

Hurricane Sandy: a Climate Change 9/11 for IR Scholars?

Written by Rodger A Payne

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RODGER A PAYNE, NOV 27 2012

Last Friday, climate activist and environmental writer Bill McKibben tweeted a link to this eye-opening graphic:

In many ways, this chart is merely another disturbing bit of information about weather in a year of shocking weather news in the United States.

The United States experienced a record drought this summer — and many areas are still facing tremendous water shortages. As a fairly direct consequence, the U.S. also suffered near-record wildfires this year, burning a total area “roughly the size of the states of Massachusetts and Connecticut combined.” The Weather Underground Director, Dr. Jeff Master, reports that the 2012 drought likely cost the economy at least \$77 billion and probably killed many more people than Hurricane Sandy, which resulted in more than 100 deaths. Recent comparable droughts in U.S. history were linked to thousands of heat-related deaths.

Perhaps the popular culture received the wrong message from the fact that the Mayans predicted the end of the

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world in 2012? After all, the latest evidence suggests that their civilization collapsed as a result of prolonged drought. (NASA helpfully refutes the doomsday prediction and says there will be a December 22, 2012, and so on).

Hurricane Sandy was, of course, an unprecedented disaster for New York and New Jersey. The storm, which was twice the size of Texas at its peak (and would have been the 20th largest country if it had been a land mass), set many meteorological records and resulted in record storm surges for New York City and surrounding regions. Analysts suggest it will cost \$60 billion to recover from the super-storm.

Despite these major domestic natural disasters, not all the weather-related news in 2012 was bad. Because of insurance claims and scarcity-driven increases in food prices, U.S. farmers actually had a banner economic year. Moreover, the “heat dome over much of the country” led to an enormous reduction in tornadoes — perhaps the fewest on record, adjusted for contemporary improvements in reporting.

Of course, many scientists this year were quite careful not to link either the 2012 drought or Hurricane Sandy directly to long-term climate change. Indeed, as Josh Busby already explained in two excellent recent blog posts at the Duck of Minerva, it is always difficult (though not impossible) to link a single severe-weather event like Hurricane Sandy to climate change. However, on this topic, Josh concurs with David Roberts of *Grist* that we all might be better off if analysts stopped offering “a confusing, nuanced portrait of probabilities and contingencies and uncertainties when what is needed, in Roberts’ view, is unequivocal language that motivates the masses to press for political change.”

To-date, there has been very little overt policy action to address climate change. Currently, I am updating a textbook chapter on climate change politics and American foreign policy (with a Louisville doctoral student in the UPA program). Despite the 2012 events, there is essentially no evidence suggesting that America’s policymakers are about to prioritize climate action either domestically or internationally. Indeed, it is hard to find evidence that they are even thinking about climate change in a very serious manner. For example, neither Barack Obama nor Mitt Romney said much about climate change through the prolonged 2012 presidential election campaign.

Many discussions of global environmental politics eventually get around to this question: should analysts or activists employ doom-and-gloom language to scare people into action? Some thinkers certainly take this approach. For example, Jeff Master recently offered this prediction based on his reading of a 2012 study by the National Research Council:

...[nation] states will fail, millions will suffer famine, mass migrations and war will break out, and national and international agencies will be too overwhelmed to cope. We were very lucky that the 2012 U.S. drought did not occur the year following the great 2010 Russian drought. That drought drove up food prices to the highest levels since 1992, and helped trigger social unrest that led to the “Arab Spring” revolts that overthrew multiple governments. Severe droughts in back-to-back years in major world grain-producing areas could cause unprecedented global famine and unrest, and climate change is steadily increasing the odds of this happening.

However, many other analysts reject doom-and-gloom language, fearing that it actually increases skepticism about the science. The latest public opinion polling demonstrates that a majority of Americans recognize the threat of climate change, meaning that they are potentially primed for a more subtle message, explaining how ongoing severe weather reflects the kind of climate disaster that scientists predict and demonstrating that the consequences are real for Americans, not merely for distant others.

Conceivably, IR scholars may well play an important role in the new discourse. The Duck of Minerva’s PM put it succinctly back in July in a post he called “Collective action and the end of the world.” After all, the general public may not heed appeals based on doomsday threats, but many academics have previously demonstrated a willingness to align their research agendas with worst-case thinking:

...if the threat of great-power conflict was the animating purpose for international relations theorists to get out of bed in the morning during the post-World War II era, I think it’s fairly clear that issues relating to political economy—and global climate change is, at root, a political-economy problem—should drive us in the post-Cold War era.

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Will Hurricane Sandy prove to be the 9/11 event inducing IR scholars to think much more seriously (and much more frequently) about climate change? We shall see.

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*Read more from **Rodger Payne** in his e-IR blog, *Climate Politics, IR and the Environment*.*

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