

The 'Obfuscation Agenda'

The letter to ExxonMobil.

BY JOHN D. ROCKEFELLER IV AND OLYMPIA SNOWE

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Editor's note: This is the text of a letter Sens. Rockefeller (D., W.Va.) and Snowe (R., Maine) sent to ExxonMobil's CEO. A related editorial appears [here](#).

October 27, 2006

Mr. Rex W. Tillerson
Chairman and Chief Executive Officer
ExxonMobil Corporation
5959 Las Colinas Boulevard
Irving, TX 75039

Dear Mr. Tillerson:

Allow us to take this opportunity to congratulate you on your first year as Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of the ExxonMobil Corporation. You will become the public face of an undisputed leader in the world energy industry, and a company that plays a vital role in our national economy. As that public face, you will have the ability and responsibility to lead ExxonMobil toward its rightful place as a good corporate and global citizen.

We are writing to appeal to your sense of stewardship of that corporate citizenship as U.S. Senators concerned about the credibility of the United States in the international community, and as Americans concerned that one of our most prestigious corporations has done much in the past to adversely affect that credibility. We are convinced that ExxonMobil's longstanding support of a small cadre of global climate change skeptics, and those skeptics access to and influence on government policymakers, have made it increasingly difficult for the United States to demonstrate the moral clarity it needs across all facets of its diplomacy.

Obviously, other factors complicate our foreign policy. However, we are persuaded that the climate change denial strategy carried out by and for ExxonMobil has helped foster the perception that the United States is insensitive to a matter of great urgency for all of mankind, and has thus damaged the stature of our nation internationally. It is our hope that under your leadership, ExxonMobil would end its dangerous support of the "deniers." Likewise, we look to you to guide ExxonMobil to capitalize on its significant resources and prominent industry position to assist this country in taking its appropriate leadership role in promoting the technological innovation necessary to address climate change and in fashioning a truly global solution to what is undeniably a global problem.

While ExxonMobil's activity in this area is well-documented, we are somewhat encouraged by developments that have come to light during your brief tenure. We fervently hope that reports that ExxonMobil intends to end its funding of the climate change denial campaign of the Competitive Enterprise Institute (CEI) are true. Similarly, we have seen press reports that your British subsidiary has told the Royal Society, Great Britain's foremost scientific academy, that ExxonMobil will stop funding other organizations with similar purposes. However, a casual review of available literature, as performed by personnel for the Royal Society reveals that ExxonMobil is or has been the primary funding source for the "skepticism" of not only CEI, but for dozens of other overlapping and interlocking front groups sharing the same obfuscation agenda. For this reason, we share the goal of the Royal Society that ExxonMobil "come clean" about its past denial activities, and that the corporation take positive steps by a date certain toward a new and more responsible corporate citizenship.

ExxonMobil is not alone in jeopardizing the credibility and stature of the United States. Large corporations in related industries have joined ExxonMobil to provide significant and consistent financial support of this pseudo-scientific, non-peer reviewed echo chamber. The goal has not been to prevail in the scientific debate, but to obscure it. This climate change denial confederacy has exerted an influence out of all proportion to its size or relative scientific credibility. Through relentless pressure on the media to present the issue "objectively," and by challenging the consensus on climate change science by misstating both the nature of what "consensus" means and what this particular consensus is, ExxonMobil and its allies have confused the public and given cover to a few senior elected and appointed government officials whose positions and opinions enable them to damage U.S. credibility abroad.

Climate change denial has been so effective because the "denial community" has mischaracterized the necessarily guarded language of serious scientific dialogue as vagueness and uncertainty. Mainstream media outlets, attacked for being biased, help lend credence to skeptics' views, regardless of their scientific integrity, by giving them relatively equal standing with legitimate scientists. ExxonMobil is responsible for much of this bogus scientific "debate" and the demand for what the deniers cynically refer to as "sound science."

A study to be released in November by an American scientific group will expose ExxonMobil as the primary funder of no fewer than 29 climate change denial front groups in 2004 alone. Besides a shared goal, these groups often featured common staffs and board members. The study will estimate that ExxonMobil has spent more than \$19 million since the late 1990s on a strategy of "information laundering," or enabling a small number of professional skeptics working through scientific-sounding organizations to funnel their viewpoints through non-peer-reviewed websites such as Tech Central Station. The Internet has provided ExxonMobil the means to wreak its havoc on U.S. credibility, while avoiding the rigors of refereed journals. While deniers can easily post something calling into question the scientific consensus on climate change, not a single refereed article in more than a decade has sought to refute it.

Indeed, while the group of outliers funded by ExxonMobil has had some success in the court of public opinion, it has failed miserably in confusing, much less convincing, the legitimate scientific community. Rather, what has emerged and continues to withstand the carefully crafted denial strategy is an insurmountable scientific consensus on both the problem and causation of climate change. Instead of the narrow and inward-looking universe of the deniers, the legitimate scientific community has developed its views on climate change through rigorous peer-reviewed research and writing across all climate-related disciplines and in virtually every country on the globe.

Where most scientists dispassionate review of the facts has moved past acknowledgement to mitigation strategies, ExxonMobil's contribution the overall politicization of science has merely bolstered the views of U.S. government officials satisfied to do nothing. Rather than investing in the development of technologies that might see us through this crisis--and which may rival the computer as a wellspring of near-term economic growth around the world--ExxonMobil and its partners in denial have manufactured controversy, sown doubt, and impeded progress with strategies all-too reminiscent of those used by the tobacco industry for so many years. The net result of this unfortunate campaign has been a diminution of this nation's ability to act internationally, and not only in environmental matters.

In light of the adverse impacts still resulting from your corporations activities, we must request that ExxonMobil end any further financial assistance or other support to groups or individuals whose public advocacy has contributed to the small, but unfortunately effective, climate change denial myth. Further, we believe ExxonMobil should take additional steps to improve the public debate, and consequently the reputation of the United States. We would recommend that ExxonMobil publicly acknowledge both the reality of climate change and the role of humans in causing or exacerbating it. Second, ExxonMobil should repudiate its climate change denial campaign and make public its funding history. Finally, we believe that there would be a benefit to the United States if one of the world's largest carbon emitters headquartered here devoted at least some of the money it has invested in climate change denial pseudo-science to global remediation efforts. We believe this would be especially important in the developing world, where

the disastrous effects of global climate change are likely to have their most immediate and calamitous impacts.

Each of us is committed to seeing the United States officially reengage and demonstrate leadership on the issue of global climate change. We are ready to work with you and any other past corporate sponsor of the denial campaign on proactive strategies to promote energy efficiency, to expand the use of clean, alternative, and renewable fuels, to accelerate innovation to responsibly extend the useful life of our fossil fuel reserves, and to foster greater understanding of the necessity of action on a truly global scale before it is too late.

Sincerely,

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