

# A Chronicle of the Age of Consequences

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## Chapter 18 A Winter of Discontent

It was a long winter for most Americans. From unusually deep snows to disappointing progress globally on critical issues to the political gridlock in Washington, D.C., Americans were buffeted by a steady diet of disconcerting headlines all season. The upshot was a palpable sense of discontent across the nation, including a plunging faith in the ability of our government to solve pressing problems. The longer-term consequences of our discontent remain to be seen, though I suspect they will be significant. In order to chronicle the roots of these possible consequences, as well as convey the mood of the times for future readers, I offer here a lengthy sampling of wintry headlines and voices of Americans themselves.

### *December*

#### **12/1 – Obama Escalates the War in Afghanistan**

*“If I did not think that the security of the United States and the safety of the American people were at stake in Afghanistan, I would gladly order every single one of our troops home tomorrow. So no, I do not make this decision lightly.”* – President Obama

The *New York Times* reported that in “a momentous decision that has been months in the making,” President Obama has ordered an escalation of the eight-year old war in Afghanistan. Obama is sending 30,000 additional American troops to fight in the war (above the 20,000 he ordered into the field nearly a year ago), while simultaneously vowing to begin bringing the troops home in July 2011 – but only if conditions warrant. The goal of this military surge, Obama said, is to “bring this war to a successful conclusion” by reversing insurgent Taliban gains in major parts of the country, providing additional time and training for Afghan military forces, and to increase the pressure on the terrorist organization known as Al-Qaeda.

Republican leaders generally lauded the president’s decision, while Democrats were generally dismayed. In an interesting bit of irony, the *New York Times* article noted that Obama’s rhetoric “often echoed themes struck by his predecessor, George W. Bush” – which further split the ranks of Democrats. Many of Obama’s supporters denounced the war’s cost (fast approaching \$75 billion per year), and its potential for failure, while many more were upset by what they considered a broken campaign promise by Obama to wind down our overseas commitments, not escalate them.

Critics on the right took their shots too. Obama’s decision to set a timeline for withdrawal of troops was immediately criticized by war hawks in Congress who said it would only encourage the Taliban to wait out the surge. Republican senator John McCain said “Success is the only real exit strategy.” Leaders in Afghanistan’s capital said the deadline was too quick to get the job done. Others at home were skeptical that the troops would be coming home that quickly. One U.S. Army spouse put it this way: “I don’t think anyone in the military believes this is going to end soon.”

Of Obama’s controversial decision, another commentator said simply “Now, it’s his war.”

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## 12/7 – Critical Climate Change Conference Opens

*“Unless we combine to take decisive action, climate change will ravage our planet, and with it our prosperity and security.”* – from a joint editorial published in 56 newspapers in 45 nations.

A much-anticipated United Nations conference on climate change opened Monday in Copenhagen, Denmark. The goal of the two-week event, which drew an unprecedented amount of world leaders, activists, and journalists, was to create an international treaty that would replace the voluntary greenhouse emission reduction targets of the soon-to-expire Kyoto Protocol with mandatory targets. The critical issue confronting conference-goers was this: in the twelve years since the Kyoto Protocol was negotiated, the quantity of carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) in the atmosphere has risen, not fallen. Global temperatures are rising too, slowly but steadily.

Here’s a quick timeline of the situation:

- 1750 – CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere stands at 280 parts-per-million (ppm)
- 1955 – Dr. Charles Keeling finds that CO<sub>2</sub> has risen to 315 ppm
- 1986 – CO<sub>2</sub> reaches 350 ppm
- 1988 – Dr. James Hansen tells Congress global warming is “already happening.”
- 1988 – The U.N. creates the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)
- 1992 – The Rio treaty sets voluntary targets to lower CO<sub>2</sub> emissions
- 1995 – An IPCC report says humans play a big role in global warming
- 1997 – The Kyoto Protocol orders emissions cuts, but the U.S. Senate rejects it
- 2001 – President Bush officially rejects Kyoto targets for the U.S.
- 2007 – A Fourth IPCC report says global warming is due to human activity and says planet has warmed .74 Celsius since 1900
- 2007 – The IPCC and Al Gore win the Nobel Peace Prize
- 2007 – In Bali, the U.N. sets a two-year timetable for an international treaty
- 2009 – Atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> reaches 390 ppm

More background: global temperatures are rising by .2 degrees Celsius per decade generally, though faster in the far north. The world’s power plants, automobiles, burning forests and other sources are producing 29% more CO<sub>2</sub> today than they were in 2000. All of this puts the planet on target to warm 4 degrees Celsius over pre-industrial levels by 2060 – a level that will cause widespread flooding, drought, and other types of devastation, according to the IPCC.

