

IMPRIMIS

Because Ideas Have Consequences

HILLSDALE
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“Cancer Scares And Our Inverted Health Priorities”

Elizabeth M. Whelan, President, American Council on Science and Health

Editor's Preview: *In 1980, Imprimis featured a widely remarked essay by Elizabeth M. Whelan on “cancerphobia,” in which she argued that the media and special interests had created an unreasonable and detrimental fear among millions of Americans about the causes of cancer. In 1990, Dr. Whelan returned to the Hillsdale campus to talk to students and faculty about new cancer scares at the November Center for Constructive Alternatives (CCA) seminar, “Privatizing Environmental Protection.”*

The late Walter Lippmann once remarked, “When distant and unfamiliar things are communicated to great masses of people, the truth suffers a considerable... distortion. The complex is made over into the simple, the hypothetical into the dogmatic, and the relative into the absolute.”

Lippmann's observations are at the heart of realigning this nation's health priorities. For the last 10 years, my goal has been to bring the public the “other side” of the public health story, and to make sure that Americans can make correct decisions about their health and lifestyles. Let me explain with a short story:

When my daughter was very young, I received a parents' newsletter with tips about childrearing. One issue recommended how to help your child overcome nightmares from monsters and goblins in the night. The editor suggested that Mom drive these demons out with a can of hair spray: Douse the affected area, announce the room was “clean,” and kiss your child goodnight. This was supposed to acknowledge the legitimate fears of children, put Mom in an active, rather than passive mode, and “solve” the problem—at least for that night.

In many respects, today's public health policy reminds me of the hair spray approach.



Pandering to fears rather than facts may well be a temporary solution in a nursery, but this approach has created a crisis of public confidence and a huge misallocation of our energy and resources. Fear of getting sick is rampant. Conventional wisdom holds that we're suffering from a host of dangerous and mysterious maladies that need to be unraveled in the laboratories.

already know to our best advantage. The shocking truth is that the major causes of sickness and death are no mystery. We don't need more vaccines or new miracle cures for today's Americans to live longer and healthier lives. What we do need is to act on scientific fact, not scientific fiction, and to set our priorities accordingly. To put it another way, if we are to hunt down and destroy premature death and disease, we have to stop squishing the public health ants and start attacking the elephants that are racing through our society.

Alar: The Scare That Wasn't

That means stopping the search for minor and/or false culprits that make little or no difference. Look at the target of one such recent search: Alar. This useful product was driven from the nation's apple orchards by public relations hype and a great deal of artificially generated public hysteria. In 1989, the Natural Resources Defense Council, a self-styled “environmental” group, launched a study claiming that chemical residues, especially on apples, elevated cancer risks among children. “Launched” is an appropriate word,

“The shocking truth is that the major causes of sickness and death are no mystery. We don't need more vaccines or new miracle cures for today's Americans to live longer and healthier lives. What we do need is to act on scientific fact, not scientific fiction, and to set our priorities accordingly.”

Medical research is essential to give hope to thousands of people afflicted with debilitating or terminal illnesses, but that is not the issue here. The real issue is how to use what we

because the study was sent into media orbit with a glitzy campaign featuring super personas Ed Bradley of CBS and Meryl Streep, the Academy Award-winning actress.

NRDC held news conferences in a dozen cities to warn that over 5,000 children might die from preschool exposure from Alar, a growth regulator used on apples. Ed Bradley solemnly declared that Alar was "the most potent cancer-causing agent in our food supply." The report hit like a bombshell, and almost no reporter questioned the results. Herd journalism began a stampede with headlines asking whether kids faced an "intolerable risk," and, "Are We Poisoning Our Children?"

"...carcinogens occur naturally in 57 food varieties in quantities thousands of times greater than occur in synthetic pesticides."

