

Opinion: The fire this time—facing the reality of climate change

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COVID-19, invasive species, and the spread of persistent chemicals and plastics provide one form of evidence that we live on a planet with an interconnected biosphere. Dangers from one part of the planet find their

way to other parts of the planet. Our oceans and atmosphere, along with ships and jet planes, transport pollutants around the globe.

Last week for a few terrifying days, we saw additional evidence of our interconnected biosphere. Fires burning about 400 miles from New York City turned the air orange and drove New Yorkers from their streets. People in other parts of America and other parts of the world are familiar with this phenomenon—New Yorkers were not. Now we are.

The argument about the causes of the fires is pointless. Yes, we've always had [forest fires](#), but the oceans and atmosphere are warmer than before, and the relationship between the growth of fossil fuel use to the rise in temperature is irrefutable. Global warming stimulates drought and drier conditions in places that once had plenty of precipitation. This, in turn, increases the risk of forest fires. We've seen it on our west coast for several years, and now it's come to our east coast. If it feels terrifying and dangerous, that's because it is.

The question becomes: What do we do? Our economy, political stability, and way of life depend on the massive use of fossil fuels. We must transition from those fuels and away from other technologies that generate greenhouse gasses as quickly as possible. We need a less damaging, renewable resource-based economy.

In America, Europe, and parts of Asia, the process of transition to the circular economy has already started. We are fortunate because the technology of renewable energy is developing rapidly, and over the next 20 years, it will displace fossil fuels. Fossil fuel interests will continue to use political tools to combat market forces, but they will lose. They are causing a slower transition to renewable energy, and while that is harmful, the transition's timetable will be difficult to accelerate or decelerate.

A great deal of infrastructure and [technological change](#) is needed if we are to maintain our way of life while transitioning from fossil fuels. That will take time and money. Unfortunately, it means we have a generation of increased [global warming](#) to look forward to until we turn the corner and reverse the buildup of greenhouse gases.

At some point, we will need carbon capture and storage, not to continue the unnecessary burning of fossil fuels but to remove accumulated greenhouse gasses from the atmosphere and engineer a reduction of global warming. That massive global public works project will require substantial technological innovation and public spending, and it will take more than a few days of orange sky to generate the political support for such an undertaking.

But last week, we had a taste of the future. We had a taste of the fires to come. Reality may be painful, but it needs to be faced. Sixty years ago, James Baldwin published his landmark work *The Fire Next Time*, which included two essays about the reality of racism in America and exploring racism's impact on society, individuals, and religion.

As the sky turned orange, I thought of Baldwin's ability to express and interpret his world with intense honesty. And then I thought about the inability of America to confront the reality of racism and our equally delusional inability to confront the reality of environmental sustainability. The title of Baldwin's book was inspired by a slave song interpreting the bible: "God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time!" In other words, if we do not address racism, we are doomed to destruction.

Sixty years later, that struggle continues, though my hope is that it is progressing—two steps forward, one step back. The reality of the movement to ignore the legacy of slavery and ignore our facts on the ground are part of the same forces dismissing the facts of climate

change: See the world as we'd like it to be rather than the way it is. George Floyd and others reminded us of the way the world remains and the racism that persists in America.

Last week, the sky over New York City also reminded us of a piece of reality. George Floyd's killing led some (but not all) to reexamine racism and its persistence in America. The orange sky that America's [west coast](#) has been experiencing for years came to our east coast last week. Will it lead us to more broadly accept the facts of climate change?

Last week, [Brady Dennis and Joyce Koh](#) of the Washington Post, reporting on the east coast's air quality crisis, observed that:

"Smoke from hundreds of wildfires raging across Canada engulfed the eastern United States on Wednesday, upending the rhythms of daily life for tens of millions of Americans, creating a sea of 'Code Red' air quality alerts as far south as the Carolinas and prompting widespread health worries."

"Nowhere was the scene more haunting than in New York City, where a thick haze blanketed the Statue of Liberty, shrouded the skyscrapers of Manhattan, delayed a baseball game at Yankee Stadium and forced a temporary halt of flights into LaGuardia Airport due to low visibility. Mayor Eric Adams recommended people wear masks outdoors and canceled outdoor city events."

"For the second day in a row, New York logged some of the worst air quality of any major city on the planet. But that was hardly the only place to experience the eerie, unsettling and throat-burning smoke that scientists say could become a more common occurrence in a warming world."

The causes of this environmental disaster are understood by the

Canadian government, but, of course, escape the agenda of the world's fossil fuel industry. Nevertheless, the causes of these fires are clear and need to be understood. Again, according to Dennis and Koh:

"At the current pace, government officials said this week, Canada is on track to experience the worst wildfire season in its recorded history. Already this year, roughly 2,300 wildfires have burned roughly 9.4 million acres, according to government data. In the Atlantic province of Nova Scotia, unusually intense blazes this year have scorched more land than in the past 10 years combined. Warm and dry conditions will increase wildfire risk in most of Canada this month, according to the Canadian government, which also expects 'higher-than-normal fire activity' to continue throughout the wildfire season. The drier weather and high temperatures fueled by a warming atmosphere are exacerbating the damage, Canadian officials say."

Like the gun industry after a mass shooting, we heard little response from the fossil fuel industry or ideological climate deniers as the East Coast hunkered down during the air quality emergency. Reality has a way of dominating ideology, and the air over New York City could not be denied. But it can be forgotten.

New Yorkers can't prevent or put out the fires, so once the smoke clears, there is an effort to resume normal life. By last weekend, the air quality returned to normal, and while the Canadian fires continued, the smoke didn't blanket the American northeast. The impact of extreme weather continues to grow, and the need to adapt to climate change grows as well. While there are limits to our ability to adapt, our short-term response must remain on adaptation, as our longer-term work targets climate mitigation.

In the case of forest fires, we need to enhance our efforts to manage forests, including controlled burning and other efforts to reduce fire

risks. We also need to invest resources in forest firefighting and other elements of emergency response. We need to send even more firefighters to Canada, as Senator Schumer is now advocating.

Cities like New York will need to put in place measures to reduce public exposure to harmful atmospheric conditions. In the long run, we need to do a better job of understanding the reality of the warmer planet we live on. We need to mitigate global warming and recognize its reality. We are living in an era where facts are questioned and science is doubted.

But an orange sky that makes you cough can turn skeptics into believers. The fire this time caused smoke and danger; the melting icecaps will cause flooding. Noah's rainbow promised the end of flooding by water and the "fire next time." Unmitigated climate change promises us both fire from drought and flooding from sea level rise. We face a crisis of biblical proportions.

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