“We call on the representatives of the 192 countries gathered in Copenhagen not to hesitate,” the global newspaper editorial continued, “not to fall into dispute, not to blame each other but to seize the opportunity from the greatest failure of modern politics... Climate change affects everyone, and must be solved by everyone...The politicians in Copenhagen have the power to shape history’s judgment on this generation: one that saw a challenge and rose to it, or one so stupid that we saw calamity coming but did nothing to avert it. We implore them to make the right choice.”

Adding to the sense of urgency at Copenhagen was the knowledge that despite nearly two years of negotiations among representatives of many nations, there was no consensus on next steps.

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Disputes included emissions targets, enforcement, costs, and fairness (how much rich polluting nations should pay developing ones, for example). Without a framework coming in, conference delegates had just two options: quickly negotiate a treaty before the world's leaders arrived on the last days of the event, or pray that the leaders themselves would hammer out an acceptable treaty in the waning moments.

Many people around the planet began to hold their breaths.

Not coincidentally, Dr. James Hansen's book *Storms of My Grandchildren* was released on the same day the Copenhagen conference opened. Dr. Hansen is the top climatologist in the United States, as well as a vocal and persistent advocate for action on climate change.

"The picture is clear," he writes in his book, "our detailed knowledge about how the Earth responded to perturbing agents in the past – very sensitively with some lag caused by the inertia of the oceans – coupled with observations of changes happening right now leads to one conclusion: the continued exploitation of fossil fuels threatens life across the planet, including our own survival. And the timetable is shorter than we thought."

The urgency comes from the nearness of climate tipping points beyond which climate dynamics can cause rapid changes out of humanity's control. Tipping points occur because of amplifying feedbacks, including loss of Arctic ice, melting ice sheets on Greenland and Antarctica, and the release of frozen methane in the sea bed and in tundra. This why it is crucial to reduce atmospheric carbon dioxide to at most 350 ppm in order to avoid disasters for coming generations, he insists.

One consequence of failing to do so will be increased storm frequency and power. That's because a warmer atmosphere holds more water vapor and thus has greater latent heat which contributes to storm intensity. In other words, the strength of the strongest storms will increase as global warming increases. Without action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, Hansen predicts a very turbulent future.

"The best estimate I can make of when large sea level change will begin is during the lifetime of my grandchildren," he concludes. "With the combination of a higher sea level, even of only a meter or so, and increased storm strength, the consequences of future storms will be horrendous to contemplate."

### **12/9 – The EPA Issues an Endangerment Finding**

*"After a thorough examination of the scientific evidence and careful consideration of public comments, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency announced today that greenhouse gases (GHGs) threaten the public health and welfare of the American people." - EPA announcement*

On Wednesday, the EPA issued a long-awaited ruling on greenhouse gas emissions.

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“GHGs are the primary driver of climate change, which can lead to hotter, longer heat waves that threaten the health of the sick, poor or elderly; increases in ground-level ozone pollution linked to asthma and other respiratory illnesses,” said the announcement. “The Administrator finds that the current and projected concentrations of six key well-mixed greenhouse gases...in the atmosphere threaten the public health and welfare of current and future generations.”

The Finding document, which supports the ruling, runs to 284 pages in length. Now the question many observers want to know is this: what will the EPA do next?

### **12/10 – Wartime President Accepts Peace Prize**

*“Compared to some of the giants of history who have received this prize – Schweitzer and King, Marshall and Mandela – my accomplishments are slight.”* – President Obama

A little more than a week after announcing a major escalation in the war in Afghanistan, President Obama accepted the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo, Norway, saying there are times when the use of military force is “not only necessary but morally justified.”

While expressing respect for the non-violence philosophy of King and Mahatma Gandhi, Obama said he can’t “be guided by their examples alone.” Negotiations didn’t stop Hitler, he noted, and they won’t stop Al-Qaeda. “I, like any head of state, reserve the right to act unilaterally if necessary to defend my nation.” At the same time, he called for the world to embrace a bolder vision of itself. “Let us reach for the world that ought to be,” Obama said, “that spark of the divine that still stirs within each of our souls.”

The choice of President Obama for the Peace Prize was controversial in many quarters, sparking criticism from the left (for its contradiction) and the right (for its prematurity). Nevertheless, the Chair of the five-person Nobel Committee that selected Obama said they did so with the hope that the president would reverse the “prevailing situation in the world, with great tension, numerous wars, unresolved conflicts and confrontations on many fronts.” He went on to cite Obama’s pledge to reduce stockpiles of nuclear weapons and address climate change.