Apples disappeared by the millions from grocery shelves and cafeteria lines. At least one panicky mother called a food trade association to find out whether to pour apple sauce down the drain or take the tainted fruit to a toxic waste dump. Meanwhile, Meryl Streep appeared on "Donahue" and "Today," announcing the formation of Mothers and Others for Pesticide Limits. The NRDC projectile made a direct hit on the apple industry, which suffered a \$100 million loss. Many of its small growers were forced out of business. A bill was also introduced in the U.S. Senate to ban Alar. This led Alar's manufacturer, Uniroyal, to withdraw the product from the marketplace. Meanwhile, the media showered NRDC with praise for its humanitarian efforts to "protect" children from cancer.

Now there's a new spin on the story. *Reader's Digest* and other major news sources have called the Alar scare a "hoax." Many American scientists, as well as the British government and the World Health Organization, have given Alar a clean bill of health. And the National Academy of Sciences publication, *Issues In Science and Technology*, says Alar is

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no true health threat.

The Alar scare shows just how far we've come in mixing fact with fiction. We see an alleged environmental organization, the NRDC, still urging mothers to keep their children from eating fruits and vegetables when the National Academy of Science report examining 6,000 studies found "no evidence that pesticides or natural toxins in food contribute significantly to cancer risk in the United States." The same report goes on to urge

Americans to eat twice as many fruits and vegetables to improve health. But, as the old saying goes, a half-truth is like half a brick: You can throw it twice as far. That gives a self-appointed group like the NRDC a great advantage over the National Academy of Science. And it is also free to use all the elements of a Stephen King novel—the mixture of the unknown, fear, and children—to create a best-selling horror tale that it can market to the public.

"Mouse Terrorism"

Why do they do it? Well, for one thing, there is fierce competition among environmental organizations competing for public contributions. To get attention they use the same shameful negative campaigning we see in so many political contests. And there is another reason: For the past 20 years, environmental, safety and health issues have been on the front burner of politics. Reporting on risk in these areas has moved from the professional journals of researchers to the assignment desks of the popular media. It has also moved to the political stump, where concern for the environment is often expressed in hundreds more regulations and billions of dollars of added costs, regardless of risk to public health or the environment.

Is it any wonder that on the six o'clock news and the campaign trail the most daunting scientific problems are reduced to simple solutions and catchy slogans? Or that the mere perception of risk is reality to millions of people?

I don't think anything illustrates the public's confusion about health risks more than "mouse terrorism." That's right: "mouse terrorism." How do the groups like the NRDC "prove" that something is harmful? They cite experiments on laboratory mice, and they are insistent that *any* dose of a chemical causing cancer in mice is a definite and unacceptable cancer risk to humans. Now, correctly handled,

animal testing *can* help predict health effects from anticipated exposure to chemicals and other substances—we need more of it—but animal testing is useless and dangerous if it ignores a fundamental toxicological principle: "the dose makes the poison." It is an egregious departure from science and logic when a substance is labeled "cancer-causing" based on a response in a single animal study using high doses of a test material.

Even more absurd is treating natural and synthetic carcinogens differently. In September of 1990, one of the most respected scientific journals in the country, *Science* magazine, pointed out that in animal testing of chemicals naturally occurring in food 27 of the 52 substances tested were carcinogenic. Furthermore, the editors of *Science* observed, carcinogens occur naturally in 57 food varieties in quantities thousands of times greater than occur in synthetic pesticides.

That's right. Your food is full of natural so-called "cancer causing agents." For the past several years, the American Council on Science and Health has sent to newspapers a publication called "Natural Carcinogens in Your Holiday Menu" to bring this point home. For instance, one mushroom has an estimated cancer hazard *167 times greater* than the daily dietary intake of the chemicals PCB and EDB. Or take malonaldehyde, a mutagen found in turkey: again, "the dose makes the poison." You'd have to eat 3.8 tons of turkey to get a toxic dose of this chemical.

And that's precisely the point about mouse terrorism: It is based upon unreal dosages. We don't drink 100 cups of coffee at a time, or eat 10 pounds of spinach, or drink a fifth of liquor at a sitting. And our bodies metabolize and excrete these chemicals unchanged without doing damage. No animal on earth could survive were it not capable of handling small amounts of foreign chemicals.

