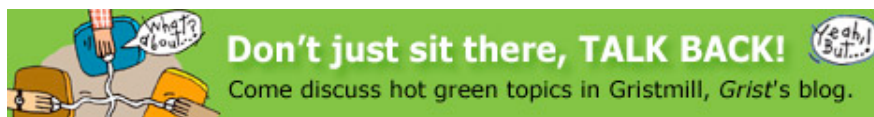


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The Death of Environmentalism

Global warming politics in a post-environmental world

BY MICHAEL SHELLENBERGER AND TED NORDHAUS

13 Jan 2005

This essay by Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus was released at an October 2004 meeting of the Environmental Grantmakers Association, and it's been ruffling feathers ever since. Get the backstory [here](#).

Foreword

By Peter Teague, Environment Program Director, Nathan Cummings Foundation

As I write this, the fourth in a series of violent hurricanes has just bombarded the Caribbean and Florida. In Florida, more than 30 are dead and thousands are homeless. More than 2,000 Haitians are dead. And ninety percent of the homes in Grenada are destroyed.

As Jon Stewart deadpanned on Comedy Central's *The Daily Show*, "God, you've made your point. You're all-powerful."

Yet it isn't God we need to be addressing our concerns to -- it's us.

Scientists have long said that stronger and more frequent hurricanes would be a result of global warming. It's an effect of warmer oceans.

Yet no prominent national leader -- environmental or otherwise -- has come out publicly to suggest that the recent spate of hurricanes was the result of global warming. That's in part due to the fact that the conventional wisdom among environmentalists is that we mustn't frighten the public but rather must focus its gaze on technical solutions, like hybrid cars and fluorescent light bulbs.

In this remarkable report on how environmentalism became a special interest, Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus suggest that it's time to reexamine everything we think we know about global warming and environmental politics, from what does and doesn't get counted as "environmental" to the movement's small-bore approach to policymaking.

I suggest we also question the conventional wisdom that we can't talk about disasters like the unprecedented hurricanes that devastated Florida and the Caribbean. The insurance industry says that, at \$20 billion, the hurricanes will surpass the costliest disaster in US history -- Hurricane Andrew. At what point



On the essay cover is the Chinese ideogram for "crisis," which is comprised of the characters for "danger" and "opportunity."

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have we become Pollyanna fearing that we'll be called Chicken Little?

I have spent most of my career working in the environmental movement, as have Nordhaus and Shellenberger. They care deeply about environmentalism. It is for that reason that their critique cuts so deeply.

The environmental community can claim a great deal of credit for what are significant advances over a relatively short period -- advances won against well-financed campaigns of disinformation and denial. Yet despite all the recent support from the media, from *Business Week* to *National Geographic* to the *New York Times*, we are still a long way from achieving serious action on global warming.

It's time to ask: has the U.S. environmental community's work over the past 30 years laid the groundwork for the economic, cultural and political shifts that we know will be necessary to deal with the crisis?

Of the hundreds of millions of dollars we have poured into the global warming issue, only a small fraction has gone to engage Americans as the proud moral people they are, willing to sacrifice for the right cause. It would be dishonest to lay all the blame on the media, politicians or the oil industry for the public's disengagement from the issue that, more than any other, will define our future. Those of us who call ourselves environmentalists have a responsibility to examine our role and close the gap between the problems we know and the solutions we propose.

So long as the siren call of denial is met with the drone of policy expertise -- and the fantasy of technical fixes is left unchallenged -- the public is not just being misled, it's also being misread. Until we address Americans honestly, and with the respect they deserve, they can be expected to remain largely disengaged from the global transformation we need them to be a part of.

To write this article Shellenberger and Nordhaus interviewed more than 25 of the environmental community's top leaders, thinkers and funders. You may disagree with their conclusions. You may dismiss their recommendations. But none of us should deny the need for the broader conversation they propose. This article should prompt those of us in the world of philanthropy to engage with each other and with the groups we fund in an honest evaluation of our present situation.

The stakes are too high to go on with business as usual.

Acknowledgements

This report would not have been possible had many of the country's leading environmental and progressive leaders not been courageous enough to open up their thinking for public scrutiny: Dan Becker, Phil Clapp, Tim Carmichael, Ralph Cavanaugh, Susan Clark, Bernadette Del Chiaro, Shelly Fiddler, Ross Gelbspan, Hal Harvey, David Hawkins, Bracken Hendricks, Roland Hwang, Eric Heitz, Wendy James, Van Jones, Fred Keeley, Lance Lindblom, Elisa Lynch, Jason Mark, Bob Nordhaus, Carl Pope, Josh Reichert, Jeremy Rifkin, Adam Werbach, Greg Wetstone, V. John White, and Carl Zichella. We are especially grateful to George Lakoff for teaching us how to identify category mistakes and to Peter Teague for continually challenging us to question our most basic assumptions

Introduction

To not think of dying is to not think of living.
-- Jann Arden

Those of us who are children of the environmental movement must never forget

with authors of the controversial essay "The Death of Environmentalism."