“If I’m successful in those tasks, then hopefully some of the criticism will subside” said Obama to a reporter’s question about the prematurity of the Nobel award, adding “but that’s not really my concern. And if I’m not successful, then all the praise and the awards in the world won’t disguise that fact.”

### **12/18 – Debacle in Denmark**

*“To be or not to be, that is the question.”* – a famous Danish prince

In the end, they punted. After two intense, chaotic, and emotionally-draining weeks involving delegates from 192 nations, observed by over 20,000 activists and journalists, the final product of the United Nations Conference on Climate Change was a three-page ‘Accord’ hammered out

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in last-minute negotiations between President Barack Obama, China's Premier Wen Jintao, and a handful of other world leaders.

The text can be summarized in these points:

- Temperatures are not to rise more than 2 degrees Celsius, but no countermeasures are described.
- All numerical environmental targets disappear – and everything is voluntary.
- Developing nations agree to oversight of their actions but without any sanctions.
- Money is pledged.
- The rainforests will be discussed next year.

And the “Copenhagen Accord” was not approved by the delegates before the Conference was adjourned.

Here's what President Obama had to say: “We can embrace this accord, take a substantial step forward, and continue to refine it and build upon its foundation...Or we can again choose delay, falling back into the same divisions that have stood in the way of action for years. And we will be back having the same stale arguments month after month, year after year – all the while the danger of climate change grows until it is irreversible....”

To employ a sports metaphor, the Conference was very much like a rugby game, only with colossal consequences. For two weeks, two teams struggled with one another in a massive scrum, with Developing Nations on one side, and Developed Nations on the other. Heads bent and arms locked together, hundreds of legs kicked at the football tossed into the scrum by various U. N. officials while thousands of spectators cheered or booed on the sidelines. Then suddenly, with only minutes left in the game, a handful of All-Stars walked onto the playing field, snatched the ball away from the weary players and walked to the far end of the field, tossing the ball back-and-forth between them as they went. In short order, they negotiated a new version of the game, signed a three-page non-binding agreement outlining the new rules, and agreed to meet later on a different field at some future time to actually play the new game. Then the All-Stars punted the rugby ball far off into the horizon, high-fived each other as the clock ran out, and departed, leaving the original teams standing uselessly on the field, looking at each other in bewilderment.

Depending on your point-of-view, this sudden turn-of-events was either a positive development or a debacle. Here are a variety of reactions:

The *New York Times*: “The global climate negotiations in Copenhagen produced neither a grand success nor the complete meltdown that seemed almost certain as late as Friday afternoon. Despite two years of advance work, the meeting failed to convert a rare gathering of world leaders into an ambitious, legally binding action plan for reducing greenhouse gas emissions...the hard work has only begun...For the moment it is worth savoring the steps forward...”

The office of the Swedish Prime Minister called the Accord a “disaster.”

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The *Washington Post*: “The fate of any future global climate change treaty will now effectively rest in the hands of the two largest emitters [the U.S. and China]. For at least the next several years, the lack of a binding international treaty may result in a piecemeal response to the problem, with action being taken largely on a national and regional level. Yet proponents of the Copenhagen agreement stress that the Obama administration is taking unprecedented action at home...”

Headline from *Bloomberg News* (online): “Obama’s ‘Unprecedented’ Climate Deal Delays Solutions.”

An opinion from the online web site *Post Carbon Institute*: “The U.N. convention on climate change in Copenhagen resulted in zero meaningful progress on global emissions reductions. Feel free to read the spin, but please don’t get caught up in its spokes. There was no groundwork laid, no small but important steps taken. Whoever tells you different is selling something.”

The *Sierra Club*’s Executive Director Carl Pope: “Tonight’s announcement is but a first step and much work needs to be done in the days and months ahead in order to seal a final international climate deal that is fair, binding, and ambitious...”

The editors at *The Nation*: “For some, the accord represents an inch of progress...[but] there is only one problem with this kind of incrementalism: nature does not award points for trying. It neither swoons over recognition of its laws nor bends to the timelines of political reality. It does not bargain with denialists and oil lobbyists, and it does not care about GDP or the filibuster or approval ratings. The physics that governs climate change is inexorable, and its outcome can be mitigated by only one thing: reducing carbon dioxide emissions.”

David Doniger of the nonprofit *Natural Resources Defense Council*: “Give up the sour and grudging reviews. The Copenhagen Accord is a significant breakthrough that signals a new era of effective cooperation between all major emitters, and opens the door to finally enacting U.S. climate and energy legislation next year.”