Health Risks We Can Do Something About

The main cause of death and sickness in our country isn't pesticide residues or low-level radiation from nuclear plants. And it isn't fluoride in toothpaste or dioxin in paper towels either. In this case, the "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" are cigarette smoking, alcohol and drug abuse, sexually-permissive behavior, and the failure to use available life-saving technology. Consider a few facts:

Cigarette smoking's toll is now a *half-million premature deaths* out of the two million annual fatalities in this country. By the time you've finished reading the morning newspaper, fifty-five Americans will have died from this insidious killer—and not just from lung cancer, but heart disease, emphysema,

and a host of other illnesses. In his most recent report, the Surgeon General says cigarette smoking is still the single most preventable cause of death in society. Every holiday weekend in the United States the news is filled with reminders about driving safely, and there is always a grim statistical accounting of the number of deaths on the nation's highways. Where is the Grim Reaper's scoreboard for a killer that's 10 times greater than the carnage from auto accidents?

Then there's alcohol and drug abuse, which take perhaps a hundred thousand people to the grave each year. They are a major cause of homicide and other violent deaths, and are linked with a long list of physiological and psychological problems afflicting the population, especially youngsters of high school and college age.

Perhaps no disease in our history has received more attention than AIDS. There are some one million Americans now infected with the AIDS virus. AIDs will be responsible for at least 40,000 deaths this year. We know that the overwhelming majority of cases are transmitted by sexually permissive behavior and drug addicts. We need more education, more introspection about our lifestyles, as well as understanding and compassion for those afflicted with the disease, but we also need to track this killer the way we track other infectious diseases—for the good of those most at risk now, and those who may be at great risk tomorrow.

There is a fourth category of risks we should also be concerned about: the failure to use life-saving technology. Remember the recent advertisement on TV showing the man walking away from pieces of his car spread across the highway? He's alive because he took the time to buckle his seatbelt. Last year, twenty-five thousand others didn't. And, believe it or not, another ten thousand people forfeited their lives last year because they didn't have a smoke detector to warn of impending peril.

These are the elephant killers stampeding through our society, and they all have something in common: Every one of them could be prevented with a change in lifestyle—like eating

properly and exercising regularly, avoiding smoking, alcohol, drugs, sexual imprudence, and taking a few seconds for extra protection against auto accidents and fire. These are strategic weapons in the war against premature death and disease in this country.

The cruel irony is, with the exception of the politically-charged AIDS disease, death from these elephant killers is more or less accepted as routine. Strange as it seems, premature death for many has become just a part of living.

How Cancerphobia Diverts Precious Resources

So what difference does it make if Alar gets a lot of print? Who cares if lots of our resources are devoted to getting it out of our food supply? What is the harm in some hype about pesticides as long as it sounds the alarm about good health? Why not spend a little extra money to be sure our kids are safe?

talking about billions of dollars—wastes precious resources that could be spent fighting the real killers.

Look at the so-called "Big Green" initiative that went before the people of California in the fall of 1990. It was an environmental wish-list to help cure a bundle of ills, from the allegedly depleting ozone layer to "unsafe" foods. Big Green was also proof that a hippo is a mouse built to government specifications: Specifically, it mandated that any pesticide, *in any amount*, causing cancer in laboratory animals would be banned, regardless of risks or benefits associated with its use.