- **We've Got Issues.** What we talk about when we talk about the future of environmentalism.
- **Changing the Climate-Change Climate.** Bill McKibben ponders whether environmentalism really is kaput.
- **Rainbow Warrior.** Dramatizing the "death" of environmentalism doesn't help urban people of color, by Adrienne Maree Brown.
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that we are standing on the shoulders of all those who came before us.

The clean water we drink, the clean air we breathe, and the protected wilderness we treasure are all, in no small part, thanks to them. The two of us have worked for most of the country's leading environmental organizations as staff or consultants. We hold a sincere and abiding respect for our parents and elders in the environmental community. They have worked hard and accomplished a great deal. For that we are deeply grateful.

At the same time, we believe that the best way to honor their achievements is to acknowledge that modern environmentalism is no longer capable of dealing with the world's most serious ecological crisis.

Over the last 15 years environmental foundations and organizations have invested hundreds of millions of dollars into combating global warming.

We have strikingly little to show for it.

From the battles over higher fuel efficiency for cars and trucks to the attempts to reduce carbon emissions through international treaties, environmental groups repeatedly have tried and failed to win national legislation that would reduce the threat of global warming. As a result, people in the environmental movement today find themselves politically less powerful than we were one and a half decades ago.

Yet in lengthy conversations, the vast majority of leaders from the largest environmental organizations and foundations in the country insisted to us that we are on the right track.

Nearly all of the more than two-dozen environmentalists we interviewed underscored that climate change demands that we remake the global economy in ways that will transform the lives of six billion people. All recognize that it's an undertaking of monumental size and complexity. And all acknowledged that we must reduce emissions by up to 70 percent as soon as possible.

But in their public campaigns, not one of America's environmental leaders is articulating a vision of the future commensurate with the magnitude of the crisis. Instead they are promoting technical policy fixes like pollution controls and higher vehicle mileage standards -- proposals that provide neither the popular inspiration nor the political alliances the community needs to deal with the problem.

By failing to question their most basic assumptions about the problem and the solution, environmental leaders are like generals fighting the last war -- in particular the war they fought and won for basic environmental protections more than 30 years ago. It was then that the community's political strategy became defined around using science to define the problem as "environmental" and crafting technical policy proposals as solutions.

The greatest achievements to reduce global warming are today happening in Europe. Britain has agreed to cut carbon emissions by 60 percent over 50 years, Holland by 80 percent in 40 years, and Germany by 50 percent in 50 years. Russia may soon ratify Kyoto. And even China -- which is seen fearfully for the amount of dirty coal it intends to burn -- recently established fuel economy standards for its cars and trucks that are much tougher than ours in the US.

Environmentalists are learning all the wrong lessons from Europe. We closely scrutinize the *policies* without giving much thought to the *politics* that made the policies possible.

Our thesis is this: the environmental community's narrow definition of its self-interest leads to a kind of policy literalism that undermines its power. When you look at the long string of global warming defeats under Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, it is hard not to conclude that the environmental movement's approach to problems and policies hasn't worked particularly well. And yet there is nothing about the behavior of environmental groups, and nothing in our interviews with environmental leaders, that indicates that we as a community are ready to think differently about our work.

What the environmental movement needs more than anything else right now is to take a collective step back to rethink everything. We will never be able to turn things around as long as we understand our failures as essentially tactical, and make proposals that are essentially technical.

In Part II we make the case for what could happen if progressives created new institutions and proposals around a big vision and a core set of values. Much of this section is aimed at showing how a more powerful movement depends on letting go of old identities, categories and assumptions, so that we can be truly open to embracing a better model.

We resisted the exhortations from early reviewers of this report to say more about what we think must now be done because we believe that the most important next steps will emerge from teams, not individuals. Over the coming months we will be meeting with existing and emerging teams of practitioners and funders to develop a common vision and strategy for moving forward.

One tool we have to offer to that process is the research we are doing as part of our Strategic Values Project, which is adapting corporate marketing research for use by the progressive community. This project draws on a 600 question, 2,500-person survey done in the U.S. and Canada every four years since 1992. In contrast to conventional opinion research, this research identifies the core values and beliefs that inform how individuals develop a range of opinions on everything from the economy to abortion to what's the best SUV on the market. This research both shows a clear conservative shift in America's values since 1992 and illuminates many positive openings for progressives and environmentalists.

We believe that this new values science will prove to be invaluable in creating a road map to guide the development of a set of proposals that simultaneously energizes our base, wins over new allies, divides our opponents, achieves policy victories and makes America's values environment more progressive. Readers of this report who are interested in learning more about the Strategic Values Project -- and want to engage in a dialogue about the future of environmentalism and progressive politics -- should feel welcome to contact us.

