

Republican Leadership for Environmental Progress: A Lost Legacy?

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I see that there are a number of instruments in front of me that will record everything that I say. So, promptly on my return to Florida, I'm going to check my liability insurance – because I'm going to tell you how I think Al Gore lost the 2000 presidential election. I'm also going to tell you why I went to Washington long ago to work on environmental matters with President Richard Nixon, what happened to me during my tenure in Washington, and a bit about why I think the present situation is the gravest probably since the onslaught of resource decimation in the late nineteenth century.

ENVIRONMENT AS THE DECISIVE ISSUE IN THE 2000 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN FLORIDA

Although the last election is far behind us, I should say that Deb Callahan and I are just beginning to speak again. She is, as you know, president of the League of Conservation Voters (see her chapter in this book). As a leader in the environmental community during the Gore campaign, Deb made, in my opinion, a great error. She gave Gore complete support early in his campaign without getting back a single promise. And I hope the environmental community never makes that kind of mistake again.

What were the promises that meant so much to me? There was one, concerning a major environmental issue in South Florida, where I live. And I think that issue turned the last election against Vice President Al Gore.

At issue was the conversion of Homestead Air Force Base in Southern Dade County from an active U.S. Air Force Base to *whatever*. And the *whatever* could be a vast variety of different projects – from an aquarium to a science center to headquarters for the Army to a major privately owned airport surrounded by intensive commercial development.

Homestead Air Force Base had been destroyed by Hurricane Andrew. The Air Force decided it didn't need it anymore – decided that Castro did not pose a significant military threat, and that any threat could be handled out of Tampa with long-range fighter aircraft.

What were the issues surrounding the redevelopment of the airfield area into a major airport and other developments? Its location was critical. The airfield sits on the banks of Biscayne National Park. So you have toxic waste from jet engines that spill fuel into the bay. And because the wind is predominantly southeast, all aircraft landing in Homestead must fly over the Everglades. How can you have a national park with 747s taking off and flying directly over your park? You can't.

Any effort by the environmental community to win an acceptable conversion of Homestead Air Force Base was going to be partly political, because “well connected” developers had plans. The Air Force wrote a long environmental impact statement that said there would be no problem transforming the Air Force base into a commercial airfield. Two syndicates of Cuban-Americans, extraordinarily wealthy, began to vie with each other for the opportunity of obtaining Homestead to turn it into a major transportation hub. Their plan looked profitable because at that time Miami International Airport was running into trouble with the volume of passengers and goods arriving from Central and South America – food, flowers, and so on.

Both syndicates had excellent connections with Florida's governor, Jeb Bush, and they were trying to get excellent connections with both presidential candidates, George W. Bush and Al Gore. Gore was enormously attracted to the strong showing among Cuban-Americans that President Clinton had made in 1996 when he defeated Bob Dole. No Democrat before had attracted such a large percentage of that vote, and I'm not sure one will again.

Candidate Gore was accepting major campaign contributions from one of the key syndicates. Candidate Bush was accepting major, major, major campaign contributions from the other syndicate. The environmental leadership including myself had met repeatedly with

Gore and his campaign staff. We told them and him that under no circumstances could he avoid the Homestead issue.

Following major criticism, the Clinton administration found the Air Force's environmental impact statement "insufficient." Clinton's staff recognized the political importance of the Homestead issue, then had it rewritten by a very good team, who would obviously find flaw in allowing continued use by airplanes over national parks. Attempting to help Gore, the President delayed the publication of the revised environmental impact statement. When the revised EIS was reviewed by the White House staff, it said, as predicted, that the transformation of Homestead into a major commercial field would be an environmental disaster. The President decided to delay any decision until after the election. We made a plea, saying that the polls were showing that the Homestead issue was the predominant environmental issue in Florida, especially in south Florida where the polls showed the race was narrowing. An early Bush lead was evaporating.

One of the strange things about the Hispanic population in south Florida is that, whereas the Cuban-Americans are almost always Republicans to the right of Genghis Khan, we now have a million non-Cuban Hispanics living in Florida who are voting Democratic. They're concerned about health, education, and strangely enough, the environment. They don't want to live in a crummy neighborhood. And they understand the impact of a jet plane flying over a national park.

For Vice President Gore to avoid this decision fascinated me. I decided to devote seven months of my life to try to persuade the Vice President that this planned conversion of Homestead Air Force Base was of such paramount importance to the election in Florida that he couldn't avoid it. And I made myself a pain in the ass to him and to his campaign staff. I met with the Vice President at the big office at the Office of Management and Budget three times. I met with his campaign staff five times and spoke to eight members of his campaign staff an average of once every ten days.