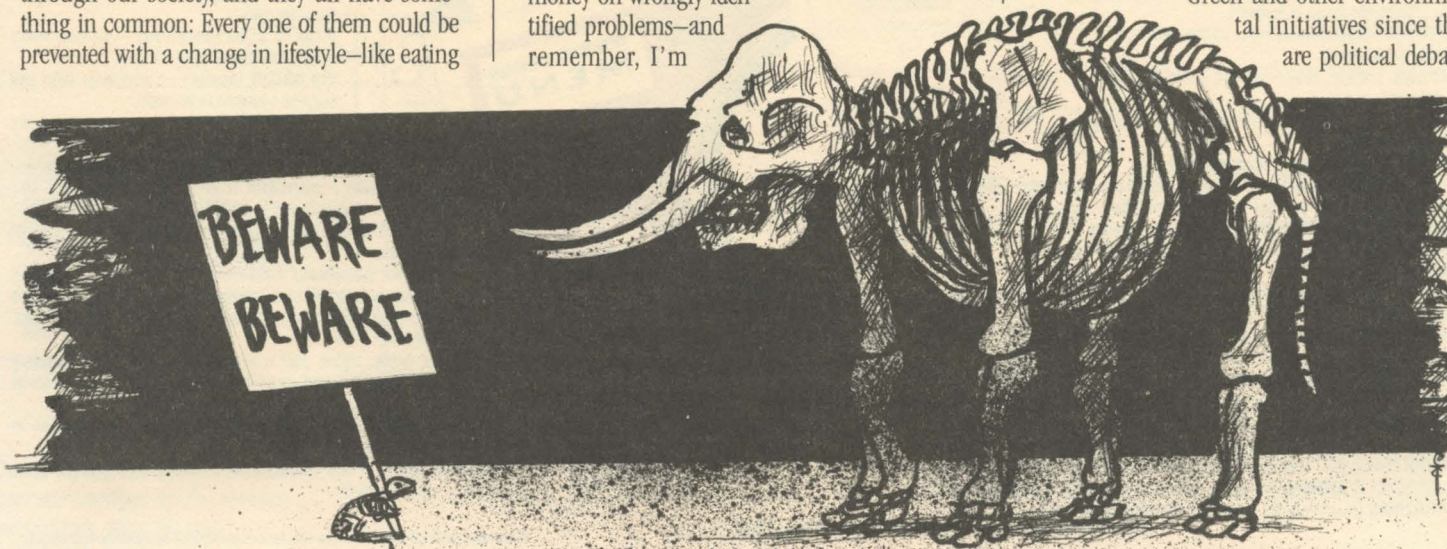
What also made "Big Green" notable was the vocal support of many of America's most famous personalities. Predictably, there was not a scientist or a cancer expert among them. Scaring the public was the order of the day: Oliver Stone, the director of "Platoon," claimed that Americans are "choking to death." Jack Lemmon said swimmers are contracting "mysterious diseases." Other stars

"Big Green was also proof that a hippo is a mouse built to government specifications: Specifically, it mandated that any pesticide, *in any amount*, causing cancer in laboratory animals would be banned, regardless of risks or benefits associated with its use."

Why? Because it is a moral outrage and a political fraud to ask the American people to invest their money and emotions in something that gives no return in improved health, no peace of mind, and causes serious economic damage in the process. We need to be deeply concerned about the welfare of our families when public health policy is set not by scientists but by political operatives and special interests with axes to grind and agendas to fulfill. But most important of all, spending money on wrongly identified problems—and remember, I'm

warned of "deadly fruit". An ad for "Big Green" declared that "scientists are unable to find uncontaminated fish in California waters. Cancer in children is up by 20 percent since 1950." And, we were told, "20,000 Americans will develop cancer and 3,000 will die because of pesticide exposure this year."

There is absolutely no scientific evidence to support any of these charges. State officials and many distinguished scientists have repeatedly said so. But it doesn't make any difference. Big Green and other environmental initiatives since then are political debates,



not scientific exercises. Fact and reality aren't important. As Big Green campaign spokesman Bob Mulholland confided: "In a political debate, science doesn't matter much. It's really how you feel about the issue."

Today, people are regularly asked to make judgments about public health policy based on

the people who are the least able to pay in society—the poor and the elderly. Big Green would have also amounted to an environmental tax of \$6 billion per year on local governments without any benefits. And, ironically, it would have undermined the very economic expansion that is needed to ensure financing of sound

wasting our precious resources on hypothetical risks systematically undermines our economy, but also diverts resources from fighting the true killer diseases in our society.

