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SEPTEMBER 2000

POLITICS

Green Surprise?



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How Bush or Gore, as President, might pull a "Nixon goes to China" on environmental issues

by Gregg Easterbrook

IF there is any issue on which this year's presidential contenders seem stereotyped, it is the environment. George W. Bush is seen as a pro-business oilman who would let polluters run amok, Al Gore as a fanatical tree-hugger who would terrorize industry with onerous ecological restrictions. Political stereotypes usually arise from rhetoric, and in both candidates' speeches can be found comments that support these standard perceptions. But their records are a different matter. What the nominees have

actually done demonstrates that Bush is hardly a foe of conservation and Gore is hardly an environmental extremist. Both are more centrist on environmental issues than is commonly assumed. And either, if elected, may have a considerable surprise in store for us -- a pleasant, green surprise.

Discuss this article in the [Election 2000](#) conference of Post & Riposte.

More on [politics and society](#) in *The Atlantic Monthly* and *Atlantic Unbound*.

More on the [environment](#) in *The Atlantic Monthly*.

From the archives:

["The NEXT Industrial Revolution,"](#) by **William McDonough and Michael Braungart (October 1998)** "Eco-efficiency" is the current buzzword in industry -- but all it really

Each man's image gives him the chance to play against type with a "Nixon goes to China" initiative in which he would propose as President exactly the sorts of reforms he is now thought unlikely to pursue. Because Bush is expected to favor the fossil-fuels industry, he might be the ideal President to press for global-warming reform. And because Gore is expected to favor more rules and more bureaucracy, he might be the ideal President to seek the rationalization of environmental law that is advocated by nearly all economists and by a surprising number of environmentalists -- letting market forces and voluntary choice do the work, instead

WEB ONLY

Coming in September:

Gregg Easterbrook will be joined by environmental experts Eileen Claussen, President of the Pew Center on Global Climate Change; Mary Gade, former director of the Illinois EPA and current adviser to George W. Bush; and Bill McKibben, author of *The End of Nature* and *Hope, Human and Wild*; for an *Atlantic Unbound* Roundtable on environmental issues in the 2000 election and beyond, hosted by *Atlantic* senior editor Jack Beatty.

promises to do is to slow down the rate of environmental destruction. Two prominent designers propose a radical new strategy.

"A Good Climate for Investment," by Ross Gelbspan (June 1998)

Reducing reliance on carbon for energy -- to safeguard our atmosphere and our climate -- could bring about not personal deprivation but a worldwide economic boom.

"Can Selfishness Save the Environment?" by Matt Ridley and Bobbi S. Low (September 1993)

Conventional wisdom has it that the way to avert global ecological

of top-heavy regulations. The chance of such a political surprise makes understanding the candidates' real environmental records, rather than their stereotypes, all the more important.

GEOERGE W. Bush has been widely portrayed as an environmental villain. Sierra Club ads depict Texas as an ecological hell; editorialists cry that Houston has replaced Los Angeles as the nation's smog capital; Gore rarely misses a chance to point out that "under Governor Bush, Texas has ranked number one in America for carcinogens in the air, number one in America for toxic releases." Yet Texas's environmental problems long pre-date Bush, who has been governor less than six years. And the state's weak-executive constitution, widely mentioned in the press, means that he has little direct power on environmental issues. What's more, the indicators themselves can be misleading. For instance, Houston became the smog capital during a period in which its pollution levels *declined*.

Last year Houston did indeed beat Los Angeles in the number of days it was in violation of the federal ozone-alert standard (fifty-two days to L.A.'s forty-two). Yet according to Environmental Protection Agency statistics, overall smog readings for Houston declined over the past two decades. So how did Houston become the "smog capital"? Simple: pollution in southern

disaster is to persuade people to change their selfish habits for the common good. A more sensible approach would be to tap a boundless and renewable resource: the human propensity for thinking mainly of short term self-interest.

Elsewhere on the Web

Links to related material on other Web sites.

George W. Bush for President Official Site: Environmental Issues

A thorough rundown of where Republican presidential nominee George W. Bush stands on environmental issues.

Gore 2000: The Environment

California declined much more rapidly than pollution in Houston. Last year was the "cleanest summer smog season on record" for Los Angeles, according to the South Coast Air Quality Management District. For the first time since monitoring began, in the 1950s, Los Angeles did not experience a single "stage one" ozone alert. Owing to extremely aggressive anti-smog programs run by the Air Quality Management District and other public agencies, progress against L.A. smog has been just short of breathtaking -- or, rather, breath-giving: the city had 191 ozone-alert days in 1979, 157 in 1989, and forty-two last year.

