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July 26, 2011, The Heat

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Title: The Heat

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7/26/2011—The heat is now moderating. But before we forget, the heat wave the country experienced the last week was genuinely historic in scope—across almost the entire country. Now, I know that no natural event can be attributed to global warming. But the question is, what will a warmer world actually look like? It will look just like this last week. It will just happen more often. When I talk this way, I get lots of different responses. Some really good people tell me that “climate does change”. What I never hear, and should, is panic. Why is there no panic over these changes, which might include desertification of large swaths of the US? Some people just deny that it is happening. A person told me last week that there has been cooling since 1991. There hasn't, of course. Global warming does not mean a new record high every year. The best indicator of warming is the absence, almost without exception, of abnormally cooler years. That just does not happen anymore. With a normal climate, you get highs and lows. Not just highs of various intensities. Then we hear that the warming is cyclical and has happened before. This is supposed to mean two different things. One, we are not causing it. Two, we can get used to it. As to the first, of course there have been warming cycles before, maybe even really rapid ones—actually I'm not sure there ever have been natural cycles this rapid. But that would mean that all the predictions that warming would happen just coincidentally occurred right before a natural warming event. You'd have to believe in the Easter Bunny. Finally, some people think we can adapt. Well, it's true that humans can adapt to a warmer world. The world has been warmer before. I once heard a government official pontificate that this particular climate is not better just because it is the one humans have had. This sort of talk is what happens when theory overtakes reality. Let's say Las Vegas becomes uninhabitable. Won't the people just eventually move somewhere else? Yes. But it will still be a catastrophe. This climate that we have had is not the best abstractly, it just happens to be the one we are organized around. If humans have to adapt to a new one, we will. But the costs will be unimaginable.