Kjell Aleklett, President of the *Association for the Study of Peak Oil (ASPO) International*: “Now there remains only one hope for the future climate and that hope is Peak Oil, Peak Gas, and Peak Coal.”

Apparently, we’re going to find out.

### **12/20 – America in Decline?**

*“We are seeing a comprehensive failure of leadership in every sector and every level of American life – in politics, business, banking, education, news media, medicine, and the clergy. All are determined to pretend that we can somehow continue the habits and behaviors of the pre-peak oil era. They are all unwilling to face reality, and are all engaged in mutually supporting each other’s dangerous fantasies.”* – James Kunstler, from his weekly blog

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This month *Newsweek* magazine featured a cover story, written by Niall Ferguson, titled “An Empire at Risk” which wondered aloud if America is in decline. The main issue, according to Ferguson, is not military success or failure, but our internal financial insecurity, specifically the ballooning national debt. He noted that the federal deficit for the federal fiscal year 2009 was recently calculated at more than \$1.4 trillion – about 11% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), according to the Congressional Budget Office. That’s a bigger deficit than any seen since World War II. “We are,” writes Ferguson, “having the fiscal policy of a world war, without the war.”

Meanwhile, in dollar terms, the total federal debt held by the public, including foreigners, will rise from \$5.8 trillion in 2008 to \$14.3 trillion in 2019 – from 41% of GDP to 68%.

“In other words, there is no end in sight to the borrowing binge,” writes Ferguson. “Unless entitlements are cut or taxes raised, there will never be another balanced budget.” He notes that in history, great financial crises are often followed by great fiscal crises, usually in the form of debt default or high inflation. “The history of all the great European empires is replete with such episodes,” he continues. “Indeed, serial default and high inflation have tended to be the surest symptoms of imperial decline.”

He worries that for America this will mean a decline in defense expenditures, which he considers an early sign of long-term trouble. “This is how empires decline,” he concludes. “It begins with a debt explosion. It ends with an inexorable reduction in the resources available for Army, Navy, and Air Force.”

And the rest is history.

Meanwhile, the *Associated Press* reports that China overtook Germany in 2009 to become the world’s top exporting nation, capping another milestone in China’s rapid rise and growing global economic influence. The AP notes that China has become the world’s largest automobile market and the biggest producer of steel. Much of this has strained relations with the United States. President Obama, like President Bush, has repeatedly called for China to increase the value of its currency, in order to make American goods more attractive to Chinese shoppers, but Premier Wen Jibao said recently that China would “absolutely not” yield to such calls.

Is America in decline? According to James Kunstler, author, critic, blogger, and long-time ‘America-watcher,’ it certainly looks that way.

“I don’t remember any period in my longish life, even the Vietnam uproar, when the collective sense of purpose, intent, and self-confidence was so muddled in this country, so detached from reality,” he writes online in his annual forecast. He believes we’re doing a poor job of constructing a coherent consensus about what is happening to us, why, and how we might respond to various crises. Not that we aren’t demanding solutions – we are – they’re just not the right ones.

The trouble is we can’t respond intelligently if we don’t understand what’s going on – and Kunstler thinks we haven’t a clue. Even President Obama is praying for an economic recovery

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without asking what it is we are trying to recovery *to*? Another Potemkin housing boom, as Kunstler puts it? Another credit orgy? Another round of debt-fueled spending by government and citizen alike?

“How dysfunctional is our nation?” he asks. “These days, we lie to ourselves perhaps as badly as the Soviets did, and in a worse way because where information is concerned we really are a freer people than they were, so our failure is far less excusable...”

Kunstler thinks we will hit a brick wall in 2010. He predicts that political dissidence, already happening in many parts of the nation, will morph into civil unrest next year, aided and betted by a contracting economy that refuses to create jobs despite the rebound in the stock market and on Wall Street in general. He expects the stock market to fall again. Federal stimulus money will dry up, casting state budgets further into trouble and so on.

“We’re in desperate need of decomplexifying, relocalizing, downscaling, and re-humanizing American life,” he writes. “It doesn’t mean that we will be a lesser people or that we will not recognize our own culture. In some respects, I think it means we must return to some traditional American lifeways that we abandoned for the cheap oil life of convenience, comfort, obesity, and social atomization.”

The successful people in America, he says, will be those who attach themselves to cohesive local communities that have healthy local economies and sturdy social networks, especially places that can produce a significant amount of their own food.

