NEW YORK – In recent years, the United States has been more a source of global instability than a source of global problem-solving. Examples include the war in Iraq, launched by the US on false premises, obstructionism on efforts to curb climate change, meager development assistance, and the violation of international treaties such as the Geneva Conventions. While many factors contributed to America’s destabilizing actions, a powerful one is anti-intellectualism, exemplified recently by Republican vice-presidential nominee Sarah Palin’s surging popularity.

By anti-intellectualism, I mean especially an aggressively anti-scientific perspective, backed by disdain for those who adhere to science and evidence. The challenges faced by a major power like the US require rigorous analysis of information according to the best scientific principles.

Climate change, for example, poses dire threats to the planet that must be assessed according to prevailing scientific norms and the evolving capacity of climate science. The Nobel Prize-winning global scientific process called the Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has set the gold standard for scientific rigor in analyzing the threats of human-induced climate change. We need scientifically literate politicians adept at evidence-based critical thinking to translate these findings and recommendations into policy and international agreements.

In the US, however, the attitudes of President Bush, leading Republicans, and now Sarah Palin, have been the opposite of scientific. The White House did all it could for eight years to hide the overwhelming scientific consensus that humans are contributing to climate change. It tried to prevent government scientists from speaking honestly to the public. The Wall Street Journal has similarly peddled anti-science and pseudo-science to oppose policies to fight human-induced climate change.

These anti-scientific approaches affected not only climate policy, but also foreign policy. The US went to war in Iraq on the basis of Bush’s gut instincts and religious convictions, not rigorous evidence. Likewise, Palin has called the Iraq War “a task from God.”

These are not isolated albeit powerful individuals out of touch with reality. They reflect the fact that a significant portion of American society, which currently votes mainly Republican, rejects or is simply unaware of basic scientific evidence regarding climate change, biological evolution, human health, and other fields. These voters generally do not reject the benefits of technologies that result from modern science, but they do reject the evidence and advice of scientists regarding public policies.

Recent survey data by the Pew Foundation found that while 58% of Democrats believe that human beings are causing global warming, only 28% of Republicans do. Similarly, a 2005 survey found that 59% of self-professed conservative Republicans rejected any theory of evolution, while 67% of liberal Democrats accepted some version of evolutionary theory.

To be sure, some of these deniers are simply scientifically ignorant, having been failed by the poor quality of science education in America. But others are biblical fundamentalists, who reject modern science because they take the word of the Bible as
literally true. They reject geological evidence of climate change because they reject the science of geology itself.

The issue here is not religion versus science. All of the great religions have traditions of fruitful interchange with – and, indeed, support for – scientific inquiry. The Golden Age of Islam a millennium ago was also the age in which Islamic science led the world. Pope John Paul II declared his support for the basic science of evolution, and Roman Catholic bishops are strongly in favor of limiting human-induced climate change, based on the scientific evidence.

Several leading scientists, including one of the world’s greatest biologists, E.O. Wilson, have reached out to religious communities to support the fight against human-induced climate change and the fight for biological conservation, and those religious communities have reached back in harmony with science.

The problem is an aggressive fundamentalism that denies modern science, and an aggressive anti-intellectualism that views experts and scientists as the enemy. It is those views that could end up getting us all killed. After all, that kind of extremism can even lead to war, based on perverted views that a particular war is God’s will rather than a failure of politics and cooperation.

In many statements, Palin seems intent on invoking God in her judgments about war, an ominous sign for the future if she is elected. She would certainly stoke many enemies who will look to their own brands of fundamentalism to strike back at the US. Extremists on both sides end up putting at risk the vast majority of humans who are neither extremists nor anti-science fundamentalists.

It is difficult to know for sure what is giving rise to fundamentalism in so many parts of the world.

What is happening in the US, for example, is not happening in Europe, but it is of course characteristic of some parts of the Middle East and Central Asia. Fundamentalism seems to emerge in times of far-reaching change, when traditional social arrangements come under threat. The surge of modern American fundamentalism in politics dates to the civil rights era of the 1960’s, and at least partly reflects a backlash among whites against the growing political and economic strength of non-white and immigrant minority groups in US society.

Humanity’s only hope is that the vicious circle of extremism can be replaced by a shared global understanding of the massive challenges of climate change, food supplies, sustainable energy, water scarcity, and poverty. Global scientific processes like the IPCC are critical, because they offer our best hope of forging a consensus based on the scientific evidence.

The US must return to the global consensus based on shared science rather than anti-intellectualism. That is the urgent challenge at the heart of American society today.

Jeffrey D. Sachs is Professor of Economics and Director of the Earth Institute at Columbia University.