by the oceans around the globe. This, in turn, will cause additional warming that will circumnavigate the globe via ocean currents.

They also stress how rising sea levels have added, and will continue to add, more ocean surface and more water evaporation, with the added water vapor—a powerful greenhouse gas—boosting global warming in two ways. First, the vapor will directly capture the heat from sunlight. Second, it will add to Earth’s cloud cover, which will reduce the reflected heat from sunlight bouncing off the planet’s surface and back into space. The additional captured heat will further escalate the melting of glaciers, ice shelves, and sea ice, which will increase the sea-level surface, further accelerating evaporation and global heating.

The accompanying melting of the Antarctic and Arctic permafrost has resulted in the exposure of a herd of long-extinct mammoth skeletons (some with hair and even flesh on the bones),

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a cause for celebration among paleontologists. However, the permafrost melt has also released, and will continue to release, millions of tons of long-trapped methane—yet another greenhouse gas, and one that is far more destructive to the atmosphere than CO<sub>2</sub>.

Beyond the tipping point, the release of these trapped gases will escalate with self-perpetuating and self-accelerating cycles of greenhouse-gas releases, higher temperatures, higher sea levels, more erratic and destructive weather patterns—and, of course, greater global warming. Humans can be counted on to give a boost to the self-perpetuating cycles by cranking up their air conditioners.

By sounding ever-more-dire alarms about global warming and the potential for runaway cycles of climate change, climate scientists themselves may be exacerbating global warming and hastening the advent of the tipping point, albeit inadvertently. Their doomsday scenario could cause many people to become

fatalists and adopt the Alfred E. Neuman mantra, “What, me worry?” Scientists are saying there is no hope unless all of humanity dramatically changes its emissions ways, and soon. But that hasn’t happened and is highly unlikely to happen anytime soon. Instead, people will resign themselves to saying: “What’s the use? Order me an Escalade, and turbocharge it!”

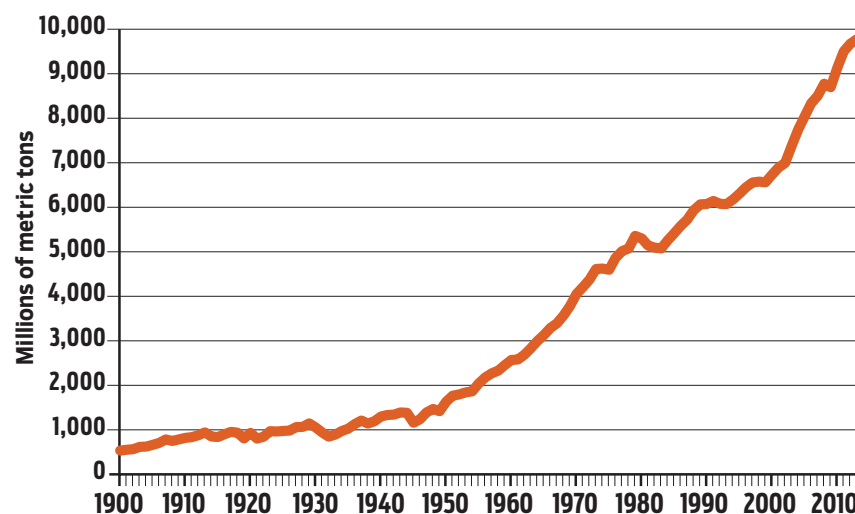
Beyond the tipping point, many scientists say, there is one inevitable outcome: environmental Armageddon, at which point the climate will become so degraded that all of life will be hellish, if species can survive that long. Effectively, Earth will gradually become a second Venus, which at one time, long ago, was likely as habitable as Earth, but is not today because of its (natural, not man-made) greenhouse-gas self-perpetuating cycles. Venus’s surface temperature is now close to 900 degrees.

### THE ECONOMICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

Economists have long pointed to the fundamental human dilemma undergirding global warming (as well as all other forms of pollution): the “tragedy of the commons.” This emerges when people cannot be excluded from (and charged for) using a so-called “common-access resource” such as the atmosphere. Thus, they do not suffer personal costs for their use (and overuse) of the resource through, say, greenhouse-gas emissions. Without personal costs for their damage, people can be expected to use and overuse, if not abuse, the resource held in common. The problem is especially acute for the global atmosphere (which is more self-evident in city smog than global temperatures).

Many people around the globe may not even know about global-warming science or, if they know the science, don’t care at all about global warming or even the prospects of an environ-

FIGURE 1  
World Total Carbon Emissions, 1900–2014



SOURCE: Tom Boden/Oak Ridge National Laboratory

mental doomsday. They can rest assured that this will be future generations’ problem.

