

Al Gore's An Inconvenient Truth: political posturing and the Democratic Party

By Joe Kay
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Al Gore's documentary on global warming, *An Inconvenient Truth*, is intended to serve one essential purpose: bolstering the environmental and supposedly liberal credentials of the Democratic Party and the former US vice president himself. Its aim, therefore, is not primarily to treat the very real environmental problems that it in part lays bare, but to create a new mechanism for ensuring that these problems cannot find a serious solution.

From a stylistic or artistic point of view, *An Inconvenient Truth* is very poor. The backbone of the film consists of a slideshow presented by Gore, the 2000 Democratic Party presidential nominee. The slideshow, staged as though Gore were giving a lecture before what would appear to be a very carefully selected audience, is interspersed with various strained attempts at humor, animated skits, flashbacks of Gore's life and experiences and more detailed descriptions of certain environmental issues.

This is certainly no *Fahrenheit 9/11*, Michael Moore's 2004 documentary, which, whatever its limitations, was able to tap in to deeply felt sentiments among broad masses of people. *An Inconvenient Truth*, directed by Davis Guggenheim—who, besides two documentaries on Los Angeles public schools, has previously directed episodes of television shows such as “24,” “NYPD Blue,” and “Alias”—neither inspires nor provokes.

The production and distribution of the film are clearly bound up with Al Gore's political ambitions—specifically, his feeling out the possibility of seeking the Democratic nomination for president in 2008. Over the past several years, Gore has positioned himself as a liberal critic of the Bush administration on a number of fronts. In January, he delivered a sharply worded attack on the administration's repudiation of democratic rights, warning that “America's Constitution is in grave danger.” (See “What Al Gore's speech reveals about the state of US politics”)

Behind Gore's words and actions, and those of like-minded individuals, lies a growing concern within sections of the Democratic Party establishment, its periphery, or both, that figures such as Hillary Clinton have been too discredited by their association with the policies of the Bush administration, particularly the war in Iraq. There is a fear that a growing mass radicalization will simply sweep past a Clinton or a Kerry, creating genuine dangers for the existing political set-up. Under such conditions, a figure such as Gore might be called upon in an attempt to keep oppositional sentiment contained within the two-party system.

There is an element of mythmaking involved in any attempt to provide leaders of the Democratic Party a liberal or compassionate face, a mythmaking in which *An Inconvenient Truth* fully participates. The film presents Gore as a great environmentalist, who has struggled

throughout his political life to combat skepticism about global warming and other environmental dangers.

The web site for Guggenheim's documentary declares it to be “a passionate and inspirational look at one man's fervent crusade to halt global warming's deadly progress in its tracks by exposing the myths and misconceptions that surround it. That man is former Vice President Al Gore, who,” we are told, “in the wake of defeat in the 2000 election, re-set the course of his life to focus on a last-ditch, all-out effort to help save the planet from irrevocable change.”

According to the film, it was Gore who held the first Congressional hearings on global warming; Gore who wrote a book to highlight the danger of global warming; Gore who sought while vice president to raise the issue of global warming to national consciousness; and Gore who now is seeking, “one person, one family at a time,” to shift public consciousness and save the world.

More is involved here than individual self-aggrandizement (though there is a strong element of that). Gore is brought forward to reinforce or revive illusions that the Democratic Party can be an instrument of social reform.

Regarding Gore's own record, certain basic points need to be made. During the eight-year period in which he served as US vice president, no measures were put in place to deal seriously with the problem of global warming. Nowhere in the various alarming graphs Gore presents in his documentary—showing a steady rise in temperature, the melting of the polar ice caps and an increase in carbon dioxide emissions—is there any indication of an improvement between 1993 and 2001.

The major international environmental accord reached during the Clinton administration, the Kyoto protocol, was a weak and limited treaty that would only moderately reduce carbon dioxide emissions. The Clinton administration pushed for various measures that would have further weakened the protocol's impact on American business, including emissions trading and the extensive use of “sinks”—the ability to reduce emissions calculations through an accounting trick, by taking into account carbon dioxide absorbed by already-existing forests and vegetation.

For all Gore's attempts to present himself as a fierce advocate of the environment, it is remarkable that during the time when he would have had the greatest political influence, he had no impact.