“Of course, this downscaling will happen whether we want it to or not,” he writes. “It’s really a matter of whether we go along with it consciously and intelligently – or just let things slide....”

### **12/31 – The End of the “Decade From Hell”**

*“Bookended by 9/11 at the start and a financial wipeout at the end, the first 10 years of this century will very likely go down as the most disillusioning and dispiriting decade Americans have lived through in the post-World War II era.”* – Andy Serwer, writing in a *Time* magazine cover story.

If the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the “American Century,” as *Time*’s co-founder Henry Luce labeled it back in the 1940s, then the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with its hurricanes, tsunamis, school shootings, terrorist attacks, recessions, bankruptcies, worries about climate change, obesity, corruption, scandal, and so on, was certainly something else.

Joe Scarborough, a former Republican congressman, summed up the decade this way for the online *Huffington Post*: “The ugliness of Impeachment in 1999 soon bled into the divisions of the 2000 election, the shock of 9/11, the “good” war in Afghanistan, the “bad” war in Iraq, rising deficits, record debts, a decaying industrial base, reckless Republican budgets, mindless consumer spending, massive trade deficits, a rising China, a falling dollar, the shame of Katrina, the empowering of Wall Street, the loosening of credit, the awarding of too many mortgages, the

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flow of too many dollars, credit default swaps, an economic death spiral, a reckless bailout, Bernie Madoff, the collapse of GM, a Stimulus bill Washington forgot to read, reckless Republican demagogues, skyrocketing unemployment rates, and a country where elites in Washington and Wall Street lived in a parallel universe from the rest of us.”

“Call it whatever you want,” writes Serwer in the *Time* cover story about the decade, “just give thanks that it is nearly over.”

Paraphrasing Ronald Reagan, Serwer asks: “Are you better off today than you were ten years ago?” The answer for most Americans is clearly “no.” For example, median household income in 2000 was \$52,000. By 2008 it had dropped to \$50,000 (and will almost certainly drop again due to current high unemployment). The poor did worse. In 2000, 11% lived below the poverty line; by 2008, that number had risen to 13%.

To Serwer, who is the managing editor of *Fortune* magazine, the Big Question is *why?* Why did so much bad stuff happen in this decade? His answer is straightforward: we mostly have ourselves to blame. He targets four main problems:

- *Neglect.* Our inward-looking culture didn’t heed obvious warning signs.
- *Greed.* Our absolute faith in free-market capitalism blinded us to dangers.
- *Self-interest.* See points one and two above.
- *Deferral.* Why do today what we can push off onto the next generation?

Despite these conditions, however, Serwer remains undaunted about America’s prospects for the future. He’s positive that the second decade will be a great one for the nation (especially in comparison to the first one). “Unless you believe that this country is in the throes of a deep and permanent decline,” he writes, “there’s no question that we’ll rebound.” We have the strongest military in the world, he notes, as well as unquestioned technological ingenuity. And don’t forget – the stock market will make people rich again.

Economist Paul Krugman is not so sanguine. Writing in an op-ed for the *New York Times*, he suggests that we call the decade the *Big Zero*. There was zero job creation, zero economic gains for the American family, zero gains for homeowners, zeros for retirement accounts, and zeros for the Dow. “It was a decade in which nothing good happened,” Krugman writes, “and none of the optimistic things we were supposed to believe turned out to be true.”

For Krugman what was most impressive about the past decade was our unwillingness to learn from our mistakes. After the dot-com bubble burst in 2000, followed shortly by the Enron and WorldCom accounting scandals, the nation turned a blind eye to the growing housing bubble and obvious Wall Street shenanigans, until it was too late.

“So let’s bid not at all fond farewell to the Big Zero – the decade in which we achieved nothing and learned nothing,” he writes. “Will the next decade be better? Stay tuned.”

### *January*

#### **1/10 – Big Bonuses Return to Wall Street**

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*“It’s amazing how quickly some people want to forget about the trouble and go back to business as usual. We face a real challenge in dealing with that feeling that the crisis is over. The need for reform is obviously not over.”* – Paul Volcker, advisor to President Obama and former Federal Reserve chief

The *Wall Street Journal* reported that major U.S. banks and securities firms are on pace to pay their employees approximately \$145 billion for 2009, a record sum – an indication how compensation is climbing despite fury over Wall Street’s pay culture. An analysis by the WSJ said executives, traders, money managers, and others at the top 38 financial companies can expect to earn nearly 18% more than they did in 2008.

