

Climate change and the flood this time

By **BILL MCKIBBEN**

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Last week, at a place called Bird's Point, just below the confluence of the Ohio and the Mississippi rivers, the Army Corps of Engineers was busy mining a huge levee with explosives. The work was made dangerous by outbreaks of lightning, but eventually the charges were in place and corps Maj. Gen. Michael

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Walsh gave the order: A 2-mile-wide hole was blasted in the earthen levee, and a wall of water greater than the flow over Niagara Falls inundated 130,000 acres of prime Missouri farmland.

The corps breached the levee to ease pressure on other floodwalls; if it hadn't, the town of Cairo, Ill., might well have been inundated. But it's not as if the problem has been solved. That water will re-enter the Mississippi a little farther downstream as it surges toward the sea. "We're just at the beginning of the beginning," Walsh said. Col. Vernie Reichling Jr. of the Memphis District of the corps said: "We'll have to fight this river all the way down to the Gulf of Mexico. I don't see it letting up." Of course, what the corps is really fighting is a river swelled not just by the power of nature but by the power of man. As climatologists have warned for years, warmer air holds more water vapor than cold. That means record snowfalls like the ones we saw this winter across the upper Midwest, and record rainfalls like the ones that have washed across much of the region this spring. And it also means more evaporation — and record drought — in places like parched Texas.

In Pakistan, Australia and now the center of the North American continent, we're getting a powerful taste of what global warming feels like in its early stages. (And if for some reason you've decided not to believe scientists, then ask the

people we pay to analyze risk in our society: In September, one of the largest reinsurance companies in the world, Munich Re, said that "the only plausible explanation for the rise in weather-related catastrophes is climate change.")

There are no grounds for optimism in this fight against the weather. So far we've only increased the temperature of the planet about a degree, and that's been enough to set the Arctic to melting, turn the ocean 30 percent more acidic and make the atmosphere about 4 percent wetter, loading the dice for floods. Climatologists predict that unless we kick oil, gas and coal habits very, very fast, the increase in temperature will be 4 or 5 degrees before the century is out. If one degree does the damage we're seeing at the moment, we'd be fools to find out what 4 degrees will look like. But foolishness is carrying the day at the moment. Consider the fecklessness Washington has shown on climate. Just last month, the House voted by a 56-vote margin to deny that climate change was real. It's like an entire chamber full of Neville Chamberlains, hopeful that they can wish trouble away.

There's no one we can shoot to make global warming disappear. But we could, if we wanted, devote the scale of resources we've spent in the last decade invading Iraq and Afghanistan to the task of retooling our energy infrastructure. That's the kind of commitment it would take, an effort we usually seem to muster only in the face of military threat. But the danger that comes from climate change is every bit as real, and in the long run far greater, than anything al-Qaida could throw at us. We're really fighting for our civilization, as people in the lower Mississippi will spend the next few weeks finding out.

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