The Environmental Protection Agency's own recent study, "Unfinished Business," found its priorities inverted. It spent according to the perceptions of the public, which the EPA deemed the lowest risk, and the most costly to research. The dangers EPA scientists put in the top risk category commanded the least attention by the public, and also the least amount of the agency's time and resources. How do we switch our attack toward scientific reality and quit throwing money and time at the public's misperceptions?

Academics and scientists have to step out of the relative obscurity of their classrooms and laboratories and into the limelight of the public health policy debate. Polls show that scientists, engineers and academic leaders have the highest credibility with the public and the media. We can't complain about the media for chasing controversy; we scientists, doctors and teachers can only blame ourselves for staying silent on these issues. All citizens need to encourage industry and business to have more backbone—to stand up to self-styled groups using sensationalism, bad testing and economic intimidation. ▲

"We aren't a sick society. We are a society that merely believes it is sick."

negative advertising and media hype. And when it comes to environmental and health issues, everything is supposedly black-and-white: You are either for the environment and against greedy industrial polluters, or you are in the enemy camp. And Ed Bradley, Meryl Streep, Oliver Stone and the others don't have to worry about growing apples or vegetables, or whether new regulations will drive small businesses into bankruptcy.

Nor do they have to worry about the fact that Big Green would have drastically lowered all crop production in the nation's largest agricultural state by an estimated 40 percent. It would have sent the cost of food skyrocketing—with many prices 50 percent higher—for millions of people. Clearly this would have increased the risks of poverty and disease for

environmental and public programs.

This shouldn't be happening in this country. We are healthier than ever. We live longer than ever—doubling our longevity in the past 50 years. We have stamped out most of the infectious diseases that ravaged our grandparents. We also know there is no cancer epidemic. Most cancer rates have been constant for decades. (A major exception is lung cancer because of cigarette smoking.) What a marvelous time to live, and to be born! We are giving ourselves and our children the gift of better health and longer lives.

But the praises of progress are being drowned out by the apocalyptic anthems of adversity. We aren't a sick society. We are a society that merely believes it is sick. That has to change, and soon. As I emphasized earlier,

"Toxic effects of high doses of naturally occurring chemicals that normally are harmless in the amounts usually found in foods and beverages."

ACETALDEHYDE (apples) – mutagen in short-term biological test systems (for example, the Ames test) and animal carcinogen.

AFATOXINS (nuts) – can induce toxic effects in humans and are among the most potent mutagens and animal carcinogens known.

ALCOHOL (wine) – human carcinogen and teratogen (can cause birth defects).

ALLYL ISOTHIOCYANATE (broccoli) – animal carcinogen.

AMYLASE INHIBITORS (potatoes, rolls) – interfere with animal and human digestive enzyme systems.

ARSENIC (potatoes) – human carcinogen and toxic effects observed in humans.

BENZO(A)PYRENE (bread, rolls, coffee, tea) – animal carcinogen.

CAFFEINE (coffee, tea) – human toxin and animal teratogen.

CAROTATOXIN (carrots) – nerve poison in animals.

CHACONINE (potatoes) – toxic alkaloid that can strongly inhibit human nerve transmission (cholinesterase inhibitor).

CHLOROGENIC ACID (coffee) – bacterial mutagen.

CYANOGENETIC GLYCOSIDES (lima beans, sweet potatoes, apples) – when chewed or ingested can release cyanide, a human toxin.

DIACETYL (butter, coffee) – bacterial mutagen.

DI- AND TRI-SULFIDES (onions) – antithyroid activity in animals (see glucosinolates).

ETHYL CARBAMATE (bread, rolls, wine) – animal carcinogen.

EUGENOL (cranberry sauce) – animal carcinogen.

FURAN DERIVATIVES (bread, onions, celery, mushrooms, sweet potatoes, rolls, cranberry sauce) – many are mutagens in test systems.

