

Palin's Big Oil infatuation

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By ROBERT F. KENNEDY Jr.

I was water-skiing with my children in a light drizzle off Hyannis, Mass., last month when a sudden, fierce storm plunged us into a melee of towering waves, raking rain, painful hail and midday darkness broken by blinding flashes of lightning. As I hurried to get my children out of the water and back to the dock, I shouted over the roaring wind, "This is some kind of tornado."

The fog consolidated and a waterspout hundreds of feet high rose from the white ocean and darted across its surface, landing for a moment on a moored outboard to spin it like a top, moving toward a distant shore where it briefly became a sand funnel, and then diffusing into the atmosphere as it rained down bits of beach on the harbor. For 24 hours, a light show of violent storms illuminated the coastline, accompanied by booming thunder. My dog was so undone by the display that she kept us all awake with her terrified whining. That same day, two waterspouts appeared on Long Island Sound.

Those odd climatological phenomena led me to reflect on the rapidly changing weather patterns that are altering the way we live. Lightning storms and strikes have tripled just since the beginning of the decade on Cape Cod. In the 1960s, we rarely saw lightning or heard thunder on the Massachusetts coast. I associate electrical storms with McLean, Va., where I spent the school year when I was growing up.

In Virginia, the weather also has changed dramatically. Recently arrived residents in the northern suburbs, accustomed to today's anemic winters, might find it astonishing to learn that there were once ski runs on Ballantrae Hill in McLean, with a rope tow and local ski club. Snow is so scarce today that most Virginia children probably don't own a sled. But neighbors came to our home at Hickory Hill nearly every winter weekend to ride saucers and Flexible Flyers.

In those days, I recall my uncle, President Kennedy, standing erect as he rode a toboggan in his top coat, never faltering until he slid into the boxwood at the bottom of the hill. Once, my father, Atty. Gen. Robert Kennedy, brought a delegation of visiting Eskimos home from the Justice Department for lunch at our house. They spent the afternoon building a great igloo in the deep snow in our backyard. My brothers and sisters played in the structure for several weeks before it began to melt. On weekend afternoons, we commonly joined hundreds of Georgetown residents for ice skating on Washington's C&O Canal, which these days rarely freezes enough to safely skate.

Meanwhile, Exxon Mobil and its carbon cronies continue to pour money into think tanks whose purpose is to deceive the American public into believing that global warming is a fantasy. In 1998, these companies plotted to deceive American citizens about climate science. Their goal, according to a meeting memo, was to orchestrate information so that "recognition of uncertainties become part of the conventional wisdom" and that "those promoting the Kyoto treaty ... appear to be out of touch with reality."

Since that meeting, Exxon has funneled \$23 million into the climate-denial industry, according to Greenpeace, which combs the company's annual report each year. Since 2006, Exxon has cut off some of the worst offenders, but 28 climate-denial groups will still get funding this year.

Corporate America's media toadies continue to amplify Exxon's deceptive message. The company can count on its hand puppets -- Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, John Stossel and Glenn Beck -- to shamelessly mouth skepticism about man-made climate change and give political cover to the oil industry's indentured servants on Capitol Hill. Oklahoma's Republican Sen. Jim Inhofe calls global warming "the greatest hoax ever perpetrated on the American public."

Now John McCain has chosen as his running mate Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin, a diligent student of Big Oil's crib sheets. She's something of a flat-earther who shares the current administration's contempt for science. Palin has expressed skepticism about evolution (which is like not believing in gravity), putting it on par with "creationism," which posits that the Earth was created 6,000 years ago.

She used to insist that human activities have nothing to do with climate change. "I'm not one ... who would attribute it to being man-made," she said in August. After she joined the GOP ticket, she magically reversed herself, to a point. "Man's activities certainly can be contributing to the issue of global warming," she told Charles Gibson two weeks ago.

Meanwhile, Alaska is melting before our eyes; entire villages erode as sea ice vanishes, glaciers are disappearing at a frightening clip, and "dancing forests" caused by disappearing permafrost astonish residents and tourists. Palin had to keep her head buried particularly deep in an oil well to ever have denied that humans are causing climate change. But, as Upton Sinclair pointed out, "It is difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends upon his not understanding it."

Palin's enthusiastic embrace of Big Oil's agenda (if not always Big Oil itself) has been the platform of her hasty rise in Alaskan politics. In that sense she is as much a product of the oil industry as the current president and his vice president. Palin, whose husband is a production operator for BP on Alaska's North Slope, has sued the federal government over its listing of the polar bear as an endangered species threatened by global warming, and she has fought to open the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and Alaska's coast to oil drilling.

When oil profits are at stake, her fantasy world appears to have no boundaries. About America's deadly oil dependence, she mused recently, "I beg to disagree with any candidate who would say we can't drill our way out of our problem."

I guess the only difference between Sarah Palin and Dick Cheney is ... lipstick.

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