

Reflections and Predictions: A Historical Perspective on the Rise and Fall of the Environment in American Politics

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Let me tell you a little bit about where I come from. I joined the *New York Times* in 1963, about six weeks before the Kennedy assassination. I spent a long time as a reporter at home and abroad and as an editor in New York. Then one day in the late 1980s, after having run the op-ed page for a few years, I was invited to join the editorial board as associate editor. It's been a wonderful ride, in part because it's enabled me to write about a bunch of stuff that I essentially knew nothing about when I arrived. One of those subjects is the environment, and I also write about energy, which is very closely related to environmental issues. When I arrived at the editorial page up on the 10th floor of the *Times* in 1989, we had let lapse, unfortunately, a robust tradition of commentary on environmental issues. It had been very strong under the late Johnny Oakes who ran the editorial page for about twenty years and was honored near his death by a special medal from the Natural Resources Defense Council and other environmental groups.

As Al Gore pointed out in his talk, the press has a way of dividing issues into categories: "A" issues, "B" issues, "C" issues. The "A" issues were always war and peace and the economy. Sometimes crime gets up there. Sometimes medical care gets up there. But the environment hardly ever does.

When I showed up I said: Let's see if we can recapture some of the energy on the environment issue that we once had. And then two things happened to jump start me. First, George Bush the elder came into office, following eight years of Reagan indifference, with a pledge to reform and update the Clean Air Act of 1970. That very quickly got

me acquainted with the complexities of environmental regulation. His proposals were on the whole excellent, and we supported them.

The second thing that happened was that Joe Hazelwood had a couple of extra drinks and piloted an oil tanker called the Exxon Valdez into the rocks of Prince William Sound – which quickly acquainted me with the degree to which people can screw up the environment. Those two things got me started and helped revive editorial interest in an issue we had long ignored.

Of course, by the time I joined the editorial board of the *Times* in 1989, the environmental movement was well launched. Nearly all our basic environmental statutes were in place. Though the current Presidential administration seems to have erased this fact from its memory, most of those statutes were enacted under a Republican, whom I covered for five years of my life, named Richard Nixon. It was under his auspices, with varying degrees of enthusiasm on his part, that we created the Environmental Protection Agency, passed the Clean Air Act, passed the Clean Water Act, and passed the Endangered Species Act.

Jimmy Carter added the Alaska Lands Act and Superfund, and together those two presidents created a body of environmental law with such widespread bipartisan support that it was able to survive eight years of indifference, if not actual hostility, from Ronald Reagan.

Following Reagan, George H. W. Bush started well and ended, in my view, less well. He appointed some good people, not the least Bill Reilly of the Environmental Protection Agency. The Clean Air Act Amendments, passed in 1990 with Reilly's help, was truly a significant piece of legislation because it introduced into the national conversation the whole idea of emissions trading, a market-based device for reducing air pollution. Emissions trading has done absolute wonders in terms of reducing sulfur dioxide pollution, which contributes to acid rain. And trading might indeed do wonders for reducing CO₂, the main global warming gas. Near the end of his administration, however, for reasons I have not fully understood, the President's advisors persuaded him that his environmental initiatives were (a) damaging to the economy and (b) hurting him with his base among the conservative Republicans. In the end, as I recall, George Bush had to be dragged kicking and screaming by Mr. Reilly to the first United Nations Summit on Environment and Development (the "Earth Summit") in Rio in 1992.

CLINTON’S ENVIRONMENTAL LEGACY

Then in 1992 Bill Clinton was elected, and from my point of view the fun really began. History will show that Bill Clinton did not arrive in office a dedicated environmentalist. On the contrary, much of his campaign was underwritten by Tyson Foods, which had contributed aggressively to the pollution of lakes and streams in Arkansas. In addition, Clinton’s main issues were healthcare, reforming the welfare system, and getting the economy moving again. As a result, for the first two years of his Administration, virtually nothing happened on the environmental front.

But then Clinton, the environmental community, and the environment itself received an unexpected gift. That was the election in 1994 of Newt Gingrich and his Contract-With-America Republicans. They came to town determined to torpedo nearly a quarter of a century of environmental laws and regulations. They made a fatal mistake. Not only did they damage the Republican Party and their own reelection prospects two years further down the line, but they also created in Bill Clinton an aggressive, born-again environmentalist.