Climate-change deniers will always be with us, in part because there are some scientist holdouts to this grim view and in part because rectifying climate change will be, by all accounts, very costly. Others may believe that reducing their carbon footprint is the right thing to do, which is why they might curb their driving (occasionally) and conserve energy at home (say, by turning their indoor thermostats down from 72 to 68 in winter).

Others believe that climate change, to some degree, will continue to be driven by growing human emissions but also calculate that the costs of humans adapting to the changes (building seawalls and moving their properties off the coast, for example) will be less than the costs of serious emissions abatement (embedded in the proposed “Green New Deal,” for example). Others may refuse to support emissions controls on the grounds that such policies could open government to a panoply of heavy-handed social policies and controls that have nothing to do with climate change. These critics would point to the Green New Deal as Exhibit A.

Clearly, climate scientists can’t count on people, through individual curbs on emissions, for a reversal of global warming, or else they and their political supporters would not have to make ever-more-urgent calls for international agreements on government-enforced emissions controls. The urgency of calls for emissions controls reveals just how ineffective previous calls have been, falling largely on deaf ears.

The problem of orchestrating emissions abatement is far more serious than climate scientists seem to appreciate. Many people who truly care about the planet’s longevity can be expected to *act as if* they don’t care, or don’t understand the climate-science nar-

rative, when in fact *they do care*. For a substantial majority of the 7.7 billion people around the globe, individuals' greenhouse-gas emissions are the proverbial drop in a very large (atmospheric) bucket. That is, they believe that their individual emissions are inconsequential in terms of their effect on global warming (and other forms of climate change). They can rightfully conclude that they, individually, do not have one iota of effect on the future of the climate. If they drive less or install solar panels on their rooftops, they might lower their own electric bills but will not, to a detectible extent, change Earth's temperature, the melting of glaciers, or the date of the arrival of the climate tipping point. Environmental Armageddon will arrive—or won't—no matter what people do individually.

Further complicating matters, many people—including climate scientists—will continue to favor policies that worsen climate change, such as shutting down nuclear power plants. According to one report, replacing two-thirds of the United States' nuclear power plants, which are threatened with closure, with natural gas-fired plants will have the same effect on greenhouse-gas emissions as putting an additional 47 million new cars on the country's road. Environmentalists often favor subsidizing electric cars, unaware that many of those cars will *increase* their drivers' carbon footprints because they will recharge their batteries off a largely coal-fired electric grid.

The great irony undergirding the science and economics of climate change is that hordes of inconsequential emissions decisions by individuals can add up to consequential—even dire—climate

outcomes. If you doubt the power of this line of thinking, look around and notice, in spite of serious scientific warnings, what the vast majority of people are *not* doing to curb their own emissions.

Most world governments can conclude that their emissions-abatement policies, by themselves, will not affect the long-term trajectory of climate change. Developing countries can reason they have far more serious policy problems—for example, relieving abject poverty in their midst. Even developed countries like the United States can resist adoption of meaningful emissions controls. Remember that President Trump is among the climate change deniers. A substantial obstacle to avoidance of climate-change doomsday that climate scientists don't seem to fully appreciate is that democracies often don't heed scientific abatement wisdom. Economists have long argued that carbon taxes are the most efficient way of curbing pollution, but carbon-tax proposals keep getting turned down by politicians and their constituencies. Why? Because they are costly and highly visible to electorates—and to carbon-based industries.

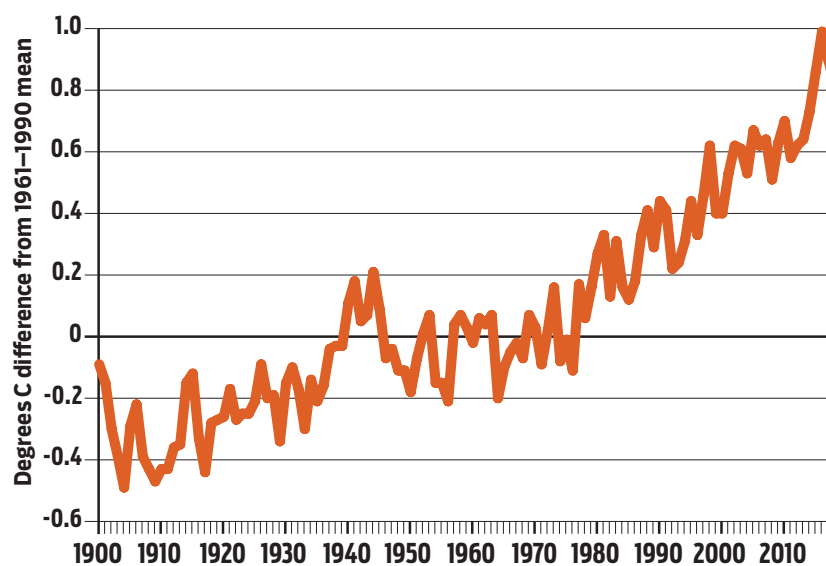
Developed-world politicians also have to fear that if they successfully tighten their emissions regulations, capital and jobs will flow to developing countries that have less restrictive emissions regulations (e.g., China, Vietnam). Climate scientists must also recognize that if the demand for oil, natural gas, and coal is lowered in some parts of the world by more windmills, the market prices of those fossil fuels will fall, increasing their use elsewhere and partially (if not totally) negating the decrease in demand. The net result would still be a warming world, but with