I then became paranoid that the Republicans might make a deal on the air force base, so I decided that I had to defend the field from the Republicans. That turned out to be rather easy. I was invited to speak about the conversion to one of the richest communities in Florida, the Ocean Reef Club in North Key Largo, which luckily was in direct alignment for the aircraft taking off from Homestead Air Force Base. Whereas jet fighter planes leaving Homestead climbed at 5,000-7,000

feet a minute, I informed club members, a lumbering 747 would be roaring along at less than 1,000 feet as it went over their 500 homes worth more than \$10 million each. And I assured them that their windows would rattle. Because major Republican Party campaign donors from across the country winter at Ocean Reef, we soon heard from the Bush campaign that Homestead Air Force Base would not be allowed to be converted into a commercial airfield.

Gore dodged and dodged. I received five promises that any day he was going to come out in opposition to the transfer of Homestead to private owners. Ralph Nader pounded him, demanding a firm statement. September came around, and the polls showed that Nader had surprisingly large strength in Florida, principally because the vice president was not “green enough.” People felt a vote for Nader was a protest vote. I urged more polling, and the polling showed that the Homestead Air Force Base issue was the predominant issue among environmental groups. There was still no change in Gore’s position. I signed off in mid-October when one of his delightful campaign aides called and said: We had a long go with him last night and told him that, even if we landed the 82nd Airborne in downtown Havana tomorrow, he would not capture the Cuban-American vote in Miami. The only way he would pick up the really tough green vote in South Dade would be to come out in favor of closing the airfield and having it transformed into some other compatible land use.

In late October, I received an “emergency” telephone call from Kathleen McGinty – a respected environmentalist who had served as Chair of the Council on Environmental Quality with distinction. The Gore campaign managers wanted her to address the leaders of the Florida environmental groups – WWF, National Wildlife Federation, Audubon, Sierra, NPCA, etc. in an effort to mobilize the green vote for Gore. The polls showed that Nader’s campaign had surprising strength, especially in south Florida. I was so sick at heart over Gore’s failure of conviction that I stated, firmly, “Count me out of last minute ‘emergency’ appeals.” I did urge many of the environmental leaders to meet with Katie in Miami. From all reports, her appeal fell on deaf ears. Katie seemed “surprised” that the Homestead issue was such an important environmental issue. She was unable to give the attendees assurance that an elected Gore would defend Biscayne Bay National Park and refuse to transfer the field to a private syndicate of campaign

donors. Katie called me after the meeting. I told her “Too late, there is no way to minimize the Nader vote at this late date. No one would trust Vice President Gore when he failed a rather easy decision. Secretary of Interior Bruce Babbitt and Carol Browner, Administrator of the EPA, both never wavered in urging the Gore campaign to make a firm statement favoring federal retention of the airfield.

So now you know why I feel so bitterly about the election. And you now know what I believe to be an untold story of how Al Gore lost the presidency. Seventeen thousand votes went to Nader in South Dade County, and more than 90,000 went to Nader statewide. Al Gore lost Florida by approximately 537 votes. The polls showed Homestead Air Force Base was the number one environmental issue.

PRESIDENT NIXON’S ENVIRONMENTAL LEGACY

Now that I’ve talked about the last election, I want to tell you a few things I learned long ago about how to work for the environment in Washington. Let me explain how I went to work for President Richard Nixon and why I accepted his invitation to become Assistant Secretary of Interior for Fish, Wildlife and National Parks.

I had finished five and a half years in state government in Florida, and was exhausted from working to establish the Florida Air and Water Pollution Control Administration, the predecessor of Department of Environmental Regulations. Hundreds and hundreds of complaints would come in saying that somebody’s plant was polluting the holy hell out of the neighborhood, and what was I going to do about it? I wanted to get back to national parks, to water, to critters.

My first meeting with President Nixon in April of 1971 was fascinating. He was in one of his dark moods. The meeting was scheduled for seven and a half minutes, and his first question to me was, “Are you coming to Washington to attend the cocktail party routine or to work?” I said, “Mr. President, I have three young children. I hate cock-

tail parties. If I'm confirmed, I have come to work." He said, "How refreshing." And he looked up and said, "Do you have any idea what your priorities are?" And I said, "Yes, Mr. President. I have a typed list that's in my pocket." He said, "Pull it out and read it to me."

I said, "I will have in your hands an executive order banning the use of poison 1080, the pesticide used to kill coyotes across the west that in turn kills everything that touches the dead coyote or any other animal that died of it." He looked up and said, "1080, oh God, the sheepherders will all be after me." I said, yes, the sheepherders will be after you. He said, "However, my wife speaks about 1080 all the time, so go ahead and get that executive order in my hands."