Suddenly Clinton was to be found defending the Clean Water Act in, of all places, Rock Creek Park, which is the closest body of water to the White House. Suddenly he was to be found defending the Clean Air Act, defending the Endangered Species Act, and using his Presidential pen to veto anti-environmental legislation, including an effort to open up the Arctic Wildlife Refuge to oil drilling. Bill Clinton began behaving like a combination of Al Gore and Bruce Babbitt. I’ve often asked myself how much of this was a matter of principle and how much of it was politics, and as always in the case of Bill Clinton, I think a little bit of both.

But I will recall for you an episode involving Bruce Babbitt, Clinton’s Secretary of the Interior, who came to see me one day in 1995 when I was writing all those environmental editorials. Babbitt sat

down on my couch, and I said, “You know, we didn’t hear a peep out of Bill Clinton for a couple of years on these issues, and now we can’t shut him up. What actually happened?” Babbitt sat there with his long legs reaching out from the couch, a smile dancing around his lips, and he said: “You know I didn’t feel I had a friend in the White House until Dick Morris came along.”

Now some of you may recall Dick Morris as the controversial pollster in the Clinton White House who got in trouble during the Democratic Convention in Chicago for consorting with a person not named Mrs. Morris and engaging in all kinds of odd sexual practices that made page one in all the tabloids in the country. Well, Morris was also a brilliant pollster. He went out and asked the American people what they thought about Newt Gingrich and his rollback of environmental laws. And back came the resounding verdict that Gingrich was wrong. When Morris took those findings into the White House, Clinton brightened up as he always did when he saw a no-lose issue. He took to the hustings, and all of a sudden Bruce Babbitt — who hadn’t been able to get anywhere with his mining regulations and his grazing reforms — could get just about anything he asked for.

By the time Clinton was through, he had built one of the most impressive environmental records of any president. I’m not sure he’ll put this front and center in his autobiography, but it will be interesting to see where he ranks environment in his list of priorities. From where I sit, Clinton did as much to help the American environment as Nixon and Carter, maybe even Teddy Roosevelt. The EPA for example: Clinton not only didn’t resist, but encouraged Carol Browner, his chief of the Environmental Protection Agency, to hand down new health regulations for smog and for soot. He did not balk when she said she was going to ask the automobile companies and the oil companies to clean up their engines and their gasoline. He encouraged her when she put in some new rules to control pollution from power plants in the Midwest.

Meanwhile over at the Forest Service, with Jim Lyons moving the levers, new rules were written to protect the biological integrity of the national forests. There was the roadless rule, which — after I persuaded Jim to include the Tongass — gave new protections to the 60 million acres of what is now de facto wilderness, and there were new protections as well against oil and gas drilling in sensitive areas like the Rocky Mountain Front. Over at Interior, as I suggested earlier, Babbitt moved smartly ahead with his mining and grazing regulations

and pretty soon found himself presiding, at Clinton's urging, over the creation of nearly two dozen new national monuments.

There were other important initiatives. One of my particular hobbyhorses was the restoration of the Everglades. I wrote about twenty editorials about it until finally a fellow editor of mine said to me, "Do you have anything else you can write about?" Those editorials may have done some good by telling people in Florida that even the *New York Times* cares about the Everglades. But what was important is that the Clinton administration cared. There really wasn't a lot of political gain to be achieved by supporting the Everglades. The idea was trying to make amends for fifty years of abuse of one of the world's great ecosystems, and trying to replicate the natural water flow that kept the Everglades in wonderful shape until about 1947.

One episode in my career that pulls some of this together came when my wife Lisa and I went down to visit the Everglades. I'm kind of a fraud. I keep writing about places that I've never seen, including all these Everglades editorials, so I thought I better actually go there. Lisa and I went down in the fall of 1997 for the 50th anniversary of the founding of Everglades National Park and we stayed on Florida Bay. Our trip was timed so I could write something near the anniversary. Gore and Babbitt both flew in with their staffs and they all met at a football field near the Everglades. Gore went up to a podium and announced that he had secured from Congress a \$50 million appropriation to acquire something known as the Talisman tract, acreage belong to the sugar growers that was badly needed for water storage. Then Gore got back on the airplane and flew non-stop to Japan where he attended the Kyoto negotiations, which produced the first comprehensive global warming agreement. That one day — a day in which the administration celebrated the Everglades and moved on to do something about global warming — lingers in my memory as symbolic of the kind of energy that Bill Clinton finally gave to these subjects, once he saw that politically and as a matter of principle it was useful to defend the environment.