Los Angeles's battle against smog -- even as its population, its car population, and its economy keep booming -- is a remarkable success story, one rich in hopeful messages about the power of local initiatives and the feasibility of protecting the environment and expanding the economy at the same time. But because that story is positive, the national media have paid it no heed; the misconception persists that L.A. smog is growing thicker. And because hardly anyone knows that L.A. air pollution is in striking decline, when it is announced that Houston outdoes Los Angeles in smog, people assume that Texas air has gotten much worse. Gore and the environmental groups are only too happy to let this false assumption stand.

By other measures Texas air quality reflects numerous problems, but the trend is in a

An explanation of Democratic presidential candidate Al Gore's environmental views.

Environmental Protection

Agency

The official Web site of the EPA.

Environmental News Network - Election 2000

The Environmental News Network, a leading news outlet for environmental issues, reports from an environmental perspective.

mainly positive direction. A study by Steve Hayward, of the Pacific Research Institute, a California think tank, shows that during the first half of Bush's governorship (according to the most recent statistics available) emissions of "volatile organic" compounds (the main component of smog), nitrogen oxide (a secondary smog factor), sulfur dioxide (the main cause of acid rain), and carbon monoxide ("winter smog") have all declined more rapidly in Texas than in the nation as a whole -- even though Texas has had a faster population growth than most other states in those years. By EPA-monitored air-quality yardsticks, Hayward found, Texas lagged behind the rest of the nation only in emissions of "particulates" (fine soot), and those, too, have declined during the Bush years -- just not as rapidly as they have elsewhere.

Figures for toxic emissions in Texas show a similar "yes, but ..." pattern. Texas has the unhappy distinction of being at or near the top of every category in the EPA's Toxics Release Inventory database. But there is a reason for this: 60 percent of the nation's petrochemical output is in Texas, and petrochemical plants are the chief source of toxic emissions from manufacturing. Texas's toxic emissions are proportionally somewhat lower than its share of petrochemical manufacturing, suggesting that the state does a better job of policing its toxins than some others. And in most recent years toxic emissions have fallen in Texas. From 1988 to 1997 toxic releases from

manufacturing declined by 43 percent nationally and by almost exactly the same percentage in Texas. (Toxic emissions declined by only 29 percent in Gore's home state of Tennessee during that period.) Because of the size of the state's petrochemical industry, toxic emissions constitute a serious public-health issue for Texas. The statistical picture is one not of environmental calamity, however, but of positive trends that need to be accelerated.

Bush deserves to be faulted for effectively canceling a state auto-inspection program designed to cut smog. But this seems to be his only outright blunder on environmental policy; other things for which he has been roasted by activists and columnists, including one program in which industries agree to cut pollution voluntarily and to "self audit" to disclose toxic leaks and other problems, can be defended. Many environmentalists really don't like voluntary programs, in part because they cut activist litigation out of the picture; yet some 324 companies have disclosed pollution violations under the Texas self-audit system -- violations the companies would otherwise have had legal incentives to conceal. And if the idea of informal negotiations between government and industry is ill-conceived, then the Vice President is as suspect as the governor: one of Gore's initiatives at the EPA has been Project XL, in which business and regulators informally negotiate voluntary compliance agreements.

Stereotyping Bush as anti-environmental also overlooks the complicating fact that last year he supported legislation requiring most Texas power plants to reduce nitrogen-oxide emissions by 50 percent and acid-rain compounds by 25 percent -- greater reductions than are required by most other states. The main credit for this bill goes to a state representative named Steve Wolens, who originated the idea, but Bush backed the measure. Critics tend to dismiss Bush's support of the power-plant bill on the grounds that he did it "only" to appeal to the national electorate. But what's wrong with that motive? Conservation is not traditionally a leading concern of Texas voters -- one reason that Bush's predecessor, the liberal Democrat Ann Richards, had a modest environmental record. When Bush was getting ready to seek the nomination, he seemed to sense that he had to buff up his environmental credentials, and so he supported a progressive bill. That is a good sign for his attentiveness to voters' concerns.

