

Correcting Glenn Beck and viral inaccuracy on the web

The web is a wonderful thing, except when it isn't. I'd heard of misquotes and outright fabrications of statements that went viral, then dogged people forever afterward. I occasionally came across statements attributed to me that I never made, but I tried to ignore them. Then along came Glenn Beck's 2007 book, "An Inconvenient Book", which contains the following passage (which was repeated by Beck on his TV show on 19 November 2007, see <http://www.glennbeck.com/content/articles/article/198/2027/>):

"And Michael Oppenheimer, Environmental Defense Fund, said, 'The only hope for the world is to make sure there is not another United States. We can't let other countries have the same number of cars, the amount of industrialization, we have in the US. We have to stop these Third World countries right where they are.'"

I never said it. The only true part is the spelling of my name and my association with EDF, first as a staff scientist, now as a science advisor. Nevertheless, the attribution to me of what is a fabricated quotation has proliferated around the web, fodder for all manner of anti-environmental websites.

The statement seems to be a perversion of something I said in either my 1990 book, *Dead Heat* (coauthored with Robert H. Boyle), or to George Will on the ABC News program *This Week with David Brinkley* on May 31, 1992, around the time of the Rio "Earth Summit". Both comments refer to the challenge of reining in global warming in the face of projected growth in developing countries. Below are excerpts from the book and the transcript of the TV show, respectively:

The biggest challenge is posed by the continued economic and population expansion of such Third World countries as China and India. Even if the developed countries shift away from fossil fuels, Third World growth could continue to be based on coal and oil, in which case there would be little hope of restraining global warming short of calamity. Limiting economic growth is not an option, for this would only succeed in trapping the Third World in a cycle of poverty that would eventually disrupt the international order just as surely as an environmental disaster. The resolution of this conflict is to be found in the free transfer of new, solar technologies to the less developed world, as well as the intensified encouragement of programs that would lead to the ultimate stabilization of their populations. If this leapfrog over heavy industry can be achieved, the Third World could actually benefit from the greenhouse quandary: with sun to spare, many could export stored solar energy the way some now export oil.

.... M. Oppenheimer and Robert H. Boyle, *Dead Heat*, New Republic Books, 1990, p.5

It's in our interest - and we wouldn't be able to stop it anyway - for the poorer countries, which only are responsible for about 20 percent of the globe's pollution, to develop, but they should develop according to a different path, a different industrial prescription than we did. We, 20 percent of the world in the wealthy countries, are responsible for 80 percent of the pollution. If China, where there's one car for every 500 people, gets the same kind of cars and the same ratio of cars to people that the United States does, where there's one car for every two people, the world is essentially going to go through the roof environmentally. We can't let that happen.

....M. Oppenheimer on *This Week with David Brinkley*, 31 May 1992

With respect to the excerpt from *Dead Heat*, the term “Third World” is long out of date, and the idea of developed countries transferring technology to a country like China, which is already a world leader in solar photovoltaic and wind turbine production, is simplistic from today’s perspective. In the excerpt from *This Week*, I was off the mark only in failing to mention electricity production based on coal burning, which has driven China’s carbon dioxide emissions ahead of those of all other countries. In that context, the “20%” seems almost quaint. Nevertheless, the concern I raised about cars remains valid, and the need to find a solution to the greenhouse problem that is acceptable to all countries remains as well, as noted in the final sentence. The fundamental idea in both excerpts, that actions by developing countries are critical to solving the problem and that we are all in this together is even truer today than it was twenty years ago. And it is entirely opposite to the manufactured quotation propagated by Beck and his acolytes on the web.