GLUCOSINOLATES (broccoli, radishes) – interfere with use of iodine (antithyroid activity) causing thyroid enlargement (goiter) in humans.

GOITRIN (broccoli) – antithyroid compound in humans (see glucosinolates).

HETEROCYCLIC AMINES (turkey) – many are mutagens in test systems.

HYDRAZINES (mushrooms) – many are animal carcinogens.

HOLIDAY DINNER MENU

WHAT'S ON THE PLATE

CREAM OF MUSHROOM SOUP hydrazines

WHAT'S IN IT?

APPETIZERS

FRESH VEGETABLE TRAY

CARROTS carotenoids, myristicin, isoflavones, nitrate

RADISHES glucosinolates, nitrate

CHERRY TOMATOES hydrogen peroxide, nitrate, quercetin glycoside, tomatine

CELERY nitrate, pesticides

ENTREES

ROAST TURKEY heterocyclic amines, malonaldehyde

BREAD STUFFING benz(a)pyrene, di- and tri-sulfides, ethyl carbamate, furan derivatives, dihydroxycarbons, piperidine, sulfite

CRANBERRY SAUCE eugenol, furan derivatives

CHOICE OF VEGETABLE

LIMA BEANS cyanogenic glycosides

BROCCOLI SPEARS allyl isothiocyanate, glucosinolates, goitrin, nitrate

BAKED POTATO amylase inhibitors, arsenic, chalcone, isoflavones, nitrate, oxalic acid, solanine

SWEET POTATO cyanogenic glycosides, furan derivatives, nitrate

ROLLS amylase inhibitors, benz(a)pyrene, ethyl carbamate, furan derivatives, diacetyl

DESSERTS

PUMPKIN PIE myristicin, nitrate, sulfite

APPLE PIE acetaldehyde, isoflavones, piperidine, quercetin glycoside, sulfite

BEVERAGES

COFFEE benz(a)pyrene, caffeine, chlorogenic acid, hydrogen peroxide, methylglyoxal, tannin

TEA benz(a)pyrene, caffeine, quercetin glycoside, tannin

RED WINE alcohol, ethyl carbamate, methylglyoxal, tannin, tyramine

HYDROGEN PEROXIDE (coffee, tomatoes) – mutagen in test systems and animal carcinogen.

ISOFLAVONES (apples, carrots, potatoes) – have estrogenic effect (mimic female sex hormone activity) in animals.

MALONALDEHYDE (turkey) – mutagenic in test systems.

METHYLGLYOXAL (coffee, wine) – animal carcinogen and bacterial mutagen.

MYRISTICIN (carrots, black pepper, nutmeg) – human hallucinogen.

NITRATE (broccoli, carrots, celery, radishes, tomatoes, potatoes, pumpkins, water) – toxic in humans; can also convert to nitrite and subsequently form nitrosamines (animal carcinogens).

OXALIC ACID (potatoes) – human toxin which can form kidney stones.

PHLORIZIN (apples) – interferes with cell enzyme systems in animals.

PSORALENS (celery) – human mutagens and carcinogens.

QUERCETIN GLYCOSIDES (tomatoes, apples, tea) – quercetin is an animal carcinogen and mutagen in bacteria and insects.

SAFROLE (nutmeg, cinnamon, black pepper) – animal carcinogen.

SOLANINE (potatoes) – alkaloid that can strongly inhibit human nerve transmission (cholinesterase inhibitor). Can also cause gastrointestinal tract irritation (abdominal pain, diarrhea, or ulceration).

TANNINS (wine, coffee, tea) – animal carcinogens. Can interfere with human nutrition, and cause growth depression and intestinal damage.

TOMATINE (tomatoes) – interferes with nerve transmission in humans (cholinesterase inhibitor).

TYRAMINE (wine) – can cause blood pressure elevation in some humans.

