A few more storms like Typhoon Haiyan may finally make our leaders act on climate change

Dondi Tawatao/Getty Images - A child walks along a devastated area in Tacloban City on Nov. 14, 2013. Typhoon Haiyan, which ripped through Philippines this past week, is one of the most powerful typhoons ever to hit land.

By Jeffrey D. Sachs, Published: November 15

Jeffrey D. Sachs, director of the Earth Institute at Columbia University, is the author of "The Price of Civilization: Reawakening American Virtue and Prosperity."

By some early measures, Typhoon Haiyan — which ripped through the Philippines and claimed thousands of lives — is the strongest storm on record to make landfall. But mega-storms like Haiyan and Hurricane Sandy are just one of the many warnings that we are flying toward climate disaster.

In the past couple of years, the United States has experienced the worst East Coast flooding in decades, as well as the most intense and largest drought in decades; 2012 was the warmest year on record in the lower 48 states. Massive forest fires have blazed throughout the drought-ridden West. Globally, the number of weather-related catastrophes has roughly
doubled since 1980, according to comprehensive data collected by the insurance company Munich Re. There is more bad news to come: rising sea levels, more-acidic oceans and more climate-related disasters.

Through all of this, Congress sits supine. And it’s no mystery why: The oil and gas industry has spent about $1.5 billion on registered lobbying in the past 15 years and hundreds of millions on federal campaign contributions. This industry largesse has helped bury climate-change information and policies, while the United States and the world suffer ever more disasters. Yet this paralysis could end soon — just a few more big storms, droughts and heat waves are likely to trump the oil industry’s big bucks.

The lobbyists’ main talking point — that controlling climate change would wreck the economy — is designed to foster confusion and inaction. After each catastrophe, we are told there is no proof that the particular disaster was caused by human-made climate change. And that’s true enough. Nature is variable. But it’s also true that the frequency and severity of weather-related disasters are on the rise. Just as smoking causes lung cancer but not every case of it, human-induced climate change leads to more weather-related disasters but does not cause every one.

Imagine if the pilot on your next flight were to use the same logic as the oil industry and its congressional stalwarts. Just before takeoff, he announces that several alarm signals show that the engines are dangerously overheated. But, he adds, we’ll take off anyway because the signals are often false alarms. By the end of the announcement, you and the other passengers would be rushing for the exits, if not storming the cockpit. So too will the American people eventually react, and probably much sooner than our leaders realize.

Americans are not as obtuse as the oil industry hopes, despite the misinformation the lobbyists shovel at us. In a climate survey last month, the Pew Research Center found that 67 percent of Americans believe that there is “solid evidence the earth is warming.” And of that strong majority, around two-thirds attributed the warming “mostly” to human activity rather than...
natural causes, in line with the scientific consensus. By a wide margin in another recent poll — 58 percent to 34 percent — Americans favored developing alternative energy sources such as wind, solar and hydrogen technology over expanding oil, coal and natural gas exploration and production.

Environmental catastrophes have a nasty way of overturning the political order. The Soviets learned this with the Chernobyl nuclear meltdown in 1986. George W. Bush learned it when he failed to respond effectively to Hurricane Katrina. Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak and Syria’s Bashar al-Assad learned it when severe droughts hit their countries in recent years, leading to soaring food prices that stoked unrest. Mitt Romney learned it when Hurricane Sandy pushed Chris Christie into the arms of President Obama. And China’s leaders are learning it today, as the public recoils from the severely polluted air and water.

I predict that America’s next political movement will not be a tea party but an environmental revolt. Another spate of catastrophes, perhaps a mix of extreme drought, storms and heat waves — all to be dreaded but, alas, to be expected — could provide the tipping point.

Americans already sense that the oil, coal and gas industries are threats, not saviors. Yes, we will need oil and gas for some time to come — coal should certainly be the first to go — but public opinion already backs low-carbon energy. With a strategy for developing these alternatives, America could produce and use energy far more cleanly, safely and efficiently, without threatening the planet. And so, too, could the rest of the world.

We will continue for a while longer, no doubt, in our lobbyist-induced paralysis. Many more communities around the world are likely to bury their dead in the wake of extraordinary floods, famines and storms. And then, finally, we will awaken to the new realities. Americans will support leaders with the vision and plans to create a safe and responsible energy system, who offer a credible road map for rolling out low-carbon energy technologies that are cost-effective and will improve our safety and quality of life.

Close to the 50th anniversary of President John F. Kennedy’s assassination, let’s remember that he called on America to go to the moon and undertake other space ventures “not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills.”

This time, those energies and skills will be directed right here on Earth.

outlook@washpost.com

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reussere wrote:
11/16/2013 11:58 PM EST

It continues to amaze me that people are more willing to believe the propaganda put out by industries that have billions of dollars at stake over the information and belief of scientists all over the planet. Not only are they much more prone to believe that paid enormous amounts to lie and conive over those who are paid a pittance in salaries, they become completely convinced that they are right.

In politics, it always pays to follow the money. Who has the most money at stake to convince you their opinion is the one to believe? The idea that somehow a bunch of researchers getting paid university salaries are all publishing false data is simply ludicrous. Really people. What would be their motivation? You think they want to change our society and turn out the lights? What financial or other benefit would they gain?

On the other hand anyone would have to be a blind idiot to fail to see that the oil and gas industry don't have hundreds of billions of dollars at stake in keeping the status quo as long as possible. By confusing the issue as much as possible, they stand to gain huge.

So all you climate change deniers I would ask... why are you swallowing the lies that the oil and gas industry is feeding you? Don't you have any powers of reasoning left? Do you like being led around by your nose ring?

Calvin Grubbs responds:
11/17/2013 12:04 AM EST

So all you climate change promoters I would ask... why are you swallowing the lies that the man made global warming industry is feeding you? Don't you have any powers of reasoning left? Do you like being led around by your nose ring?

SIR PLEASE LET ME ASK YOU THE SAME QUESTION. WHAT MAKES YOUR OPINION ANY BETTER THAN ANYBODY ELSE. YOU ARE ALL PART OF THE SAME SCAM.

dalyplanet responds:
11/17/2013 12:09 AM EST

It is not scientists stating that the weather is coming from the tailpipe of your car. In this case it is a very well connected global policy maker looking for control over the worlds energy supply.
A few more storms like Typhoon Haiyan may finally make our leaders act on climate change – The Washington Post