GEORGE W. BUSH'S ENVIRONMENTAL RECORD

Now we come to this Administration. I know you've had speakers here defending Bush, and I think you've had a number of people criticizing him. My thoughts are no secret because they're in the *New York Times*

all the time. Let's put it this way: I wish he had spent a little more time talking with his father about environmental issues before he made some of the appointments he did.

Frankly, the negativism of this Bush administration on the environment came as a surprise to me. I didn't see any of that in his campaign literature and I didn't see much of it in his campaign rhetoric. In fact, as you will recall, he made a commitment to reduce CO₂ emissions, the main global warming gas, a commitment he later rescinded. But the truth of the matter became apparent to me the moment I looked at his appointments. With the single shining exception of Christie Whitman at the Environmental Protection Agency, President Bush or whoever was doing his appointments for him at the White House filled every critical environmental post with either an industry lobbyist or with an ideological opponent of the very notion of federal stewardship of the public lands.

There's no sense in rehearsing all the things that have flowed from that. All you have to do is call up my editorials for the last three years. But I have lamented the roll backs of the Clean Air Act (which I don't think have been justified by the reasons set forward by the White House), the attempted roll back of the Clean Water Act, and the fact that other basic statutes are not being, in my view, as rigorously enforced as they could.

The Environmental Protection Agency has an interesting new man there, Mike Leavitt, and as far as I'm concerned the jury is still out. He's a smart guy, I think he's his own guy, and he might end up doing some very good stuff. But the one who disappoints me the most is Gale Norton at the Department of the Interior. Basically what she has done is not only open up all kinds of sensitive areas in Alaska for oil and gas drilling, which in my view will make no appreciable dent in our natural energy needs, but she has unilaterally renounced her statutory authority to create new wilderness. Now what we have here

— it’s no fun for me to sit around and beat up on anybody — but what I think we have here is an enormous swing of the ideological pendulum. Clinton sent it one way, and President Bush’s people are moving it back. If they stop here, that will be one thing; but I think, with the people he’s got in charge of the major agencies, they’re going further. And I think they have gone further than they had any need to go.

THE 2004 ELECTION

So the question of the day is this: Will any of this environmental back swing make a bit of difference in this campaign? Or will it be seen as a natural reaction to the Clinton years of very aggressive enforcement of our existing laws, and raising new issues? It’s entirely possible that the American people were worn out on environmental issues by Bill Clinton, but my suspicion is it will be an issue, if only a modest one.

My suspicion is that even among Republican voters there is a hunger for more protection, a hunger for more assertiveness in all levels of government to make sure we can continue to enjoy a reasonable quality of life in this country.

The political pollsters seem to think I am wrong. When I look back, one of the reasons I think George Bush the elder pedaled backward on issues after that vigorous beginning is that somebody got to him and said “You’re hurting yourself.” I suggested that earlier. Karl Rove has essentially said the same thing to this president: “Mr. Bush, these issues don’t fly. If you push environmental issues aggressively, you’re going to kill yourself with your base.” Apart from that kind of advice, I cannot explain this Administration’s insane effort to reintroduce snowmobiles to Yellowstone National Park. On the great scale of issues facing us, especially during a war in Iraq, I would say snowmobiling in Yellowstone ranks just about at the bottom. But I wrote seven editorials on the subject, so fixated am I on what I sense to be Karl Rove’s fixation on reintroducing snowmobiles to a place where they have no business being. The people in the Park Service don’t want them there, and most of the visitors don’t want them there. The

snowmobile industry isn't economically significant, and the dealers who would be hurt because they can no longer rent snowmobiles in the town of West Yellowstone can easily be compensated in cash.

Somehow Karl Rove has got it into his noggin that reintroducing snowmobiles in Yellowstone and overturning a Clinton rule is absolutely essential to preserving the integrity of the conservative base in America. To me it's idiotic. And it was this kind of thinking that I believe eventually influenced Bush I, and it has definitely influenced Bush II. Personally, I don't know this Bush well enough. I have a sense of who his father was — not a very intimate sense, but a guess. This guy — I just don't know how he feels about these issues. I think he's vulnerable to the last person who comes in and says we can't do this because it's going to kill us politically.

