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By Molly Ivins

Groundhog Day

AUSTIN, Texas -- In a happy harmonic convergence, Groundhog Day falls only two days after the State of the Union Address this year. Some days, I'd feel better with Punxsutawney Phil in the Oval Office -- at least he doesn't lie about the weather. The Bush administration is now trying to stop NASA's top climate scientist from speaking out on the need for prompt action on global warming. As far as we know, the groundhog isn't suppressing anyone, he just calls it as he sees it.

James E. Hansen, longtime head of the Goddard Institute for Space Studies, gave a speech last month calling for immediate reduction in emissions of greenhouse gases because global warming is so pressing. He says since then NASA has reviewed his coming lectures, papers, postings and requests for interviews from journalists. "They feel their job is to be this censor of information going out to the public," said Hansen. The top P.R. guy denies it, saying, "It's about coordination."

Yep, it sure is about coordination. According to the Environmental Working Group's Website, there's a coordinated, multimillion-dollar campaign funded by polluters to convince us that global warming doesn't exist -- or if it exists, it's not serious, or if it's serious, it's not an immediate threat. And so we get into another one of those weird debates where something as clear as elementary addition suddenly becomes, "Well, some say ... but then, other's say."

For instance, some call it domestic spying, whereas others call it a terrorist surveillance program. Actually, it's a domestic spying program being conducted without warrants.

The problem is not just keeping track of everything the Bushies are up to, but trying to evaluate the damage. For example, the man who has headed the Justice Department investigation into the dealings of corrupt Republican lobbyist Jack Abramoff for the last two years has been removed from his job. The Bush team decided to put him on the federal bench, so the Abramoff investigation will be headed by someone less senior and less experienced.

Now, is this real damage? I don't think so. The investigation continues and would be damned hard to bury at this point. This gesture is just Bush flipping the bird to the Democrats and the public: "See? Ha! I can do whatever I want, no matter how it looks." Whereas, six years of

dragging, delaying and disinforming about global warming – now that causes irreversible damage.

Some damage is harder to see than others – and I offer two cases of suppression. First, there's a congressionally mandated report on outsourcing high-tech jobs. It was supposed to be released before the '04 election but wasn't, because it was politically embarrassing. More than a year later, they are still stonewalling, ignoring the federal law that ordered the study done and be released before November 2004.

Second case: According to the Project on Government Oversight, the Congressional Research Service has warned a senior analyst to avoid describing his research findings. The analyst, whose job it is to describe research findings of the nonpartisan service, specializes in separation-of-power issues, but was criticized over a report and comments he made concerning the plight of national security whistleblowers.

"It is undeniable that unprecedented numbers of government whistleblowers face retaliation with no adequate protections. We are stunned that the Congress is offended to hear the truth about its failure to help whistleblowers and are even punishing their own seasoned researchers for talking about it," said Danielle Brian, executive director of the project.

What we have here are two small examples of an entire climate of secrecy and fear being created by this administration. As government officials keep more and more information from us, they are in turn increasingly less accountable for what they do, since we have no idea they're doing it. Those are small things with grave consequences.

And then there are the consequences that can never be counted. The New York Times broke a sad story about a duplicitous Bush policy that helped drive the elected president of Haiti, Jean Bertrand Aristide, out of his country.

Haiti has since descended into abysmal chaos. Perhaps no one person or policy should be blamed for Haiti's long-developing problems, but it has sunk to a new low after its one noble grasp at real democracy, which Bush claims to support. How sad. The worst damage is always the small, starving children.

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