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*Thought
of the week*

"Reason never failed men. Only force and repression have made the wrecks in the world."
- William Allen White

**Time for
the climate
change
discussion?**

WASHINGTON — All right, *now* can we talk about climate change? After a year when the lower 48 states suffered the warmest temperatures, and the second-craziest weather, since record-keeping began?

Apparently not. The climate change denials — especially those who manipulate the data in transparently bogus ways to claim that warming has halted or even reversed course — have been silent, as one might expect. Sensible people accept the fact of warming, but many doubt that our dysfunctional political system can respond in any meaningful way.

The thing is, though, that climate change has already put itself on the agenda — not the cause, but the effects. We're dealing with human-induced warming of the atmosphere. It's just that we're doing so in a manner that is reactive, expensive and ultimately ineffectual.

Congress is being asked to approve \$60 billion in emergency aid for the states that were ravaged by Hurricane Sandy. Strictly speaking, it is not possible to say this freakish storm was caused by climate change. But Sandy was the second hurricane to strike the northeastern United States in two years — which, to say the least, exceeds the normal frequency of such events.

And Sandy was part of a pattern. According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, 2012 was "the second most extreme year on record," with 11 weather-related disasters including Hurricanes Sandy and Isaac as well as swarms of killer tornadoes across the Great Plains and the Ohio Valley.

The year was also exceptionally dry; by July, about 61 percent of the country was experiencing conditions that qualify as "drought." On a cheery note, the situation was not as bad as the Dust Bowl droughts of the 1930s. Less happily, the lack of rainfall in 2012 exacerbated wildfire activity. "The Waldo Canyon fire near Colorado Springs, Colo., destroyed nearly 350 homes and was the most destructive fire on record for the state," NOAA reported.

Hurricanes striking where they don't usually strike, fires burning where they don't usually burn, drought everywhere — these anomalies begin to add up. Scientists have long been telling us that one impact of climate change will be increased volatility, and unpredictability, in weather events. This appears to be what we're getting.

We're also getting heat. Lots of it. The average temperature in the contiguous United States for 2012 was 55.3 degrees. That's 3.2 degrees above the average for the 20th century, according to NOAA, and an astonishing 1 degree higher than 1998, the previous warmest year.

A degree here and a degree there might not sound like much, but these are impressively scary numbers. To put it in context, breaking the record for hottest year by a full degree is like breaking the world's record for the long jump not by an inch or two, but by nearly two feet, as Bob Beamon did at the 1968 Olympics. To update the track-and-field metaphor, if all the years were sprinters, 2012 would be Usain Bolt.

In some parts of the world — Alaska, for example — it was a bit cooler than usual. But preliminary indications are that in terms of global temperatures, 2012 fits the overall pattern of a warming world. Of the 10 hottest years on record, all have come since 1998.

The consensus among climate scientists is that this is happening because the concentration of heat-trapping carbon dioxide in the atmosphere is nearly 40 percent greater than at the time of the Industrial Revolution, when humankind began burning fossil fuels on a grand scale.

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COLUMNIST



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Your Views

Generosity makes A Day with Santa successful

Dear editor,

On behalf of the Edenton-Chowan Recreation Department and its volunteers I would like to thank you for another successful "A Day with Santa."

Thank you for any part you played, be it large or small, from sponsoring a child, donating food, money, and time

for knitting hats.

This year's "A Day with Santa" provided toys for over 500 children in our community.

If you can only image the smiles and wonder on the faces of the children as they sat on Santa's knee in hopes that he would bring them just a little Christmas joy.

We had a great turnout on Dec. 21st. Not only did the children receive their toys but they also had an opportunity to enjoy an afternoon of games, crafts,

face painting, food and music.

None of this would have been possible if not for the love and generosity of many citizens, churches, business and organizations through Chowan County. We can not thank you enough and appreciate all that was done to make "A Day with Santa" 2012 a success.

Thank you again,

GWENDOLYN BROWN
Chairwoman (chief Elf) and staff

Reform nonpartisan judicial elections

RALEIGH — North Carolina policymakers will have a lot on their plate in 2013. The General Assembly will tackle education reform, a rewrite of the state tax code, the unemployment-insurance debt, and other pressing issues. Gov. Pat McCrory will propose initiatives of his own, likely to include regulatory reform and changes to the budget process.

Nevertheless, I hope they make time early in the 2013 legislative session to take care of a lingering legal problem: North Carolina's unwise and unconstitutional system for electing members of the state's appellate courts.

The current system is unwise because it deprives voters of relevant information and reduces voter participation in judicial elections. Some years ago, the Democrats then in control of the General Assembly got worried about the increasing numbers of Republicans being elected to the Supreme Court and Court of Appeals.

Dressing up their partisan worries in good-government clothing, they voted to strip party labels from the ballot for judicial elections. They also instituted a government-funding scheme designed to discourage judicial candidates from running real, statewide campaigns — that is, campaigns that were privately funded with enough dollars to communicate effectively to voters.

The trick was the essentially "voluntary" scheme by punishing those who didn't. Under the law, if you refused to participate and received significant donor support — or, even more problematically, your campaign benefited from privately funded independent expenditures — your opponent receive extra "rescue funds" from the state.

It was certainly not the case that, after these reforms, the races for the appellate courts became truly nonpartisan. Both Democrats and Republicans continued to recruit and endorse candidates for Supreme Court and Court of Appeals.

But because party labels were no longer on the ballot, and the government-financing scheme starved the campaigns, many voters had no idea who was in which party.

That was, of course, the idea behind these changes in the first place. Republicans had been winning judicial races, possibly because North Carolina voters thought GOP judges

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JOHN HOOD

would be tougher on crime than Democratic judges. Robbed of this information by legislative action, voters had to resort to guesswork, or to thrilling moments of representative government in which they choose judges on the basis of apparent gender or a vague inkling of name recognition.

Some chose not to choose at all. In this year's general election, some 4.5 million North Carolinians cast ballots for federal, state and local offices. Nearly all of them (99 percent) made a selection in the presidential race.

Almost as many voted for governor (98 percent). But participation in other statewide races was significantly lower. More than a million voters, or nearly a quarter of the electorate, declined to indicate a preference for Supreme Court or Court of Appeals.

In addition to being unwise, the rescue-fund element of North Carolina's election system also proved to be unconstitutional.

The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in 2011 that a similar program in Arizona constituted an assault on the First Amendment. Because of the decision, North Carolina's program was rendered unenforceable. But the law is still on the books.

I think state lawmakers should address these problems ASAP. They should repeal the government-funding system entirely and restore party labels to our statewide judicial races. The current system is the worst of all possible worlds — nonpartisan elections that aren't really free from partisanship.

By depriving voters of a valuable piece of information (party labels) and using so-called public financing to discourage judicial candidates from running real campaigns, the system pushes judicial politics into the world of super PACs and other independent-expenditure groups.

Failing that, lawmakers should do the next-best thing: Submit a constitutional amendment to voter referendum that emulates the federal model by having governors appoint the judges, subject to legislative confirmation and perhaps a subsequent retention election by voters.

Either option would be far superior to the current mix of play-acting, speech-punishing, and keeping voters in the dark.

Hood is president of the John Locke Foundation

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