Again, the question of the day is: Will the environment make a difference in the election? I would say it depends on how you list things. If you ask the American people where the environment ranks in the terms of war and peace and in terms of the preservation of Social Security, jobs, Medicare, and so on, it's always going to be down there at the bottom. If you refine the question and ask it in a more specific way by asking "Do you believe that we should spend major federal dollars on clean air, on clean water, on endangered species, and on protecting the health of our forests?" — then the poll results would shoot straight up. So it's going to depend in this election on how John Kerry frames that question, and how detailed he's prepared to get, and in what states and what parts of the country he is willing to ask it.

The right question at the right time, in the right place, could make a difference. After all, Florida was decided by five hundred or so votes four years ago. New Mexico was close. Some of the northwestern states were close. So it could be a huge issue in states that could make a difference in terms of the electoral college. Frankly I hope the

environment does become a central issue in this campaign, because there are so many challenges that we've got to confront in the future that it seems idiotic not to make it part of the national conversation in a year when everybody is paying attention.

When Al Gore ran for president, like Kerry today, he had a lot of environmental information on his website. And like Kerry he mentioned it in individual speeches.

But just as individual speeches are different from websites, so a debate between two candidates is different from political speeches. There are orders of magnitudes of importance in the way that we campaign in this country. I think that if Kerry is willing to make the environment part of his continuing debate, one-on-one with George Bush, he might be able to make some headway.

TOP ENVIRONMENTAL PRIORITIES

If we let the national conversation go flat on the environment issue, we are not going to solve a whole range of problems that this country is going to have to confront sooner or later. Everybody has their favorite issue. Let me mention just two that I think are of paramount importance.

First, we have somehow got to solve what is called the fossil fuel equation. Oil is not in infinite supply. Natural gas, as we are now discovering when we look at prices, is not in infinite supply. What we have is a hell of a lot of coal, but coal is an extremely dangerous thing to burn so long as it puts out as much CO₂ as it does. If you care about global warming, then we've got to do something about coal. Not only is global warming a problem, but so is oil dependency. For both of those reasons we've got to figure out some way of backing out of all that oil that we're using, and probably a lot of the natural gas. That means finding serious substitutes for the fuels we now use.

The Bush administration has rightly moved to put aside substantial amounts of research money for hydrogen, but widespread use of hydrogen as fuel is way, way, way in the distance. I think if you're

talking about oil dependency and global warming you've got to be much more alert than that. So what we're talking about is a major effort to develop fuel alternatives, and I don't mean just Tom Daschle's corn farmers. I mean fuels from the forest, fuels from the land like grass — ways that we can replace one third of our existing gasoline supply. I'm looking for a major effort, even if it involves massive subsidies to the automobile companies in Detroit that are developing fuel efficient cars short of hybrid cars. I come from Detroit, and I don't want to see unemployment lines in Detroit or those companies lose their profits. We have got to move to a more fuel-efficient fleet in fairly short order, and if that means helping Detroit over the hump with subsidies, then that is fine with me.

The other big thing we've got to do, since we're faced with using coal, is to figure a way to clean up the coal. We've got hundreds of years' worth of coal sitting under the ground, and the Chinese do too, and they're going to use that coal. Cleaning coal could mean figuring out clean coal technology at the plant level. Or it could mean expensive ways of re-injecting the carbon into the ground. I don't know, but I do know that we need a major effort to figure out how to clean up the coal.

The fossil fuel equation is one big thing. The other one is quite different. It has to do more with the quality of life. And that is open space preservation.

I had breakfast at the Yale Club yesterday morning with a lawyer from Atlanta who told me that when he and his wife moved to Atlanta at the beginning of his law career, thirty years ago, the metropolitan area of the city was twenty miles across. It is now 150 miles across. That's a stunning statistic. They're running out of water in Atlanta, many people sit in traffic for two hours in Atlanta, and the air stinks in Atlanta. All the reasons that people went there in the first place have evaporated because so many people went there and the city never planned for such drastic population growth.

Now it's not just in our urban and suburban areas that overcrowding is taking place. It's taking place out west as well. We are in danger of cluttering up our wild spaces. The conversion of agricultural land to residential and commercial land is proceeding at a spectacular rate. I was reading in the *High Country News* the other day that 20 million acres in the western states had been converted from wild lands to residential areas by 1970. The figure is now up to 42 million. In other

words, the loss of landscape to commercial and residential development in the thirteen or so western states has more than doubled in the space of one generation. I don't know what you do about that, but I do know that saving open space is going to take some major dough. There aren't many Ted Turners with 500,000 acre ranches in this world. What we are going to need is a beefing up of the Land and Water Conservation Fund and of the agriculture programs, a lot of private money, a major effort with a number of land trusts around the country and so on and so forth. But it's got to be, I think, a national effort of some kind to hang on to some of the open space we have.

