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Prime Time Fiction

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One of the current sub-plots in (NBC's) *The West Wing* concerns a glacier in Alaska, which melted and deluged a downstream village. The White House suddenly found itself dealing with the "first casualties of global warming." Chief of Staff Leo McGarry sat enthralled as a "hydroclimatologist" from the US Geological Survey told him that mean temperatures in Alaska have soared 7 degrees (Fahrenheit) in the past 30 years, creating unstable lakes that are prone to overflowing and wiping out downstream villages.

Last week's show ended with the administration calling for massive cuts in so-called greenhouse gas emissions. This would, we're to suppose, somehow help drowning Alaskans. *West Wing* is a political drama that relishes high-stakes battles of good-versus-evil, so maybe tonight we'll see some obnoxious, cigar-chomping oil executive (or Republican senator) derail the President's idea. Then cut to an SUV commercial.

It is a fictional show, of course, so it's only appropriate that it relies on fictional issues to captivate the audience. Nor should it surprise us that the whole scenario is fictional. If some "hydroclimatologist" from the Geological Survey stood in the Chief of Staff's office and claimed Alaska had warmed 7 degrees in 30 years, the response would not be to upend the nation's energy policy. The response would be to pick up a phone and call the Alaska State Climatologist for confirmation, who would have quickly put the story on ice.

It is an urban legend that Alaska has warmed 7 degrees in 30 years. No matter how much the Alaskans try to debunk it it lives on, most recently in the fevered imagination of *West Wing* scriptwriters.

Last summer the *New York Times* ran a story quoting unnamed "federal sources" who said Alaska had warmed 7 degrees in 30 years. Then they ran an editorial denouncing the US government's apparent indifference to this calamity.

The Alaskan Climate Research Center (ACRC) contacted the paper and gave them data showing no such warming had taken place. The mean temperature rose about 2.4 F (about 0.4 degrees C per decade) in the 1971-2000 period. The entire increase occurred in one jump in 1976-77, probably due to a circulation realignment in the Pacific Ocean. A temperature index formed using data from Fairbanks, Anchorage, Nome and Barrow (hence the "FANB" index) shows, if anything, a slight cooling trend since 1979.

The *Times* was never able to identify a source for their claim, and they printed a retraction, sort of. They did find a scientist who figured that if you look in the right places and pick an earlier start and end date you could get a mean increase of maybe 5.4 degrees over a 30 year span. In their retraction the *Times*' fudged the point a bit, saying Alaska's mean temperature went up 5.4 degrees, rather than 7, over the past 30 years.

The ACRC responded again saying that no, this is still wrong. They posted a map (<http://climate.gi.alaska.edu/change>) showing the record of all their weather stations for the 1971-2000 interval. In the accompanying text they state: “there is not a single first class weather station in all of Alaska, which reported 5°F temperature increase for the last 3 decades.” The highest increase, 4.2 degrees, was at Barrow. One of the lowest (1.7 F) was at nearby Kotzebue.

The *Times* dropped the story, but it has now resurfaced on the West Wing, where earnest White House staffers will no doubt run with it for a few weeks hoping to bludgeon the oil industry and kill a few thousand jobs in oil-producing states like, say, Alaska. Once they’ve moved past this plot line the 7-degree-warming-in-30-years claim will surely pop up again somewhere, but hopefully not in the real West Wing.

And that wasn’t the only bit of global warming fiction on TV recently. The same night as the fictional glacier melted, TVOntario interviewed David Suzuki on their current affairs show “Studio 2.” Apparently some scientists sponsored in part by the David Suzuki Foundation have put out a report arguing that global warming will cause the Great Lakes to boil dry, or overflow, or do something or other a few decades from now. Ho-hum yet another apocalyptic enviro-scare: it’s starting to drag on like a secular “Left Behind” series.

I didn’t watch much of the interview, but what caught my attention was the claim by Mr. Suzuki that when he was a boy growing up in London Ontario, winter used to set in at the end of October, but now it’s warmed up so much winter arrives a lot later. Global warming, you see. It’s not the ups and downs but these rapid warming trends we need to worry about.

So the next day I looked up the temperature records for the weather station at London’s airport. The data are spotty prior to WWII, but there’s a continuous record after 1940, ending at 1990. I’m guessing at Dr. S’s vintage but I figure this is early enough.

I don’t think much of running trend lines through averaged temperature data as a way of measuring “climate,” but this is how the debate often gets framed. And it shows the October-November average temperature in London fell from 1940 to 1990 at a rate of -0.2 degrees Celsius per decade. “Fell,” as in *cooling*. As in, October and November are now colder, on average, than when Dr. Suzuki was a lad awaiting winter in London. The annual average also shows cooling, at about 0.1 degrees C per decade.

Unfortunately the temperature data are not posted after 1990, at least not at the NASA collection where I was looking (http://www.giss.nasa.gov/data/update/gistemp/station_data/). But across the lake at Erie, Pennsylvania, there is a weather station that continues to post its data. The October-November temperature average there fell by 0.26 degrees C per decade from 1940 to 2001 (see chart). The annual average fell by about 0.13 degrees C per decade from 1940 to 2001. In other words the area has gotten colder, not warmer.

Incidentally it is a real annoyance that Environment Canada no longer gives its temperature data away. Almost all the Canadian weather stations reporting into the NASA data base stopped releasing the post-1990 numbers for free use by the public. You are expected to pay for it now. This is a government that brags about spending billions of dollars on climate change initiatives, including \$350 million in the most recent budget for its so-called “Sustainable Development Technology” slush fund, not to mention tens of millions for the Climate Change Action Fund, and however many hundreds of thousands to put those asinine commercials on TV telling people that sealing their windows and turning down the heat will stop

global warming. Yet they won't spend the money to make available the basic data that would allow people to see long term, up-to-date records of local temperatures. Makes you wonder what they don't want people to know.

Global warming and Kyoto have, mercifully, been out of the public eye for a while. Some commentators who never grasped the issue in the first place have triumphantly used this as evidence that the anti-Kyoto concerns were all overblown. In reality the story is quiet here in Canada because the feds have all but abandoned any intention of implementing Kyoto. How that came about is a story for another day. Stateside, the global warmers are still sore about Bush's decision to reject Kyoto, and are laying the groundwork for a new political push to bring it back. Since the idea that Kyoto would somehow benefit the global climate was always a fiction, it is only fitting that the entertainment industry is taking the lead.

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Erie, Pennsylvania, Oct-Nov Mean Temperatures, 1940-2001