The online *Bloomberg News* reports that Goldman Sachs (formerly an investment firm, now a bank), which earned a record \$11.6 billion in 2007, is on track to earn \$11.4 billion in 2009. The 140-year old company received \$10 billion in capital from the federal government during the bailout, plus another \$12 billion when the feds bailed out the insurance giant AIG, which owed the money to Goldman Sachs. During the past year, profits earned by Goldman Sachs outstripped its rivals. According to Bloomberg, the bank paid its employees \$16 billion, which comes out to \$527,000 per employee – which is almost eight times the median U.S. household income.

Meanwhile, the nation’s unemployment rate hovers around 10%.

Goldman Sachs’ CEO Lloyd Blankfein, who earned \$65 million in 2007, told a Congressional committee that his firm was doing “God’s work” because it was helping its investors.

*Rolling Stone* writer Matt Taibbi had a different perspective, calling the Goldman Sachs “a great vampire squid wrapped around the face of humanity.”

Meanwhile, President Obama and Congressional Democrats have struggled to come up with a viable financial reform bill. While Washington stalls, some are pushing back. Arianna Huffington recently urged Americans to move their money out of the four Big Banks (including Goldman Sachs) to smaller, more local, community banks as a form of protest. “Think of the message it will send to Wall Street and to the White House,” she writes on her web site. “That we have had enough of the high-flying, no-limits-casino banking culture that continues to dominate Wall Street and Capitol Hill. That we won’t wait on Washington to act, because we know that Washington has, in fact, been a part of the problem from the start.”

### **1/20 – What Change We Can Believe In?**

*“I don’t know if anything will come of this or not, but this is a peaceful way of showing our frustration.”* – Ruth Lobbs, 57, a schoolteacher and Tea Party member

On the first anniversary of President Obama’s inauguration, voters in Massachusetts sent the President and his party an unwelcome surprise when they elected Scott Brown, an unknown Republican state senator, to fill Ted Kennedy’s seat in the U.S. Senate. Trailing by as many as 20

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points in polls two months ago, Brown surged to a 5-point victory in the special election by promising, among other things, be the “41<sup>st</sup> vote” against Obama’s attempt to overhaul health care (Republicans in the Senate are using a parliamentary procedure called a filibuster to block bills, which requires 60 votes to overcome).

Brown’s election in heavily Democratic Massachusetts was seen by many analysts as a protest vote not only against Obama, but against Democrats in general. Polls showed that many Independent voters who had voted for Obama in 2008 switched to Brown because they thought Democratic policies were doing more to help Wall Street than Main Street.

Here is Drew Western, a neuroscientist at Emory University, writing in an op-ed about liberals’ discontent with Obama: “As the president’s performance numbers and ratings on his handling of virtually every domestic issue have fallen below 50 percent, the Democratic base has become demoralized, and Independents have gone from his source of strength to his Achilles Heel, it’s time to reflect on why...What’s costing the president are three things: a laissez faire style of leadership that appears weak and removed to everyday Americans, a failure to articulate and defend any coherent ideological position on virtually anything, and a widespread perception that he cares more about special interests like bank, credit card, oil and coal, and health and pharmaceutical companies than he does about the people they are shafting...People in the center will follow if you speak to their values. And act on what you believe. FDR did it. LBJ did it. Reagan did it. Even George W. Bush did it, although I wish he hadn’t. But you have to believe something. I honestly don’t know what the president believes.”

Meanwhile on the far right, the nation has witnessed the rapid rise of a phenomena called the Tea Party movement, a loose affiliation of anti-government protestors angry at the Democrats generally and Obama specifically for what they perceive as an alarming expansion of federal power. The movement began in 2009 with a series of ‘tea parties’ and rallies across the country designed to invoke the spirit of the famous 1773 Boston Tea Party. The protests were originally aimed at the federal bailout of Wall Street and the massive Stimulus package passed by Congress, but they have grown into a broad call for limited government, fiscal responsibility, and freer markets. *The Economist* recently called the Tea Partiers “America’s most vibrant political force.”

A Tea Party rally on the Mall in Washington, D.C, last fall drew a large crowd of enthusiastic supporters, reported the *New York Times*. “I want Congress to be afraid,” said Keldon Clapp, 45, an unemployed marketing representative who recently moved to Tennessee from Connecticut after losing his job. “Like everyone else here, I want them to know that we’re watching what they’re doing.”

“This is not some kind of radical right-wing group,” Senator Jim DeMint, Republican of South Carolina, said in an interview as dozens of people streamed by him. “I just hope the Congress, the Senate and the president recognize that people are afraid of what’s going on.”

