

*The Paris agreement is another false 'turning point' on the climate – George F. Will 12/16/2015 (Washington Post)*

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History, on the “[right side](#)” of which Barack Obama endeavors to keep us, has a sense of whimsy. Proof of which is something happening this week: [Britain’s last deep-pit coal mine is closing](#), a small event pertinent to an enormous event, the Industrial Revolution, which was ignited by British coal.

The mine closure should not, however, occasion cartwheels by the climate’s saviors, fresh from their [Paris achievement](#). The mine is primarily a casualty of declining coal prices, a result of burgeoning world energy supplies. Thanks largely to the developing world, demand for coal is [expected to increase](#) for at least another quarter-century.

The mine is closing immediately after the planet’s latest “[turning point](#)” — the 21st U.N. climate change conference since 1995, each heralded as a “turning point.” The climate conference, like God in Genesis, looked upon its work and found it very good. It did so in spite of, or perhaps because of, this fact: Any agreement about anything involving nearly 200 nations will necessarily be primarily aspirational, exhorting voluntary compliance with inconsequential expectations — to “report” on this and “monitor” that. A [single word change](#) that brought the agreement to fruition: It replaced a command (nations “shall” do such and such ) with an entreaty (nations “should” do such and such ).

Secretary of State John F. Kerry knew that any agreement requiring U.S. expenditures and restrictions on wealth creation would founder on the reef of representative government. He remembers why Bill Clinton flinched from seeking Senate ratification of the 1997 Kyoto Protocol: The Senate [voted 95 to 0](#) for a resolution disapproving the protocol’s principles, with Massachusetts Sen. Kerry [among the 95](#).

Eighteen years later, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.), one of whose invaluable functions is to be a wet blanket about moveable feasts such as the Paris conference, [says](#): “Before [the president’s] international partners pop the champagne, they should remember that this is an unattainable deal based on a [U.S.] domestic energy plan that is likely illegal, that half the states have sued to halt, and that Congress has already voted to reject.”

The Paris agreement probably occasions slight excitement among the planet’s billion people [who lack electricity](#), and the hundreds of millions [in need of potable water](#). Historians, [write](#) Walter Russell Mead and Jamie Horgan of the American Interest, are likely to say that the Paris agreement ended climate change the way the [1928 Kellogg-Briand Pact](#) ended war. But as the ink dries on the Paris gesture of right-mindedness, let us praise the solar energy source most responsible for the surge of human betterment that began with the harnessing of fossil fuels around 1800.

The source is, of course, coal, a still abundant and indispensable form in which the sun’s energy has been captured from carbon-based life. Matt Ridley, a member of a British coal-producing family and author of “[The Rational Optimist](#),” notes that the path of mankind’s progress, material as well as moral, has been from reliance on renewable but insufficient energy sources to today’s [85 percent reliance](#) on energy from fossil fuels.

The progression has been from reliance on human (often slaves’) muscles, to animal energy (first oxen, then horses), to burning wood and peat as stores of sunlight, to energy from water and wind, to, at last, fossil fuels. Sustained economic growth, a necessary prerequisite for scientific and technological dynamism, became possible, Ridley writes, when humanity was able to rely on “non-renewable, non-green, non-clean power.” Because “there appeared from underground a near-magical substance,” Britain’s landscape was spared: “Coal gave Britain fuel equivalent to the output of 15 million extra acres of forest to burn, an area nearly the size of Scotland. By 1870, the burning of coal in Britain was generating as many calories as would have been expended by 850 million laborers. . . . The capacity of the country’s steam engines alone was equivalent to 6 million horses or 40 million men.”

And cheap coal produced the iron for new labor-saving machines. The environmental toll from burning coal (it emits carbon dioxide, radioactivity and mercury) has been slight relative to the environmental and other blessings from burning it.

In May 1945, Aneurin Bevan, a leading light among British socialists, [said](#): “This island is made mainly of coal and surrounded by fish. Only an organizing genius could produce a shortage of coal and fish at the same time.” Genius was not required. Socialism — command-and-control government of the sort that climate fine-tuners recommend for the entire planet — soon accomplished this marvel, with coal rationed and the price of fish soaring.