I said, "I'll have an executive order in your hands banning DDT. It's going to take a little longer." He said, "Oh God, my number one contributor is John Olin, and he makes DDT." I said, "Yes, John Olin does make DDT and he is your number one campaign financier, but you're going to ban DDT." He said, "All right, if you've got the science, I'll buy it."

I said, "You're going to remove millions of acres of the Alaska lands and make them into national parks and refuges." He said, "Oh God, Senator Stevens will kill me." He said "Reed, can't you find something that's going to bother the Democrats?" I said, "You're going to enforce the Endangered Species Act. You're going to support Clean Air and Water." John Ehrlichman, who had been a land-use lawyer in Seattle and was one of Nixon's senior staff members, was beaming. "You're going to support a resolution banning whaling. You're going to encourage the enlargement of the national parks system, and you're going to create a record number of national wildlife refuges. Nixon said, "For Christ's sake, stop."

I said, "There's one more thing. I'm going to enforce the Eagle Law, Mr. President. It hasn't been enforced and thousands of eagles are being killed every year. Some of them are being poisoned, but some of them are being shot and the penalty is only \$1,000 per bird. I'm going to be pressing for a much higher penalty. I'm going to start arresting people for killing eagles." He said, "Good show, goodbye." So that was the end of my meeting.

John Ehrlichman walked me out and said, "What are you going to do with your existing staff?" I said, "I'm going to say goodbye, thank you very much for serving the previous Assistant Secretary, and I wish you all godspeed."

He said, “What are you going to do to get staff?” I said, “I don’t know John, but I’ll tell you that if you call the National Republican Committee or if you send me a list of who you think I should hire, I’ll give you my word I won’t hire any of them. I’ll be damned if I’m coming up here and wasting my time without having a spectacular staff.” He said, “Well, you are a son of a bitch. Everyone says you’re a son of a bitch. Oh, go ahead.”

PLAYING POLITICS: HOW TO REALLY GET THINGS DONE IN WASHINGTON

Now I’m going to tell you an insider story. One of the great questions is: When you lose an argument in the Department of the Interior, how do you win the reversal of that decision? We developed a Machiavellian system. The Secretary of the Interior was Rogers C. B. Morton, a marvelous massive man, six foot eight inches tall, 230 pounds. He’d been a Congressman from the eastern shore of Maryland, a moderate Republican. He ate onions at luncheon, got pretty hot by late afternoon, and required violent exercise. There’s a game in Washington played in all of the buildings, including up on the Hill, called paddleball. You hit a rather fast moving rubber ball against a wall, and it’s two against two. You are in a complete sweat in eight minutes, and after an hour you are totally exhausted. I played against Morton every afternoon. The key was this little list that my staff passed to me – decisions that were very important or ones that we had lost that we felt were worth retrieving. The key was the shower. The secretary’s shower stall and my shower stall were adjacent. As the secretary was lathering up, I would say something like: “Rogers, have you really made a decision on that oil sale in the Alaskan Gulf? Did you know the gulf is the primary breeding area for halibut, and halibut is an \$80 million industry in Alaska?” He would say, “Nobody told me there was halibut,” so I would say, “I want to show you this data from the National Fisheries Service,” and so on and so forth. I won more arguments in the shower than any other place.

But seriously, if you're going to go into government, let me suggest the following few items that I think are essential.

- **If you're a staff member, learn to be a good staff member – work your butt off.**
 - **If you're in a leadership position, hire the best staff you can. Never be scared of bright assistants. A good manager always hires brighter people than he or she is and shares victories – and never blames them for failures.**
 - **The importance of delegation. Don't have too big a staff so they get restless over turf. I was allowed twelve positions. I only filled seven. I wanted everybody to go home exhausted.**
 - **Learn how to be a public speaker.**
 - **There is no substitute for honesty. You will never be forgiven if you're dishonest.**
 - **Know what you will not do. Know what would cause you to resign, and don't ever budge from it.**
 - **Remember that every day you are in a power position you can make a difference, and every day is golden.**
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Q & A

Q: Why did the environment become such a polarizing issue?

A: It began with a tremendous change in the Republican Party. Although the western Republicans during the period that I served were often outraged by environmental progress, they were not in a position to do much about it. I noticed a change in about 1973 or 1974 when some of the questioning during testimony became personalized and rough. In the 1980s the Party turned further to the right under the Reagan administration. Reagan took no pleasure in seeing a smooth

government run. He ran against government – he derided government. We began a real slowdown under Reagan, with a crisis at the Department of the Interior under James Watt, and the Republicans lost their bearing on the issue. The environment became a Democratic issue because Carter and then Clinton made it part of their priorities.

Today, we moderate Republicans are out in the cold. The years when senior members of the Republican Congressional delegations worked with their Democratic counterparts to pass the astonishing litany of legislation that is the bedrock of our environmental progress are long gone.