In conversations with demonstrators, reported the *Times*, people identified themselves as Republicans, libertarians, independents and former Democrats. Several speakers denounced the

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Obama administration's health care plan as "socialism." A few Confederate flags waved in the air, but there were hundreds of American flags and chants of, "U.S.A.! U.S.A.! U.S.A.!"

Journalist Tim Rutten, writing in the *LA Times* summed up things this way: "There is a deep and increasingly restive anger stirring in the country. Its focal points at the moment may seem to health care and 'big government.' But if there were a Republican in the White House, they might just as well be tax cuts and 'limited government'...[the] shift of economic risk onto the backs of the middle class has allowed the top 5 percent of income earners to amass a share of the country's wealth unmatched for a century. There's the real source of the country's anger."

### 1/21 – The Supreme Court Drops a Bombshell

*"While American democracy is imperfect, few outside the majority of this court would have thought its flaws included a dearth of corporate money in politics."* – Associate Justice of the Supreme Court John Paul Stevens

By a 5-4 decision, a bitterly divided U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the government may not ban political spending by corporations in political campaigns, overturning two major precedents. By rolling back nearly all restrictions on corporate spending in federal elections, a torrent of corporate-funded advertising in future political campaigns will almost certainly be unleashed. Many observers were shocked by the news.

President Obama called it "a major victory for big oil, Wall Street banks, health insurance companies and the other powerful interests that marshal their power every day in Washington to drown out the voices of everyday Americans."

One long-time finance reform advocate called the decision a "disaster for the American people and a dark day for the Supreme Court."

Another reformer said "We are moving to an age where we won't have the senator from Arkansas or the congressman from North Carolina, but the senator from Wal-Mart and the congressman from Bank of America."

On the other side: Republican National Committee Chairman Michael Steele hailed the decision, saying "Free speech strengthens democracy." Another conservative commentator said: "This will be good in allowing unions and corporations to speak."

Labor unions disagreed. One labor leader said "Unlimited corporate spending in federal elections threatens to drown out the voices of the people who really should be at the center of the political process, voters and candidates."

According to Senator Chuck Schumer of New York "The bottom line is this: the Supreme Court has just predetermined the winners of next November's elections. It won't be Republicans. It won't be Democrats. It will be corporate America."

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## *February*

### **2/7 - Epic Storms**

*“We see blowout warming in the satellite temperature record, which is so beloved of the anti-science crowd since they think – incorrectly – it doesn’t show warming. [In fact] we crushed the previous record.”* – climate blogger Joe Romm on his site *Climate Progress*

Much of the mid-Atlantic region received over two feet of snow over the weekend from a powerful storm that closed airports, toppled trees and power lines, paralyzed government, and left thousands without power. Snow fell at the rate of three inches an hour in some places. “This was an epic storm,” said Andrew Ulrich, a meteorologist, “the sheer amount of snow was amazing.” Robert McFadden of the *NY Times* wrote that it was a “blizzard that had forecasters reaching for superlatives.” President Obama called it “snowmageddon.”

Snow closed the U.S. government for four straight days and forced the Commerce Department to hold a press conference for reporters by telephone to announce the creation of an office on global warming, ironically enough.

Another storm was due to hit the East Coast in two days, causing the *Associated Press* to ask if this was the “worst winter ever?” That’s because this was the second record-making storm to hit the mid-Atlantic this winter, coming less than two months after a December 19<sup>th</sup> howler that dropped sixteen inches on Washington. Snows of that magnitude, said one observer, are rare, much less two in one season.

Meanwhile, a powerful rainstorm on the west coast unleashed a torrent of mud that swamped more than forty homes in a suburb of Los Angeles. “It looked like Niagara Falls was coming down the street,” said one resident. Elsewhere in the LA basin, flooding caused by the storm flooded freeways and caused numerous accidents and washed out at least two mountain roads. Forecasters had predicted that 1-2 inches of rain would fall, instead the storm stalled and dumped 3-4 inches instead.

There’s more. *USA Today* reported that there’s been lots of snow in some places where it usually doesn’t fall and relatively little where it normally does. For example, more snow fell on Baltimore than Buffalo this winter. Seattle had the warmest January on record. Hail fell in Los Angeles, and Dallas had its first White Christmas since 1929. In D.C. the total reached a record 56 inches, while an annual dog sled race in New Hampshire was cancelled due to a lack of the white stuff. Snowball fights broke out in Alabama and Mississippi.