a poorer developed world. These countries can be expected to resist domestic and international emissions restrictions, especially when the agreements saddle them with obligations to subsidize the emissions-abatement costs of less-developed nations, a number of which can rightfully claim that they are not consequential culprits. International climate talks can be expected to drag on ... and on ... and on.

#### THE INEVITABILITY OF CLIMATE-CHANGE DOOMSDAY

Is this Armageddon avoidable? The most aspirational answer is "Maybe," *if the science is wrong or if world governments do what climate scientists declare to be the right thing*. The safer and more realistic answer, grounded in the cold economics of global warming, is "Probably not," because climate scientists have backed themselves into an untenable corner. In reversing greenhouse-gas emissions, they must count on the good will of billions of people around the world who, collectively, caused the global-warming problem in the first place. Climate scientists must hope that these same billions of people will have a "Saul

FIGURE 2  
Annual Global Mean Temperature, 1900–2018  
Temperature difference relative to 1961–1990 mean



NOTE: Combined land-surface air and sea-surface water temperature  
SOURCE: NASA Goddard Institute for Space Studies GISS Surface Temperature Analysis

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on the road to Damascus” experience and somehow change their previous economic thinking on their own emissions.

Recent events do not inspire optimism. When prominent Democratic politicians announced the Green New Deal, many Republicans castigated the backers for exaggerating the global-warming problem and, therefore, exaggerating the extent of required emissions abatement and associated costs. Nevertheless, Republican critics estimated the cost of the Green New Deal at \$5–9 trillion in annual federal outlays over the next decade, which means the annual federal budget would have to double and maybe even triple. These cost estimates caused many television talking heads to dismiss the proposal as wildly “unrealistic.” By the time Senate Republicans put the Green New Deal resolution up for a vote, no supporting Democrat ventured to vote for it on

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the ostensible grounds that the proposal had not been vetted in committee but, more likely, on the grounds that they would be seen approving the heaping of enormous costs on their favored constituencies, the poor and the middle class.

Nonetheless, the climate-science narrative leads inextricably to the conclusion that such “unrealistic” emissions-abatement costs are now necessary. The true tragedy of the climate commons is that the gap between what scientists say needs to be done by 2030 or 2050 and what realistically will be done is huge and probably totally insurmountable.

#### ABATEMENT RESISTANCE AND TARDINESS

Escalating and accelerating climate change can give rise to growing annual damage in terms of lives, property destruction, reductions in national income, and happiness, as climate scientists predict will be the case. However, many people will be unmoved, individually, to change their emitting ways, which they have been largely unmoved to date despite ongoing lectures from scientists on the looming climate horrors.

Again, the economic thinking undergirding the tragedy of the climate commons can be controlling. In the face of the mounting damage, people individually can reason that their own emissions won’t consequentially affect climatic conditions, and neither will their efforts to reduce their carbon footprints consequentially improve long-term climate quality or reduce the national and global damage. Granted, the damage might at some point become so great

and immediate that individuals will be spurred to curb their own emissions—but don’t count on that too heavily.

Even if people do go through a conversion, the core problem is that, given the climate-science narrative, the point at which people go through their conversion from emitters to abaters can come too late. *Once the tipping point has been reached, people’s corrected emission ways will be for naught, as climate change will have become self-perpetuating, self-accelerating, and irreversible.*

#### CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Many climate scientists exude confidence that if they can get people to understand the science of climate change, individuals and nations will understand the urgency of their calls for serious emissions-abatement policies. They don’t appreciate the extent to which the economics of climate-change thinking don’t square with climate scientists’ calls for people and nations to solve the climate-change problems by “doing the right thing.”

More importantly, climate scientists must tread cautiously in escalating the urgency of their calls for emission reforms. They understand that if they remain silent on the mounting consequences of climate change, people will be unlikely to change their emitting ways. However, they need to

also appreciate how their narrative and escalating urgent calls for drastic policies to curb emissions can fuel people’s reluctance to change their use of fossil fuels, concluding that their individual efforts would be futile and the climate jig is already up, or else embrace the narrative that it’s all a “hoax.” Few climate scientists seem to understand the extent of the entrapment that the Climate-Change Doomsday narrative imposes.