Q: Who were the drivers behind the international engagement of the Nixon administration? It probably is the U.S. administration that has engaged most widely internationally.

A: Thank you. A good question. Two reasons. First, he was totally fascinated by international relations. That was his primary interest in life. He really wasn't interested in the national economy and for sure he wasn't interested in environmental issues. If you read any of Nixon's books, you never find the environment mentioned. Between Henry Kissinger and George Schultz and the other high-ranking members of his administration, we had Vietnam, we had 250 divisions of Soviet troops on the borders of Germany, and we had other problems around the world. Nixon was totally devoted to trying to find solutions and trying to make an indelible record in world history on those subjects. I think it was a fixation and a fascination and it was fed, very carefully fed, certainly by Kissinger and by others.

China is just one example of many, many opportunities for breaking new ground. There was also an extraordinary interplay between the Russian Ambassador to the U.S., Anatoly Dobrynin, and then Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, James Schlesinger. They went birding together every Saturday. I had to arrange for their birding. Helicopters had to take them to weird places. Imagine what the Counterintelligence Chiefs of the CIA thought of the Director of Central Intelligence birding with this Russian ambassador. I had to close portions of the C & O Canal during the warbler flights north.

Masses of secret service officers. The two of them walked arm and arm with binoculars. I even had to close a road in Virginia. God, the then Governor was pissed off at me – the helicopter landed on a closed state road because they had never seen a Prothonotary Warbler. It was in the Great Dismal Swamp. This road had to be closed for two and a half hours so a young ranger from the Virginia Wildlife Service – he was an expert birder – could take them down a path to find them a Prothonotary Warbler. They were so excited – both of them were missing it on their life lists of birds. So I had to get the Governor to close off the road. I said there was an accident, close the road off for miles in both directions. The Governor said, “You will pay for this Reed, you will pay for this.” It cost me a case of bourbon. But I got it done. They saw a Prothonotary Warbler.

I actually built Dobrynin a viewing station in Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge just outside of Washington on Maryland’s eastern shore. It’s a great big viewing station where he would go on Saturday mornings or Sunday mornings and he would have a big spotting scope and he would write extraordinary notes. He wrote a note to Rogers Morton saying, “I just looked at 6,000 canvasbacks and 4,500 of them were males and only 500 were females. Can you explain that?” And Rogers wrote back, “I was lying on my dock Sunday morning and I saw a flock that was either your flock or my flock and I can’t figure out what the hell has happened to the females so I assigned Nathaniel the responsibility of finding out.” They weren’t breeding. You may know, we had a terrific drought in the late 1960s and 1970s and the females were dying on their nests from predators so you had a total imbalance.

Q: Do you see any hope for moderate Republicans?

A: As a nation, we’re split so closely right now, that in order to win, a successful Republican contender has to reach out to the middle of the Republican Party. I have been among major industrialists in Ohio, I’ve been in Pennsylvania, I’ve been a lot of different places, and there’s a very strong feeling about the current administration’s policies – not only on the environment, but also on the deficit. No country in many years has produced \$490 million worth of paper that somebody’s going to buy, and we’ll repeat that figure very closely next year. We simply cannot be in that kind of debt. It will become an enormous issue. I feel rather confident that, unless there’s a tremendous gaffe by

Kerry, or some totally unexpected event that the President could take charge of, like a September 11, that the moderate Republicans are going to go with Kerry.

At the moment, national security, the economy, and healthcare are the three major campaign issues and will remain so, I think, most of your lifetimes unless solved. Homeland security is not going to go away for a good many years, if ever. I don't know how we're going to solve the healthcare problem. I have an employee who is the wife of a cattleman rancher, who has breast cancer and she has a bill of \$38,000 with no insurance. I asked the hospital comptroller what happens to people who cannot pay. He said we put liens against their property. I said "Do you really put them out on the street?" "No, but we do everything legally we can before we write it off as uncollectible."

I don't know how many other modern countries with apparently strong economies can survive without some kind of catastrophic health care. It's not my specialty. These are the problems that are going to confront us, and most importantly, *you* as you move forward in life. These are enormously vexing, difficult problems. The age of easy solutions if there ever was one is long behind us. That's why what you're doing here, educating yourselves, is so absolutely vital.

I look at all of you and say we're leaving a lot on your plate and the only people who are going to solve the problems of America are those that are educated. We have 23 major cities right now – this is from the National Geographic – 23 major cities in the United States that now have minority plurality in the school systems, and most of those school systems are suffering from lack of good education, over-crowded class rooms, often under qualified non-motivated teachers, uninvolved parents and inexcusable poor management. I'm really worried about an uneducated mass of Americans. You are, whether you like it or not, you are the limited elite. You better study hard and program yourselves to take on leadership positions in the country. And I mean that.