Strangest of all, at one point satellite images snowed snow in *all* fifty states, including a dusting on the top of Mauna Loa volcano in Hawaii (which is normally covered with snow, but is dry this winter). The *Associated Press* remarked “The idea of 50 states with snow is so strange that the federal office that collects weather statistics doesn’t keep track of that number and can’t say whether it has ever happened...”

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None of this was really a surprise. Weather forecasters predicted a heavy winter, due to an active El Nino pattern in the Pacific ocean. However, it added fuel to a winter-long tempest of skepticism about global warming. As Juliet Eilperin, a reporter for the *Washington Post* wrote: “This winter’s extreme weather...comes at a time when, despite a wealth of scientific evidence, the American public is increasingly skeptical that climate change is happening at all.”

Over the winter, scientists reporting a rise in global warming came under vigorous assault for a supposed conspiracy to manufacture evidence, often receiving vicious personal attacks. While industry may be behind much of the orchestrated campaign, many observers said, there is honest wishful thinking among many citizens that climate change is not really happening.

“But wishing does not alter the facts,” wrote leading climatologist Dr. James Hansen in an op-ed piece. All scientists make mistakes, he noted, but the scientific method is designed to correct them. Science is skeptical by nature and method. New data causes conclusions to be reexamined. Fraud is rare for this reason.

He went on to note that it was the warmest January *globally* in the 32-year satellite-based data record. “Our data show that 2009 was tied for the second warmest year in the 130 years of near-global instrumental measurements,” he wrote (the global record warm year was 2005).

“The bottom line is this,” he writes, “the Earth has been in a period of rapid global warming for the past three decades. The assertion that the planet is entering a period of cooling in the past decade is without foundation. On the contrary, we find no significant deviation from the warming trend of the past three decades.”

### **2/27 - A Coffee Party is Born**

*“Let’s start a coffee party...smoothie party. Red bull party. Anything but tea. Geez. Ooh how about cappuccino party? That would really piss ‘em off bec it sounds elitist...let’s get together and drink cappuccino and have real political dialogue with substance and compassion...”* – Annabel Park on her internet *Facebook* account

Reporter Dan Zak, writing in the *Washington Post*, calls Ms. Park part of a growing trend which aims to push back against the conservative Tea Party movement. Within weeks, he reported, Ms. Park was overwhelmed by thousands of responses from strangers from Texas to Chicago, making her the de facto coordinator for the Coffee Party USA, whose aims include promoting civility and inclusiveness in political discourse.

According to Zak, the Coffee Party is percolating in 30 states, though the effort has exhausted Park, a documentary filmmaker, who sometimes spends whole days on *Facebook*, organizing, organizing. Still, the Coffee Party is “not so much a movement as a slow-drip ripple through online nano-politics,” he writes.

However, the Coffee and Tea Parties do have one thing in common: a desire to “save” America. A recent *Washington Post/ABC News* poll showed that two-thirds of Americans are

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“dissatisfied” or “angry” with the federal government – the highest level in 14 years. Many of the discontented have sought solace in social networking, with the Coffee Party becoming the latest effort to turn virtual disenchantment into real-world results.

“We don’t see cooperation with the government,” said Robert Gaudet, who administers the web site *Tea Party Patriots.org* which has 100,000 *Facebook* users. “We see ourselves monitoring the government...”

Coffee Party member Alan Alborn puts it this way: “We need citizen politicians.” Tea Party member William Temple says this: “We want citizen legislators, people who know about sacrifice. Get the career politicians out of here.”

Coffee Party member Stacey Hopkins continues: “You’re dealing with a nation that’s jaded. Paranoid, distrustful, broke, angry...once we say our political affiliations, everyone goes to their corner and then comes out swinging...A lot of people have the same goals and desires.”

According to Park, the Coffee Party believes the middle is the way. “We have to relearn how to talk to each other,” she says. “It’s also about regaining confidence that we can come together, that we can come to the middle and agree on things.”

Dan Zak of the *Washington Post* sums up: “Tea or coffee? Both movements view themselves as silent majorities who have found their voice, as sleeping giants who are now awake, caffeinated on activism, ready to persuade or react to the other side, if there are sides at all.”

As winter gives way to spring, it will be very interesting to see how all the raw emotion in evidence this season plays out. Americans are experiencing a level of anxiety unprecedented in my lifetime, and how this anxiety transforms itself into election results, economic behavior, or social discord will have consequences for years to come. Perhaps the ‘ship-of-state’ will right itself once the flowers begin to bloom and the backyard grills begin to sizzle once more as citizens venture outdoors again. I doubt, however, that this winter’s discontent will dissipate very easily under the warming rays of the summer sun.

It all depends on what happens next.