

Smoke and Mirrors

Shocking image really a cool way to present a misconception

by: Mike Freeman

Here we go again.

I'm at home, sitting in my favorite chair, watching the local evening news. A local reporter is starting the next segment and behind him a white cloud billows from a massive tower. I know all too well what he is about to say:

"Reporting on air pollution in Birmingham, this is (insert reporter's name)."

Pictures are worth a thousand words. They have the power to convince, to concern and to inspire action much more than the written word. So what is wrong with the picture I see on my television? It is wrong because it reinforces a misconception - a flat-out falsehood, really. You've seen this kind of image. In fact, you may have seen it - visions of huge towers billowing white clouds juxtaposed with stern narrative warnings about global warming - on the trailer for former Vice President Al Gore's "documentary," "An Inconvenient Truth." But what exactly is billowing from these towers? Is it sulfur dioxide? Nitrogen oxide? Some other form of pollution? All of the above?

Actually, it is none of the above. The plume is water vapor. The towers are "cooling towers." They are not smokestacks. They cool the water used by the plant to generate the electricity we use to heat, cool and light our homes. They do so by pumping hot water and steam to the top of the tower and dropping it. As the water falls through the air it is cooled and releases vapor out of the top of the towers.

There are smokestacks at the power plant, too. But they are much smaller. And it is hard to see any smoke or anything else coming out of them because the real pollutants are controlled by the Clean Air Act and other laws. Frankly, smokestacks just aren't as photogenic as massive cooling towers billowing thick white clouds. So whenever it's time for a report on air pollution, we get to see cooling towers and water vapor. Make no mistake; this is not some local phenomenon. It is a practice employed by some of the largest and most recognized media outlets in our country. And now we see the same visual card being played in Gore's "An Inconvenient Truth," which opens in Birmingham on Friday. Advanced screenings at the Sundance Film Festival and reviews since it opened in other areas of the country earlier this month give it rave reviews and refer to it as a "gripping story" with "a visually mesmerizing presentation" that is "activist cinema at its very best." The Web site promoting the film goes even further. It proclaims that "if the vast majority of the world's scientists are right, we have just ten years to avert a major catastrophe that could send our entire planet into a tail-spin of epic destruction involving . . . floods, droughts, epidemics and killer heat waves. . . ."

Trying to hammer home that point, the film's marketing trailer uses images of (surprise!) cooling towers. On screen, they spew ominous clouds into the atmosphere, which most viewers must think contain noxious, dangerous pollution. This image is then followed by pictures of melting glaciers, post-Katrina New Orleans underwater and starving children in drought-stricken Africa.

But why do I care? I care because I defend companies charged with illegally polluting the environment. In that role, I find myself routinely struggling to bring logic, reason and balance to the table. Sure, pollution is bad. No one wants it, especially in their own back yard. Our society, including companies I represent, is striving to control and limit it. The truth, whether inconvenient or not, is that a certain amount of pollution is necessary. It is necessary unless we want to fundamentally change our society and the way we live, work, eat and play. So make no mistake what Al Gore is asking of us. Inconvenience might not be a strong enough word. Perhaps someone should make a movie of people shivering in their homes during winter because the local power plant was shut down to fend off global warming. Might not get a standing ovation at Sundance, though. Movies like "An Inconvenient Truth" are symptomatic of an unmistakable move afoot to change our lives in fundamental ways. Perhaps that is the intent. The problem is, though, that this movement relies on graphic images to alarm and scare us. It seeks to convince us that, as Gore has put it, "humanity is sitting on a ticking time bomb" called "global warming," which is being caused by the carbon dioxide released from the fuel we burn.

Is Planet Earth warming? Is our industrial society to blame? Is carbon dioxide the culprit? These are legitimate questions. What are the solutions? I don't know, but cooling towers and water vapor are not part of the problem, and pointing fingers at cinematic targets, though a convenient tactic, is not the solution.

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