PART I

Environmentalism as a Special Interest

Death is not the greatest loss in life. The greatest loss is what dies inside us while we live.

-- Norman Cousins

Those of us who were children during the birth of the modern environmental movement have no idea what it feels like to really win big.

Our parents and elders experienced something during the 1960s and 70s that today seems like a dream: the passage of a series of powerful environmental laws too numerous to list, from the Endangered Species Act to the Clean Air and Clean Water Acts to the National Environmental Policy Act.

Experiencing such epic victories had a searing impact on the minds of the movement's founders. It established a way of thinking about the environment and politics that has lasted until today.

It was also then, at the height of the movement's success, that the seeds of failure were planted. The environmental community's success created a strong confidence -- and in some cases bald arrogance -- that the environmental protection frame was enough to succeed at a policy level. The environmental community's belief that their power derives from defining themselves as defenders of "the environment" has prevented us from winning major legislation on global warming at the national level.

We believe that the environmental movement's foundational concepts, its method for framing legislative proposals, and *its very institutions* are outmoded. Today environmentalism is just another special interest. Evidence for this can be found in its concepts, its proposals, and its reasoning. What stands out is how arbitrary environmental leaders are about what gets counted and what doesn't as

"environmental." Most of the movement's leading thinkers, funders and advocates do not question their most basic assumptions about who we are, what we stand for, and what it is that we should be doing.

Environmentalism is today more about protecting a supposed "thing" -- "the environment" -- than advancing the worldview articulated by Sierra Club founder John Muir, who nearly a century ago observed, "When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe."

Thinking of the environment as a "thing" has had enormous implications for how environmentalists conduct their politics. The three-part strategic framework for environmental policy-making hasn't changed in 40 years: first, define a problem (e.g. global warming) as "environmental." Second, craft a technical remedy (e.g., cap-and-trade). Third, sell the technical proposal to legislators through a variety of tactics, such as lobbying, third-party allies, research reports, advertising, and public relations.

When we asked environmental leaders how we could accelerate our efforts against global warming, most pointed to this or that tactic -- more analysis, more grassroots organizing, more PR.

Few things epitomize the environmental community's tactical orientation to politics more than its search for better words and imagery to "reframe" global warming. Lately the advice has included: a) don't call it "climate change" because Americans like change; b) don't call it "global warming" because the word "warming" sounds nice; c) refer to global warming as a "heat trapping blanket" so people can understand it; d) focus attention on technological solutions -- like fluorescent light bulbs and hybrid cars.

What each of these recommendations has in common is the shared assumption that a) the problem should be framed as "environmental" and b) our legislative proposals should be technical.¹

Even the question of alliances, which goes to the core of political strategy, is treated within environmental circles as a tactical question -- an opportunity to get this or that constituency -- religious leaders! business leaders! celebrities! youth! Latinos! -- to take up the fight against global warming. The implication is that if only X group were involved in the global warming fight *then things would really start to happen*.

The arrogance here is that environmentalists ask not what we can do for non-environmental constituencies but what non-environmental constituencies can do for environmentalists. As a result, while public support for action on global warming is wide it is also frighteningly shallow.

The environmental movement's incuriosity about the interests of potential allies depends on it never challenging the most basic assumptions about what does and doesn't get counted as "environmental." Because we define environmental problems so narrowly, environmental leaders come up with equally narrow solutions. In the face of perhaps the greatest calamity in modern history, environmental leaders are sanguine that selling technical solutions like florescent light bulbs, more efficient appliances, and hybrid cars will be sufficient to muster the necessary political strength to overcome the alliance of neoconservative ideologues and industry interests in Washington, D.C.

The entire landscape in which politics plays out has changed radically in the last 30 years, yet the environmental movement acts as though proposals based on "sound science" will be sufficient to overcome ideological and industry opposition. Environmentalists are in a culture war whether we like it or not. It's a war over our core values as Americans and over our vision for the future, and it won't be won by appealing to the rational consideration of our collective self-interest.

We have become convinced that modern environmentalism, with all of its unexamined assumptions, outdated concepts and exhausted strategies, must die so that something new can live. Those of us who pay so much attention to nature's cycles know better than to fear death, which is inseparable from life. In the words of the *Tao Ti Ching*, "If you aren't afraid of dying there is nothing you can't achieve."

Environmental Group Think

If we wish our civilization to survive we must break with the habit of deference to great men.

-- Karl Popper

One of the reasons environmental leaders can whistle past the graveyard of global warming politics is that the membership rolls and the income of the big environmental organizations have grown enormously over the past 30 years -- especially since the election of George W. Bush in 2000.