Bush's advisers know that polls now consistently show that wide majorities of U.S. voters, including Republicans, support environmental safeguards. The Republicans learned in 1995 that there is no national constituency for anti-environmentalism, when Congress, under Newt Gingrich, attempted to roll back EPA rules and the effort exploded in party faces everywhere. For example, Gingrich effectively proposed to repeal the Clean Water Act, though it's

safe to say that not one single voter, even on the far right, favors unclean water. Bush's advisers also know that important Republicans, including New York Governor George Pataki, who came to office with a weak environmental record, have improved their public standing by tacking in the direction of conservation. One of Bush's early decisions as governor of Texas was to appoint a former chemical-industry official as one of the heads of a state environmental commission. It is a sign of Bush's waking up on this issue that the environment subcommittee advising his presidential campaign is composed of moderates, academics, and former EPA officials.

For that matter, in all the father-son psychoanalyzing of the Republican candidate, it has been missed that the elder Bush's Administration was mainly pro-environment. The Bush White House proposed the 1990 Clean Air Act, a sweeping bill that led to declines in air pollution nationally. President Bush also imposed a ban on tuna caught without dolphin-safe nets, placed a moratorium on most offshore oil exploration, and took other ecology-friendly steps. In 1992 many of Bush's advisers believed that the President was leaning toward a commitment to greenhouse-effect reform. But the President took the spectacularly bad advice of his adviser Richard Darman, who hates environmentalism, and began to act like an anti-environmentalist, making light of global-warming concerns and giving testy

speeches about how people matter more than owls. Bush's seemingly invincible poll numbers in the 1992 race with Clinton began their downturn almost to the day he went anti-environment, and the tactic did not even win him the Pacific Northwest owl states in the election. Surely father and son have discussed this.

During the 1988 presidential race George Bush memorably humiliated Michael Dukakis by standing at the edge of a filthy Boston Harbor and talking about how a governor who couldn't clean up his own state did not deserve to run the nation. To film their renowned "love that dirty water" commercial, Bush consultants had to frame out of the background the evidence of a large construction project -- the Boston Harbor cleanup plant, already rising in 1988, and spectacularly successful today, with Boston Harbor once again safe for fishing and swimming. In 1988 it was true that Massachusetts had serious environmental problems; it was also true that Dukakis was doing something about those problems. No matter. With Bush's eager help, Dukakis was damned for the bad and got no credit for the good.

This year Gore consultants may play turnabout, hitting George W. Bush for environmental problems in Texas without mentioning his already-enacted reforms. But should Bush win, the environmental perspective he would bring to the White House would surely be more progressive

than expected, raising the question of whether he would commit his Administration to a big ecological initiative of its own.

Continued...

(The online version of this article appears in two parts. Click [here](#) to go to part two.)

Gregg Easterbrook is a contributing editor of *The Atlantic* and a senior editor of *The New Republic* and [Beliefnet.com](#). His most recent book is *Beside Still Waters: Searching for Meaning in an Age of Doubt* (1998).

Illustration by Patrick Oliphant.

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SEPTEMBER 2000

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IN Gore's case, the stereotype of environmental extremism is as strong as the stereotype of Bush as indifferent. Overwrought environmental language is a Gore specialty: climate change is "the most serious threat that we have ever faced"; the internal-combustion engine is "a mortal threat" to society; "We must make the rescue of the environment the central organizing principle for civilization." Anyone who has seen Gore launch into his spiels on human-population growth curves or ice-core carbon data from the poles (he sometimes stands on a chair to dramatize how high he must point to reach the top of various shocking bar graphs) has learned to look out the window and think about sex or baseball until the whoosh of exaggeration is over. In the early 1980s Gore's subject as a member of Congress was the nuclear-arms buildup, a genuine doomsday threat. But by the time of the first START treaty negotiations, late in the Reagan Administration, nuclear Armageddon had begun to decline as a fear. Gore took the language and world view he had adopted in speaking of nuclear weapons -- whose

dangers can never be overstated -- and seemed to shift them to the environment, leading to his penchant for overdoing the gravity of every issue from parking lots to coral-reef bleaching.