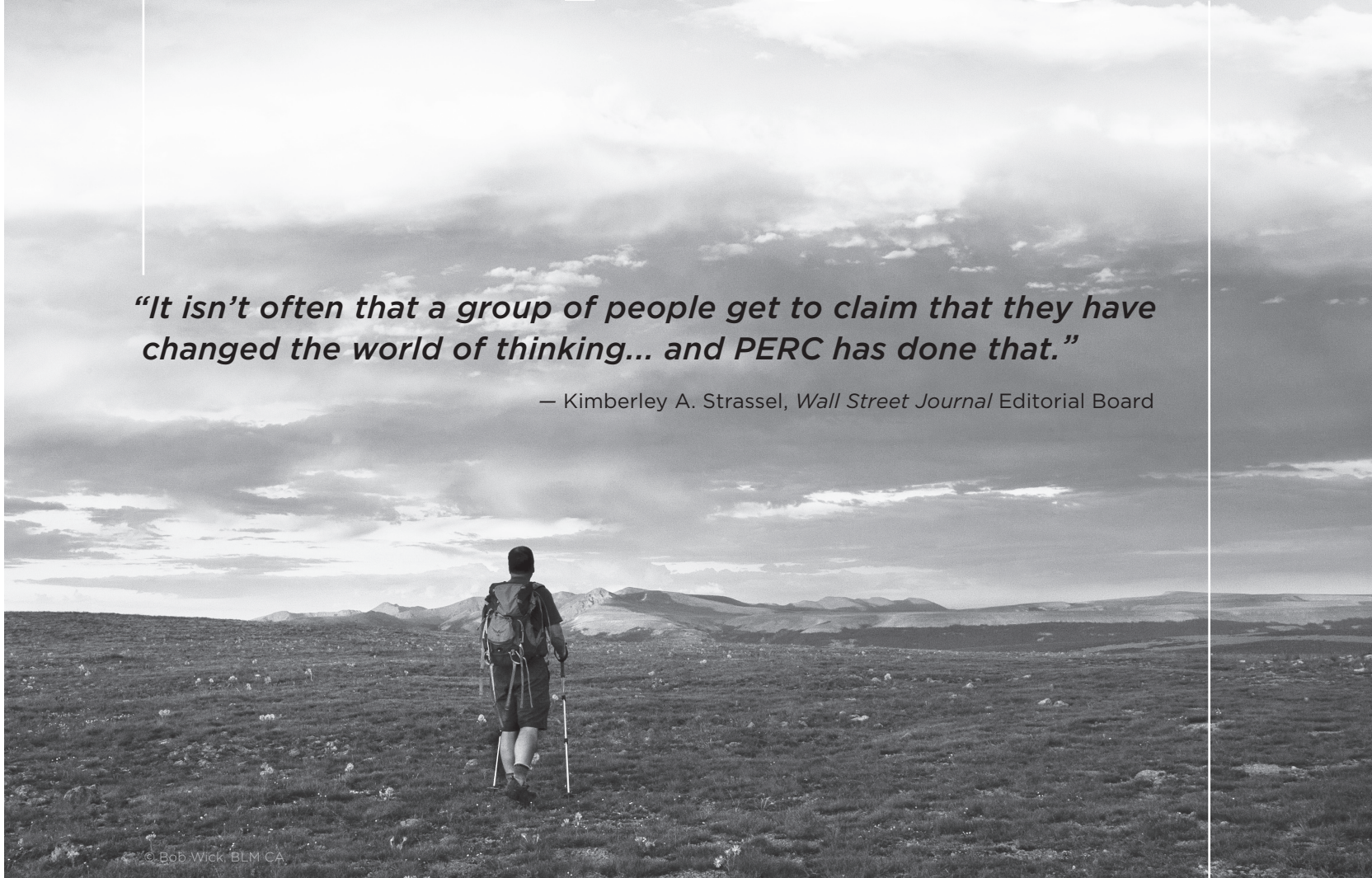
Is there room for hope? Maybe. Some climate scientists agree that global warming from human causes has been underway and will continue long into the future, but at a tempered pace. These so-called “lukewarmers” suggest that humans have more time to devise tolerable corrective policies than mainstream climate scientists say is the case. The added time before the advent of environmental Armageddon can be construed as something of a reprieve from the Climate-Change Doomsday Trap—though it can lead people and policymakers to relax and waste that reprieve with elevated emissions. This means that humans will face, maybe 50 or 100 years from now, the full force of the trap that looms over climate policy today, leaving little hope for the great grandchildren of today’s global parents.

Climate scientists must come to understand the economics undergirding the Climate-Change Doomsday Trap. To date, they have largely relied on the presumption that scientific truth will win the policy debate. They must turn their attention to finding escapes from the economic bind of the trap that, admittedly, may hold little promise. R

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— Kimberley A. Strassel, *Wall Street Journal* Editorial Board



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