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Gulf between Science and Politics

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It is time to look back on 2016 and ahead at 2017. Last year was again the warmest on record, well ahead of 2015, which itself set a new global temperature record. The sea-ice cover, which is shrinking as the planet warms, is near record lows at both poles for the first time. New research continues to point to accelerating climate change and increasing extreme weather. Last year, U.S. communities were faced with costs of \$53 billion from extreme weather and climate disasters.

Here in Vermont we have had more snow than last year, but so far the winter has been relatively warm. The downside has been more freezing rain and ice-storms. In our garden, a new crop of spinach is growing under glass, as the sun gets higher in the sky, and we will soon be making salads again.

A recent Yale Climate Communication national survey in November after the election shows that 70% of Americans think global warming is happening, 61% are worried about it, 65% see it as a threat to developing countries and 71% as a threat to future generations. Yet the new administration is pretending climate change is a hoax, because it is a threat to the fossil fuel industry and to libertarian economics.

So let us contrast these two worlds; the scientific world with its roots in reality, and the new political world, which is built on power fantasies that change daily, glued together by egoism - and the determination to continue the exploitation of fossil fuels and the Earth.

In Washington, making America 'great', 'draining the swamp', and destroying the US government and its global reputation, are all pathetically jostling for attention. Indeed the swamp has been filled with alligators, and the new administration is a chaotic mess, as it struggles to assert the absolute power of the president. When false information is being rebranded as 'alternative facts'; all that is really clear is that our government is on sinking sands.

In my local store after the election, someone said: "You must be shattered to see everything you have worked for destroyed". I grinned, because narcissistic tweets don't affect the climate; even though they are a tragic threat to American values, international cooperation and world peace.

I heard that the US military has developed contingency plans to deal with 'illegal' executive orders. I am glad to see that Vermont is also working to counter illegal or immoral federal policies. Our Governor has reiterated that Vermont will not enforce federal laws that discriminate against non-citizens working on our farms.

Two difficult issues need to be faced. The states must prevent the takeover of their National Guard by a ruthless federal government. In addition, when they are blackmailed with "obey or lose your federal funds", extraordinary measures may be needed to cut funds to the central tax system. Recall that the real Tea Party started in New England centuries ago. Ultimately though, if the government in Washington becomes truly dysfunctional, the New England states can unite and act alone.

In December I was in San Francisco with 23000 earth scientists from around the globe for the annual meeting of the American Geophysical Union. What a delight to be in a global community of men and women searching to understand the real world, and eager to network and share all they have learnt. The younger generation knows the challenges that lie ahead, but their deep shared integrity will carry them forward. Those from overseas paid rather little attention to US politics. The fact that the US is surrendering global leadership to China and Europe is a reality, but this does not affect all the scientific and engineering work that needs to be done to build a resilient world.

Clearly we cannot expect guidance or funding from Washington. It is time to expand our efforts to build energy efficient and resilient communities here in Vermont, so we can face the future together with moral clarity.