But whatever his oratorical embellishments, Gore's record in office suggests a sensible pragmatism. As a member of Congress, Gore never voted as an ecological zealot. His lifetime Capitol Hill rating from the League of Conservation Voters was a fairly centrist 64 percent, and when preservation of the snail darter threatened to block the Tellico Dam, Gore voted for the dam. In the White House he has worked to enforce environmental law and to repel attempts at weakening it. But although business leaders grumble about Gore and his chief lieutenant, the EPA administrator Carol Browner, both have consistently shown reasonableness. The Everglades-cleanup deal that the two brokered in 1999 will restore the area without harming the sugar industry. To prevent the disruption of agriculture, pesticide reforms have proceeded more slowly under Gore than some activists would like. Decisions on the next phase of urban-ozone reduction have been given over to nonpartisan commissions, one of which was headed by Mary Gade, a Republican attorney who has since become Bush's environment adviser. Other actions have been equally evenhanded. One of Gore's first decisions in office, little noticed, was to slow down the phasing out of CFCs (the primary ozone-

depleting compound) in order to give automobile air-conditioner manufacturers time to switch to alternate refrigerants. In public Gore spoke of ozone depletion as the end of the world. As a decision-maker, he took a gradualist approach to reform. This is a sign of perspective. Gore seems to have mastered the Reagan duality of using overstatement to energize constituents and then governing with common sense and temperance.

Gore's performance in office has been sufficiently centrist to anger activists; [Friends of the Earth](#) endorsed Bill Bradley. Activists are particularly exasperated that as Vice President-elect in 1992, Gore promised to shut down a toxic-waste incinerator in East Liverpool, Ohio, that stands close to an elementary school. Since arriving in the White House, Gore has taken no action on the incinerator, which meets EPA safety standards. An East Liverpool contingent dogs many Gore campaign appearances, chanting "Read your book!" More broadly, mainstream environmentalists complain that although Gore's book, *Earth in the Balance*, is full of dire prophecies about global warming, U.S. greenhouse-gas emissions have increased by 10 percent during the Clinton-Gore years, and no reforms have been enacted. The closest Gore has come to taking action on greenhouse gases is flying to Japan in 1997 to help negotiate the [Kyoto Protocol](#), an agreement currently in limbo. Clinton signed the Kyoto agreement but never

submitted it to the Senate for ratification, feeling that it had zero chance of passing, since the Senate had voted 95-0 to reject a key element of the treaty. Whether to push for ratification of Kyoto would be one of the early questions facing a Gore Administration. Gore speaks of his role in the Kyoto negotiations as a bold gamble. Overlooked is that the protocol has an amazingly convenient loophole from his standpoint: if ratified, it would not come into force until 2008 -- the final year of a two-term Gore Administration.

Yet by every major measure other than greenhouse gases Gore's tour as the director of environmental policy has been triumphant. U.S. air and water pollution declined sharply during the 1990s; CFC production has ended; tens of millions of acres of forest and pristine land have acquired preservation status; recycling has increased; "Superfund" toxic-waste sites have been cleaned up; toxic emissions have fallen even as the domestic manufacture of chemicals has increased; acid rain has declined even as the use of coal for electric power has increased; the brown pelican and other imperiled creatures have recovered sufficiently to be "delisted" under the Endangered Species Act -- all during a period of record economic boom. Bush says that as President he would favor letting responsibility for the environment devolve to the states, because "the command-and-control structure out of Washington, D.C., won't work." The Gore years make it

inarguable that federal environmental controls do work -- pollution is declining and prosperity is on the rise under a regime of Washington command-and-control.

But the fact that current rules are effective does not necessarily mean they are efficient. Much of the federal environmental regulatory apparatus is convoluted, imposes high process costs (litigation and delay are the two major ones), fails to take advantage of free-market incentives, or has perverse consequences. An example of the last is the "brownfields" problem of the Superfund program.

Enacted in 1980 to clean up old chemical-waste spills, the Superfund legislation created corporate liability wherever toxic spills are found, regardless of who caused the problem. The unintended consequence was to render investors terrified of buying or building on land where there had ever been chemical handling, because owning such a "brownfield" makes one liable for what occurred on that land *before* one bought it. This has driven capital away from thousands of land parcels in urban manufacturing areas, where it can be assumed that something must have been spilled by somebody at some point; it has caused banks to stop lending in urban industrial zones; and in a classic instance of how perverse incentives work, it has encouraged companies to buy up and pave over pristine rural land, where there is no chance of liability for past spills. Yet

although virtually everyone agrees that Superfund problems like this must be resolved, Congress has been gridlocked on amending the law for almost a decade. Essentially, the Clinton-Gore Administration has let this flawed legislation stand.

On the other side of the ledger are examples of streamlined, market-based environmental initiatives that have performed very well. One is the acid-rain emissions-certificate trading program, created by the 1990 Clean Air Act. Under this system power plants make decentralized, private trades in certificates for acid-rain emissions; the certificates have ever-declining value. Under trading the rate of acid-rain reduction has accelerated (acid rain was down by 30 percent in the past decade), and control costs have been far lower than projected, because the market rapidly finds the cheapest opportunities for pollution cuts.