This is widely regarded as an elitist issue: closing the door after you get there so nobody else can get in. But it's not an elitist issue. All you have to do is ask those people in Atlanta about the kind of life they're living now in order to know that this is an issue that affects more and more of us every day. When I was researching this talk I looked at some of the numbers that the Trust for Public Land puts out, and in 2002 voters approved 92 of 107 conservation finance ventures, generating \$6.9 billion in local money, for open space conservation. I wish that Washington could do as well.

Let me just say in closing that I am honored to have been invited up here today. If these challenges are going to be met and these problems are going to be solved, I don't think it's going to be by editorial writing. It's going to be by people like yourselves, and I wish you the best of luck.

Q & A

Q: Can curbing consumption become a national issue in this campaign?

A: We had the Chairman of General Motors in the other day at the *New York Times*, and when we put the question to him about tightening up the fuel economy standards, he said that tougher standards would not change the buying habits of the American consumer. I'm not so sure that's true. If Detroit put the same energy into advertising medium-sized hybrid cars that they put into adding more bells and whistles onto SUVs, maybe they'd sell some more of the smaller cars. But you're absolutely right. Americans are not on a daily basis conscious of the hidden costs of their environmental decisions. I'm not. And if I'm not, then I don't know who is.

Take these Hollywood movie stars, for example. I was invited to go to the NRDC concert they had for the Rolling Stones and my wife was mad as hell when I told her it would be a conflict of interest so I couldn't go. Leonardo DiCaprio and a bunch of people showed up in their little green cars – but they all have Hummers in the garage. So there is a certain amount of hypocrisy at work. What Bill Ford and the Chairman of General Motors says is that the only way you are going to reach people is to tax big time. But it is interesting because fuel prices have hit records in absolute terms (not in inflation adjusted terms) in California and nobody is driving less. So it seems to me that unless you really hit someone in the pocketbook like a \$3 or \$4 gas tax where gasoline is five bucks a gallon instead of \$2, which is really nothing in terms of Europe and not that much historically compared to the 1970s oil embargo, you're not going to get them.

Q: To follow your comment that Gore didn't make the environment a big issue: In Gore's defense, when he came to speak to us he said that environment didn't become a big issue because, whenever he did mention it, George W. Bush said he agreed with him. I was wondering how someone working for the *New York Times* deals with issues that might be important but aren't creating conflict.

A: Well there are a couple of answers to that. The current incumbent in the White House is a master at defusing questions. Muhammad Ali the boxer had a technique called rope-a-dope, where he just leaned back against the ropes and let the other guy pound him until the guy wore out. Then Ali would knock the guy out. In a way that's how Bush played the debates in 2000, letting Gore get worn out and wrapped up in tortured detail about a specific issue. Furthermore, environmental issues are comfy. If one guy says I'm for open space, and the other guy says I'm for open space too, that's the end of it. So readers got the impression that Bush cares about it as much as Gore does. But I think right now the issues are drawn much more sharply than they were four years ago, and it might be possible for Kerry to draw a sharper contrast with Bush than Gore was able to draw.

I have to say this about Kerry. He's Al Gore without the sizzle. The Democrats have a way of putting up extremely thoughtful and extremely boring candidates. But I'm told that when Gore came here he made a wonderful speech. He was funny and self-assured, and

everybody in the room here said: “Where was this guy four years ago?” I would ask the same question.

But I think now, because Mr. Bush has allowed himself to be pushed, in my view, further to the right on environmental issues than I think his own instincts would have taken him, it is possible for Kerry to occupy the center on these issues.

Q: What do you think about Ralph Nader running again in 2004?

A: I wrote my share of anti-Nader editorials. I think he cost Gore the election, but on the other hand if you listen to Podesta, as I’m sure you did a few weeks ago, Podesta would have argued that if Gore had been true to himself, or his aides had wanted to be true to himself, he would have fended off Ralph Nader. So I don’t know where the truth is there.

My problem with Nader is that these problems are more complicated. You know what my problems are with Mr. Bush – I just think he is ideologically further away than he ought to be from facing the complexities of the issues. But Ralph Nader doesn’t face the complexities either.