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September 6, 2010: George F. Will as a Know-Nothing

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Title: George F. Will as a Know-Nothing

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9/6/2010—It is bad politics as well as unattractive to label one's political opponents as know-nothings. It suggests that opposition is nothing more than ignorance, which is a pretty arrogant position. But what can you do when your opponents expressly elevate ignorance to primacy, as George F. Will did today in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette? Will's op-ed argues that environmentalists today lack political pull because they "have forgotten their origins as skeptics". The American people are skeptical today of all experts, especially those who forecast a recovery that has not come, and environmentalists think they know better than the people. As a general position, skepticism might have a lot to recommend it; but paralysis has nothing to recommend it. Imagine instead of global warming, scientists discovered that a comet was heading toward Earth and recommended an expensive effort to block it. Presumably, George F. Will would be out front arguing against such government spending because "the American people have looked in the sky and have not seen anything." It's either getting warmer or it is not. If it is getting warmer, people are either causing it or they are not. Maybe the vast majority of scientists studying this are wrong. But if they are right, the contrary opinions of even a majority of the people will not change the facts. It is especially dishonest of Will to point to public opposition to taking action to combat global warming as evidence that there is something wrong with the science. Combatting global warming will not be cheap (though much cheaper than doing nothing). Why shouldn't the people oppose expensive action when apparently respectable writers like Will loudly proclaim, without any evidence, that the underlying science is wrong? There is a good test of skepticism. Watch where corporate money is. Environmentalists were and are skeptics of claims by big business that their products are safe. But when corporate money supports "skepticism", as big tobacco did when science reported a link between smoking and cancer, it is time to be distrustful of skepticism. What position does big oil take on global warming today?