Taking into account the shortcomings of existing environmental law and the possibility that expanding the role of market incentives could bring faster, cheaper ecological progress, a broad range of analysts -- among them [Resources for the Future](#), a nonpartisan environmental think-tank in Washington, D.C., and a group of experts brought together by Yale University in 1996 -- have recommended that U.S. environmental laws be totally revamped. Gore has proposed no such reforms, accepting the status quo of successful but

cumbersome.

GORE'S defenders say that he cannot propose to rationalize environmental law right now because hard-core conservatives in the House -- where figures such as the majority leader, Richard Armey, and the majority whip, Tom DeLay, form the last holdout of anti-environmentalism in national politics -- would use any revisions as an opportunity to gut environmental protection. But that calculation might change in a Gore presidency -- if the House became Democratic, or if Gore's standing as chief executive enabled him to twist congressional arms.

Gore as President might propose to revamp environmental law both because it would be desirable and because it would be politically astute. After all, there are comparatively few Third Way-issue openings left for Democratic liberals who want recognition as centrists. Welfare reform, deficit reduction, crime control -- Clinton has already moved the party toward the center on most high-profile subjects. Scanning the horizon for a place where he could make a mark, Gore might well choose the rationalization of environmental law. Coming from Bush, the idea would be attacked as a Trojan horse for conservatism; coming from Gore, it would be instantly credible.

Gore might also use the revamping of conservation law as an opportunity to shift

the tone of his environmental rhetoric, and the Democratic Party's, from gloom to optimism. Not only are most ecological trends in the United States now positive, but this is an accomplishment for which liberal government deserves much of the credit. If one is going to argue, as Democrats like to, that government improves people's lives, one needs examples of success.

Environmental protection is among the leading government success stories of the postwar era, but voters seem not to know it (polls show that the public believes the air and the water are growing more polluted, not less), so the government does not get credit. An important reason for the public's false belief in the decline of the U.S. environment is doomsday pronouncements of the sort Gore himself favors. If a President Bush adopted a theme of environmental optimism, voters might think he was being a Pollyanna. If a President Gore did the same, it would be a striking message and might help to reinforce the public's faith in government.

BY the same token, if a President Gore proposed meaningful greenhouse action, voters might think he was just being his old Dr. Doom self. A President Bush could take steps against global warming much more persuasively.

Bush as President might move toward greenhouse action for two reasons, one scientific (evidence of artificial climate

change is beginning to accumulate) and one political (taking steps that would be unpopular with Texas oil interests would lend his Administration an air of integrity). That Bush might be moved by the science of global warming may not fit his media stereotype, but it does fit his background in the sector of the Republican establishment that, following Teddy Roosevelt, has always considered conservation and "stewardship" to be civic virtues. It also fits the pattern of postwar environmental legislation. Robert Stavins, a Harvard University environmental economist, notes that many of the nation's important environmental initiatives have been enacted while a Republican was in the White House -- the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, the creation of the EPA under Richard Nixon, the new Clean Air Act under George Bush.

So far, all George W. has said is that he takes global warming "seriously" but that the Kyoto treaty should be rejected, because it would cost American jobs. The former Indianapolis mayor Steve Goldsmith, who is the campaign's domestic-policy adviser, has pushed Bush hard to speak of the greenhouse effect as a worrisome prospect. Goldsmith and Mary Gade have worked to ensure that Bush listens to moderate experts on greenhouse issues, keeping their candidate away from the shrinking band of right-wing activists who consider global warming a leftist con job. Hewing to a moderate line on the issue grows easier for Republicans as major companies such as

Ford and BP Amoco go on record saying that greenhouse science is significant.

What might a President Bush propose on global warming? Perhaps an international carbon-trading initiative modeled on the acid-rain-reduction program, by which nations and businesses would swap permits for greenhouse-gas emissions globally, which would tend to bring about reductions in emissions at the lowest cost. The Kyoto agreement envisions carbon trading, but since it may never be ratified, Bush might need to propose an alternative -- and he would be in a position to fashion a simplified, more market-oriented plan. Should he propose an effective greenhouse program, Bush might be able to get the deal through Congress, because coming from him such legislation would not be viewed as a Trojan horse for anti-industry sentiment.

Surprises from newly elected Presidents are surprisingly common. Regardless of who wins in November, there will be an opening to take an important set of environmental issues off their current ideological, us-versus-them course and create a positive new dynamic. Either candidate might give us this happy surprise.

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