

# Cato's Letter

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## Campaign 2008 and The Cult of the Presidency

**GENE HEALY**

**M**y new book is called *The Cult of the Presidency*, but lately I've been thinking that I should have called it *The Futility of Hope*.

I hope you're not here for a dose of sunny optimism about the state of the presidency and the future of our politics. Because if so, man, are you about to be disappointed.

Let's think about that phrase "the Audacity of Hope." What does it mean? I haven't read the book, but in listening to the speeches where Obama uses the phrase, it becomes clear that "the Audacity of Hope" is the belief in the promise of redemption through presidential politics. It's the idea that the president can save us. That when it comes to whatever it is that ails us—whether it's unemployment or hurricanes, divisiveness or spiritual malaise—the president has the cure. As Obama put it in a speech in South Carolina a couple of months back, with the right kind of leadership, we can "create a Kingdom right here on earth."



Gene Healy is a vice president at the Cato Institute and the author of *The Cult of the Presidency: America's Dangerous Devotion to Executive Power*, recently described by George Will as "brilliant... the year's most pertinent and sobering public affairs book." This is an excerpt from a speech given at Cato University on July 24.

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## Cato Scholar Profile: PATRICK J. MICHAELS

PATRICK J. MICHAELS is a senior fellow in environmental studies at the Cato Institute. He is also a research professor of environmental sciences at the University of Virginia and a past president of the American Association of State Climatologists. His writing has been published in *Nature*, *Science*, *Climate Research*, *Climatic Change*, *Geophysical Research Letters*, *Journal of Climate*, the *Washington Post*, the *Washington Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and *USA Today*. Michaels holds A.B. and S.M. degrees in biological sciences and plant ecology from the University of Chicago, and he received a Ph.D. in ecological climatology from the University of Wisconsin at Madison in 1979.

**According to *Nature* magazine, you are among the most popular academic lecturers on global warming in the nation. When you speak to audiences across America, what is the single most important point you try to get across about the state of our climate?**

The earth surface temperature has risen about 1°C in the last 100 years. About half of that rise occurred early in the 20th century, before the carbon dioxide concentration of the atmosphere had changed appreciably. A second warming began around 1975, reaching a peak in 1998 because a very strong El Niño event and a very active sun added to the warming trend associated with elevated carbon dioxide. There has been no warming since then, showing that the internal variability of the climate system is still of sufficient magnitude to temporarily stop the carbon dioxide-induced warming. One of the implications of this is that we have almost certainly overestimated the sensitivity of surface temperature to carbon dioxide. Another is that warming of the 21st century is likely to be modest—around 1.5-1.75°C. This is the figure one arrives at by adjusting computer model projections for observed warming—in other words moving them from the world of the theoretical to the real one.

**There has been much debate on the credibility of climate science. In your opinion, is the science credible?**

There are several lines of economic and social

thought that argue that large-scale issues that confront society tend to be exaggerated once they enter the political sphere. Global warming is not immune to this. Consequently, lurid and scary scenarios with little or no justification, such as the notion that Greenland will suddenly shed its ice and the sea-level will rise 20 feet by 2100, receive a lot of attention. More moderate points of view, such as the fact that tuning our climate projections with reality leads to a modest warming, are rarely heard. That's the most credible science on global warming.

**Both presidential candidates want to do more to address the threat of climate change. In your opinion, what is the best way to tackle climate change from a public policy standpoint?**

Do the politically incorrect and seemingly impossible thing: nothing right now. No carbon tax. No cap-and-trade hidden tax. No emissions cap. Why? First, the rate of warming is very modest, meaning that there is plenty of time to develop new or modified forms of energy production that will emit less carbon dioxide. If those are desired goods (and efficient products generally are), preserving the capital for investment in them (by individuals) rather than taking it away for government to invest (with taxes) is a more efficient way to get to a more efficient future.

## Mark your calendars!

In January, Pat Michaels's new book *Climate of Extremes: Global Warming Science They Don't Want You to Know* will be released by the Cato Institute.

