



UCLA Institute of Environment and Sustainability

One day before thousands of Americans [took to the streets](#) to protest cuts to scientific research, Kim Stanley Robinson gave a barn burner of a defense of science in the “Optimist Room” of a UCLA conference center. The [author](#) of “The Ministry for the Future,” “The Mars Trilogy,” and other books with scientists and climate diplomats as heroes, is himself a calm, deliberate speaker — the very image of equanimity. But the Trump administration’s attacks on science have riled even him. He told the crowd in the Optimist Room that he’d tossed out his previous notes for the talk because other things needed to be addressed.

“When a group of people take a chainsaw to the National Institutes of Health for its medical research money this is wantonly destructive,” Robinson said. “And those very same people when they’re scared for their own lives... they will indeed run to a scientist (a doctor) and hope for help, and it won’t be there to the same extent it was before.”

The point that Robinson made, as a wind-up to his longer talk titled *Optimism, Optopia, and Climate Change Stories*, is that science is a special kind of ideology — but an ideology nonetheless — in that it is an imagined filter that we apply to help us understand our reality. “Reality comes pouring in with its blooming, buzzing

confusion and you need a sorting system — cognitive, perceptual, educational, and pedagogical — to sort that information into a meaningful system for yourself,” he said. But why is it any different from other ideologies? “Because it’s so crowdsourced, it’s so reiterative, it is so evidence-based, it is so much of a collective accomplishment.”

Science is a public good — a system of knowledge that benefits us all. At times, it has been a unifying ideology. Unfortunately, it’s now collided with a competing, anti-democratic ideology that puts self-interest above obvious public protections, like rivers not catching on fire and children being able to breathe. Some of those in power right now subscribe to this brand of anti-science, ultra libertarianism, that some have termed [venture capital extremism](#), but that doesn’t mean it’s appealing to most Americans who like the idea of being protected from fire, pollution, and death.

Robinson went on to describe the kind of mobilization that is required to fight back, and I’m going to just quote him here:

“You could quantify it and say that the damage done in the last 6 weeks to the National Institutes of Health means that all of us, on average, are going to have a shorter lifetime. You could then quantify that. There are 8 billion people on the planet. What if they’ve all lost a month? That’s 8 billion months that have been lost to death. So yes, people are going to die from the stupidities of the Trump administration’s attack on the federal government, I mean immediately from disease and from famine in the rest of the world. But all of us are taking a hit to the length of our lives and the quality of our lives. So, this is bad, what then do we do? And that is a hard question, what to do to change the direction of history in our time right now and to defend what I thought—and everybody thought—was an established public good. Well one thing you can’t do is preemptive capitulation. This comes out of animal behavior and particularly you see it in packs of dogs. It’s kind of a doggy behavior where there’s alpha males and in a fight a dog will turn up their belly, and bear their throat and say, ‘Look I lose, kill me if you want, but you don’t have to because now I’m yours.’ And some animal behaviorists will call this preemptive capitulation, and I don’t think we ought to do that.”

Robinson offers a better model from the animal kingdom: the humble penguin. Citing a visit to Antarctica, he said that Adélie penguins often find themselves under attack from *skuas*, which are cousins of seagulls but bigger and nastier. And when the skuas come flying over a rookery of penguins to dive bomb for eggs or vulnerable baby penguins, the one thing they have to their advantage is their numbers. Robinson again:

“All the penguins, they raise their heads to the sky, and they start squawking, they’re yelling ‘Get out of here, we don’t want you here, we don’t like you. Come down here and we’ll beat you with our stubby little wings. Come down here and we’ll peck you with our tiny little beaks that can’t do much damage. Do not mess with us, because there are so many of us that we will peck you to death.’ And the skuas come down and they skate away. When they see the group leaping up at them as something that looks almost like an ecstatic display although it’s not, it’s more ‘Don’t mess with us.’ That response is solidarity in action. So we need to be penguins here. Everybody needs to be saying ‘No.’ And the universities are the mechanism by which the federal government funds medical research, it’s not NIH itself that does most of it. It gives out research grants all across the country and the world that do the research necessary... What has to be responded to by all of us is ‘You cannot kill the future.’ Think about what they’re up to. There’s genocide, there’s ecocide, there’s futurecide. To kill the future means you see a trend in history that seems inevitable and going in a direction you don’t like because your privileges will be lost and then you get what I’ve termed the Götterdämmerung response, from Wagner, the Twilight of the Gods, I call it the ‘goddaming of the world.’ ‘But if I have to die then I’m going to kill the world and it has to die with me.’ It’s a malignant narcissism, it’s a response of complete self-absorption without any sense of other people or a sense of future generations... What future are they so scared of? Well, look at the demographics of the world, look at the 8 billion people, they are diverse, we are seeing more and more equity, there is less desperate poverty on this planet, partly because of the UN sustainable development goals and partly each nation doing what it can to help especially the rich nations helping the poor nations. So it will be, if we can trust Dr. King, that the long arc of history bends toward justice — that is one stiff bend that everyone has to pull on to make it bend. It doesn’t happen naturally, it

gets bent, so it's not the long arc of history that bends toward justice, it's that *humans bend the long arc of history toward justice*. You don't want to do things in passive tense ever but especially in this case. We have to do it. That also means more inclusive. If every human has adequacy, in terms of housing, food, clothing, water, education, electricity, healthcare, then there will be a more inclusive populace, people will be able to contribute to the cause. So precisely a world of diversity, equity and inclusion. So that's the future that they are trying to kill and you can't kill the future; it comes."



Robinson has devoted his life's work to exploring what actions and speculative assumptions in the present lead to what possible futures, Utopian and otherwise. But he's become one of our most important thinkers when it comes to trying to avoid the dystopian future we're rushing toward. I encourage you to [watch the entire talk](#) (below), which is part of a 3-part seminar series put on by UCLA's Institute of Environment and Sustainability.

It's a salve for this Stand Up for Science moment. Because Trump 2.0 is climate denialism on fentanyl. This administration is no longer content to just reject climate science; its officials are attempting to sabotage and replace long-established science by [putting together disinformation research that suggests a warming world actually benefits humanity](#), all in an effort to accomplish things it couldn't during

the first term. The cover-up to the murder-suicide.

I'll note one other thing that occurred to me during Robinson's talk. Not only is Trump 2.0 attacking science in the abstract sense, which is an unsurprising target given the antagonism shown to climate scientists in the last decade and the CDC ever since the pandemic. This time around it is also an attack on some of America's most-trusted professionals: nurses, doctors, VA healthcare workers. That won't go over so easily.

Nurses [routinely rank #1](#) among professions that Americans trust and value for their integrity and ethics, according to Gallup. In a [survey by Pew Research Center](#) in 2024, a vast majority — 76% of Americans — expressed a great deal or fair amount of confidence in scientists and researchers to act in the public's best interests. The profession with the lowest confidence rating? Members of Congress. It's not a close call.

Much has been made of the fact that scientists have not always been the best messengers when it comes to communicating the urgency of the climate crisis. Scientific communities have debated the wisdom of protesting like any other party to partisan politics. I think we are seeing now that they are quite good messengers when it comes to demonstrating that a handful of people atop the administration shouldn't be allowed to run the federal government, along with its most basic services, off a cliff for no good reason but to try to delay the future.