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"Warming Up to the Facts"

George Roche, President, Hillsdale College

Hillsdale College recently invited some of the nation's leading environmental scientists and health experts like Dr. Elizabeth Whelan, the author of this month's *Imprimis*, to discuss a number of topics, from alleged environmentally-related cancer risks to acid rain and global warming.

On the latter issue, it has become pretty much an article of faith that the so-called "greenhouse effect," by which the Earth's atmosphere traps the heat of the sun, is raising temperatures to levels that can cause harm to life on our planet's surface. A steady stream of stories on network news and in leading national publications warn that increases in carbon dioxide caused by auto emissions and industrial pollution are creating a phenomenon known as "global warming."

This warming effect, the media tell us, threatens major changes in climate worldwide. We face a variety of dangers—from the flooding of coastal areas, as melting polar ice caps raise the level of the oceans, to widespread drought, as moisture is evaporated away from inland areas. The way the story is told (and repeated and repeated and repeated), we're on a down-



ward environmental spiral which can only be checked by drastic changes in our way of life, industrial activity and pattern of fuel consumption. And we'd better get to it right away.

Well, it *is* true, isn't it? Not necessarily. Hillsdale's speakers offered a very different assessment of the global warming phe-

nomenon. They were by no means convinced that we are headed toward environmental disaster, but they did think that media reports have created an atmosphere of hysteria.

They pointed out that the "greenhouse effect" is entirely natural and quite necessary. Without the atmosphere's capacity for trapping solar radiation, the earth would be a giant ball of ice. Yet, the "greenhouse effect" is discussed in the media as if it were something dangerous—the result of human blundering at best, conspiracy at worst.

The Hillsdale conference made it clear that all scientists do not believe the earth is getting warmer. One speaker noted that, at the turn of the century, citrus fruit was grown across the Southeast from Grand Isle, Louisiana, to Charleston, South Carolina. Now, however, Florida is the only Southeast location where citrus is still viable, so the trend is clearly not toward higher temperatures.

Why, then, are we hearing this global warming song over and over?

Certainly, there is a herd instinct among the national media. Once a story has become
(continued on page 6)

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established on the networks or in major publications, it takes on a life of its own. A theory propounded in News Magazine A is amplified on TV Network B, convincing National Newspaper C that it is a settled fact.

This plays into the hands of scientists and environmental activists who have a direct interest in seeing certain ideas reflected in law and government policy. Millions of dollars in research funds and control over vast land and resource holdings turn on environmental legislation, and the environmental lobby wants to dominate those decisions.

Since press people generally share certain ideological sympathies with the environmental folk anyway, the media's tendency to sensationalize unproven theories dovetails neatly with the environmental lobby's need to get their ideas promoted with minimum examination. This cozy relationship is what has created the hubbub about global warming. But ironically, it's distracting us from making as much progress as we could in addressing other environmental concerns which are less apocalyptic but have far more impact on the quality of life—issues like solid waste disposal and development of practical alternative fuels.

We face serious environmental challenges on which our prosperity, our very way of life depend. To meet them, we must reign in all the hysteria about end-of-the-world fantasies like global warming, and instead, start warming up to the facts. ▲

One by One

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by Hillsdale College President George Roche

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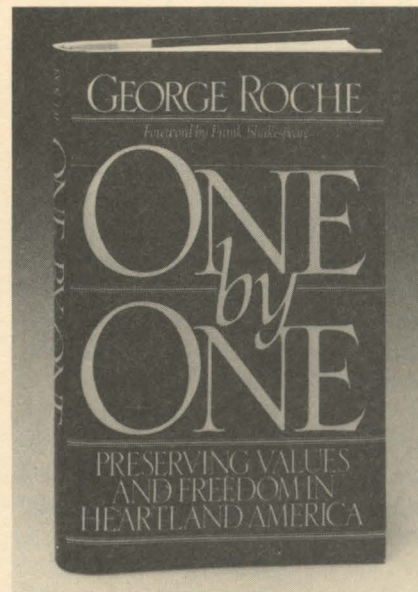
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