A point should also be made about Gore's response to the 2000 elections, one of the most pivotal political events in recent American history. In *An Inconvenient Truth*, Gore, who won the popular vote in 2000 and would have won the presidency if there had been a full recount in the state of Florida, treats the hijacked election as an unfortunate event in his own personal life, rather than a fundamental

attack on the democratic rights of the American people. He jokes at the beginning of the documentary that he “used to be the next president of the United States of America.”

Later on, he declares that the election result was a “huge blow” to him as an individual, but that he concluded “you have to make the best of it.” This unserious and politically irresponsible attitude to the theft of an election—in which Bush was handed the presidency by a 5-4 vote on the US Supreme Court—is a continuation of the cowardly capitulation of Gore during the crisis in November-December 2000 itself. The Democratic Party nominee, far from waging a struggle to expose the anti-democratic character of the Supreme Court’s decision, did everything he could to prevent the American public from drawing broader political conclusions.

The essential contradiction in Gore’s presentation on the environment is the same one that afflicts the Democratic Party as a whole: the former vice president and his party attempt to present themselves as oppositional, as concerned about the issues affecting ordinary citizens, while at the same time defending a social system that is ultimately *responsible* for war, growing inequality, the attack on democratic rights and the devastation of the environment.

Gore and the Democrats reacted in such a deplorable fashion in 2000, in the final analysis, because they were far more alarmed by the possible mobilization of masses of people in defense of democratic rights, with all its implications, than they were by the ascension of the Bush crowd to power.

The same issues arise in regard to *An Inconvenient Truth*, even if one were to accept that Gore had the highest possible motives. No doubt a section of big business in America is genuinely alarmed about the economic and social consequences of global warming. For example, the documentary notes that if the ice on Greenland were to melt, global ocean levels would rise by about 20 feet, leaving large portions of major urban centers submerged. This, of course, would have a disastrous impact on the ability to conduct business as well.

However, dealing with the genuine threat of global warming would require a rational and internationally coordinated scientific plan, including the provision of enormous resources for public transportation systems and alternative forms of energy production. Such a plan would necessarily cut into the profits and power of private enterprises, and would also necessitate the transformation of energy companies into publicly controlled entities, so that energy policy could be controlled democratically.

A serious response to the environmental damage already sustained and the threat of truly catastrophic future damage requires a transformation of a *socialist* character. Global warming cannot be solved within the framework of a system distinguished by the existence of rival nation-states and the subordination of all decisions to the interests of private profit. But the defense of the capitalist system is the most fundamental concern of the Democratic Party.

In this context, it is noteworthy that Gore barely mentions the oil companies in his documentary. They receive only the briefest reference during a discussion of “global warming skeptics,” i.e., scientists funded by energy lobbyists to manufacture a “dispute” over the reality of global warming. Nowhere is there a discussion of the profit interests of the oil giants, or even a comment on the strong ties between these companies and the Bush administration. One encounters no mention of the secret Energy Task Force meetings chaired by Vice President Dick Cheney, held in 2001, in which energy companies worked out policy with administration officials and reportedly pored over maps of Iraqi oil fields.

Gore and the Democratic Party have no interest in drawing attention to the role of private profit in the devastation of the environment.

As part of his politically motivated evasion of the basic issues behind global warming, Gore insists that the problem is not fundamentally political or social, but personal and “moral.” It is not a question of revealing the social interests that have prevented any serious consideration of environmental questions, but of encouraging people to make better individual decisions. The blame lies not at the feet of energy companies and the private ownership of the means of production, but of ordinary American people.

“If an issue is not on the tops of their constituents thoughts,” Gore pontificates, “it is easy for [politicians] to ignore it.” Politicians, both Republicans and Democrats, in other words, have ignored global warming not because they are beholden to the interests of big business, but because the people who vote for them don’t care about the problem.

The film ends with a question: “Are you ready to change the way you live?” Viewers are directed to a web site, www.climatecrisis.net, which advises consumers to turn down their heating in the winter and air conditioning in the summer, and to use more efficient light bulbs to save energy. After a presentation that paints a dire picture of the future of life on earth if global warming is not halted, such a conclusion would be laughable if it were not so politically duplicitous and cynical.

The film’s form is determined by its essential purpose. The concerns that many people have over the fate of the environment are here deliberately channeled into the thoroughly impotent and, from the standpoint of the American ruling elite, safe harbor of “consumer choice.” According to the logic of the film, such “choice,” combined with the efforts of visionary figures like Al Gore, will ultimately save the day.

The real “inconvenient truth” about Gore and global warming is that the political perspective he embodies is utterly incapable of dealing with the problem.

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