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Manslaughter by Politicians

By Richard W. Rahn

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Manslaughter is the killing of a human being without expressed or implied malice. Average life expectancy is very highly correlated with per capita income, and income growth is very highly correlated with economic freedom (note accompanying table).

Income, Life Expectancy, and Economic Freedom		
2006 Per Capita Income (country per year)	2006 Average Life Expectancy at Birth	Average Index of Economic Freedom Score
More than \$25,000	80	74
\$25,000-\$10,000	72	63
\$10,000-\$3,000	69	58
Less than \$3,000	57	52

Sources: The World Bank and The 2008 Heritage/WSJ Index of Economic Freedom

When politicians enact anti-economic growth regulations and taxes, even in the name of "global warming," "environmentalism," and "fairness," they are, in fact, shortening the lives of many of their fellow citizens and those in other countries.

I do not pretend to know with much certainty whether the Earth will be much warmer at the end of this century and whether any increase in temperature that does occur will reduce or increase human life expectancies. But I do know the following with high confidence: The global warming alarmists told us 15 years ago that the Earth would be getting steadily warmer - yet, in fact, it has been getting cooler for the last 10 years, and some of their new models say this cooling trend might continue for another 10 or 15 years. The restrictions on drilling for new oil have driven up the price of oil products to the extent they are causing unnecessary real hardship to billions of people on the planet and, as a result, people are spending less money on their medical care and medical research.

The political requirements to use corn and other food plants for fuel have driven up the price of food again for billions of people in the world, and those at the bottom of the income ladder are increasingly suffering from malnutrition.

In sum, millions, if not billions, of people right now are unnecessarily having their lifespans reduced because of an overreaction to a projected climate change which may or may not have an affect on the lifespans of humans living sometime in the future.

A 2002 National Bureau for Economic Research paper by Frank R. Lichtenberg showed that the empirical data (from 1960-97) provide strong support that medical innovation and expenditures on medical care contribute to increased longevity. "The estimates imply that the medical expenditure needed to gain one life-year is about \$11,000, and the pharmaceutical R&D expenditure needed to gain one life year is about \$1,354. Previous researchers have estimated that the average value of a life-year is approximately \$150,000."

Probably many politicians think they are being responsible when they do things like imposing costly environmental taxes, prohibiting new mining for needed metals, and coming up with costly CO2 trading schemes as the Europeans have done, and which are now being debated in the U.S. Congress. Yet, all these actions impede the proper functioning of the market, reduce economic growth and lower life expectancies, in part, by reducing the funds available for medical research and treatments.

Environmental laws that require reasonably clean air and water can clearly be a net gain for human health and economic development. But, like anything taken to excess, the costs of many of the new and proposed measures to curb CO2 greatly exceed the benefits, thus costing both lives and treasure. Most serious economists who have looked at the issue believe environmental adaptation (as humans and other plants and animals have done for millions of years) would be far less costly than speculative actions to try to change the climate.

The fundamental problem is that many politicians do not understand or, perhaps, do not wish to understand tradeoffs. That is, every time they increase a regulation or a tax, or require a government expenditure that reduces economic freedom and does not meet a reasonable cost benefit test, they are not engaged in just some annoyance, but they are costing real human life years.

Vaclav Klaus, president of the Czech Republic and also a noted economist, has written a book titled "Blue Planet in Green Shackles, What Is Endangered: Climate or Freedom?" Mr. Klaus does understand tradeoffs, and he also understands the nature of many in the political class, having spent much of his life under a communist regime.

He argues, as he did in an interview with The Washington Times last week, that global warming "is used to justify an enormous scope for government intervention vis-a-vis the markets and personal freedom."

One might take issue with President Klaus' assertion that those who advocate more regulation and higher taxes are not all well-meaning public servants, except for the unwillingness of many such as former Vice President Al Gore to debate both the science and economic costs with serious opponents and support serious cost-benefit analysis. It is possible to make rational decisions about such issues as how much to spend on the environment, defense, public health, infrastructure, etc., and how to best fund such activities.

Unfortunately, all too many in the political class, whether in Washington, Brussels or wherever, want to turn the issues into a "religion," as Mr. Klaus says, rather than to coolly analyze the pros and cons, and rationally debate the merits. If it were only possible to indict politicians for "manslaughter" for their costly and destructive acts, many billions of life years would be saved.

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