

## Skyfall! Y2K vs. Global Warming

Some recent studies are sounding the alarm about climate change. The authors of these studies are claiming that hundreds of American cities will be largely uninhabitable within as little as 20 years! They are forecasting chronic and catastrophic flooding in many coastal areas. Should we panic? I think not. Instead, we should do a little analytical thinking and remember the great scare of Y2K.

If you're over the age of about 35 you'll remember the big panic that took place in the late 1990s. At that time computer programmers became worried about the decades-long practice of not using the first two years of the date to save digital memory. So, 1998 was simply coded as 98.

With the year 2000 quickly approaching really smart computer people worried that all the machines we depend on wouldn't know what to do when 1999 became 2000. There were all sorts of predictions. The electric grid goes down. Planes falling out of the sky. Nuclear weapons launching themselves. And so many other breathless prophecies of chaos, death, and woe of Biblical proportions.

This was a big deal. Governments everywhere launched into action and so did the private sector. A bazillion lines of code were frantically rewritten in a race against the clock. The United States spent more than 100 billion dollars and the world spent somewhere between 500 and 600 billion. Of course, there were laggards. A lot of nations and companies didn't get the work done on time.

Then, on January 1, 2000 what happened? Nothing. Well, there were a tiny number of minor problems, but nothing of any consequence.

So what does all of this have to do with frantic proclamations about climate change? Actually, quite a bit. We're hearing the same kind of dire predictions that we heard with Y2K. The media is fanning the hysteria in the same way, only this time they are being even more extreme. People who were skeptical of Y2K and urged a calm analysis of the issue were ridiculed then and so-called "climate deniers" are mocked today.

With all that in mind, let's consider just one aspect of the Y2K-Climate Change comparison. With Y2K we were dealing with a single factor. It was abbreviated coding on dates. The issue was created by humans in human-manufactured machines. There was only a single variable and it was well understood. And yet, virtually all the experts were wrong.

Climate change, on the other hand, is an infinitely more complex issue. There are many large variables that are not well understood. They include short and long cycles in solar radiation; cold and warm water ocean patterns that last decades, volcanic activity, land use, and other human activities. And that's just a partial list of

the stuff we know about. There's also the virtual certainty that there's another big variable or two that we haven't even considered.

Let me frame this in a way that makes sense. If Y2K is the equivalent of basic math then climate change theory is advanced calculus.

By the way, did the world waste more than a half trillion dollars fixing what was mostly a non-problem? Not exactly. It's generally agreed upon that with the rapid advancement of computer software a lot of computer systems were in need of a serious upgrade. Consequently, that work got done sooner rather than later.

The same kind of thing could apply to infrastructure upgrades in our coastal cities. There are many cities on American coastlines that have had flooding problems dating back a century or more. It would seem to be a good idea to spend tax dollars fortifying those areas against the kind of storm surges that have been battering the coastlines since long before humans ever walked the earth. If even a modest amount of increased flooding happens because of climate change, then all the better.

Climate is the most complex thing humans have ever even tried to understand. That being the case, wouldn't it be nice if climate change scientists applied a little Y2K humility before making catastrophic predictions?

And how about the news media? Would it be too much to ask that they do their jobs a little better, questioning these hyperbolic studies instead of hyping them even more? And how about reporting with a little less certainty on the most complex issue ever known to man? Would that be asking too much? Well, that's no great mystery. You know the answer to that one.

CLEAR ENERGY  
ALLIANCE