The institutions that define what environmentalism means boast large professional staffs and receive tens of millions of dollars every year from foundations and individuals. Given these rewards, it's no surprise that most environmental leaders neither craft nor support proposals that could be tagged "non-environmental." Doing otherwise would do more than threaten their status; it would undermine their brand.

Environmentalists are particularly upbeat about the direction of public opinion thanks in large part to the polling they conduct that shows wide support for their proposals. Yet America is a vastly more right-wing country than it was three decades ago. The domination of American politics by the far-right is a central obstacle to achieving action on global warming. Yet almost none of the environmentalists we interviewed thought to mention it.

Part of what's behind America's political turn to the right is the skill with which conservative think tanks, intellectuals and political leaders have crafted proposals that build their power through setting the terms of the debate. Their work has paid off. According to a survey of 1,500 Americans by the market research firm Environics, the number of Americans who agree with the statement, "To preserve people's jobs in this country, we must accept higher levels of pollution in the future," increased from 17 percent in 1996 to 26 percent in 2000. The number of Americans who agreed that, "Most of the people actively involved in environmental groups are extremists, not reasonable people," leapt from 32 percent in 1996 to 41 percent in 2000.

The truth is that for the vast majority of Americans, the environment never makes it into their top ten list of things to worry about. Protecting the environment is indeed supported by a large majority -- *it's just not supported very strongly*. Once you understand this, it's much easier to understand why it's been so easy for anti-environmental interests to gut 30 years of environmental protections.

The conventional criticism of the environmental movement articulated by outsiders and many funders is that it is too divided to get the job done. Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Ross Gelbspan argues in his new book *Boiling Point*, "Despite occasional spasms of cooperation, the major environmental groups have been unwilling to join together around a unified climate agenda, pool resources, and mobilize a united campaign on the climate."

Yet what was striking to us in our research was the high degree of consensus among environmental leaders about what the problems and solutions are. We came away from our interviews less concerned about internal divisions than the lack of feedback mechanisms.

Engineers use a technical term to describe systems without feedback mechanisms: "stupid."

As individuals, environmental leaders are anything but stupid. Many hold multiple advanced degrees in science, engineering, and law from the best schools in the country. But as a community, environmentalists suffer from a bad case of group think, starting with shared assumptions about what we mean by "the environment" -- a category that reinforces the notions that a) the environment is a separate "thing" and b) human beings are separate from and superior to the "natural world."

The concepts of "nature" and "environment" have been thoroughly deconstructed. Yet they retain their mythic and debilitating power within the environmental

movement and the public at large. If one understands the notion of the "environment" to include humans, then the way the environmental community designates certain problems as environmental and others as not is completely arbitrary.

Why, for instance, is a *human*-made phenomenon like global warming -- which may kill hundreds of millions of *human beings* over the next century -- considered "environmental"? Why are poverty and war not considered environmental problems while global warming is? What are the implications of framing global warming as an *environmental* problem -- and handing off the responsibility for dealing with it to "environmentalists"?

Some believe that this framing is a political, and not just conceptual, problem. "When we use the term 'environment' it makes it seem as if the problem is 'out there' and we need to 'fix it,'" said Susan Clark, Executive Director of the Columbia Foundation, who believes the Environmental Grantmakers Association should change its name. "The problem is not external to us; it's us. It's a human problem having to do with how we organize our society. This old way of thinking isn't anyone's fault, but it is all of our responsibility to change."

Not everyone agrees. "We need to remember that we're the environmental movement and that our job is to protect the environment," said the Sierra Club's Global Warming Director, Dan Becker. "If we stray from that, we risk losing our focus, and there's no one else to protect the environment if we don't do it. We're not a union or the Labor Department. Our job is to protect the environment, not to create an industrial policy for the United States. That doesn't mean we don't care about protecting workers."

Most environmentalists don't think of "the environment" as a mental category at all -- they think of it as a real "thing" to be protected and defended. They think of themselves, literally, as representatives and defenders of this thing. Environmentalists do their work as though these are literal rather than figurative truths. They tend to see language in general as representative rather than constitutive of reality. This is typical of liberals who are, at their core, children of the enlightenment who believe that they arrived at their identity and politics through a rational and considered process. They expect others in politics should do the same and are constantly surprised and disappointed when they don't.

The effect of this orientation is a certain *literal-sclerosis*² -- the belief that social change happens only when people speak a literal "truth to power." Literal-sclerosis can be seen in the assumption that to win action on global warming one must talk about global warming instead of, say, the economy, industrial policy, or health care. "If you want people to act on global warming" stressed Becker, "you need to convince them that action is needed on global warming and not on some ulterior goal."

What We Worry About When We Worry About Global Warming

Calculative thinking computes ... it races from one prospect to the next. It never stops, never collects itself. It is not meditative thinking, not thinking which contemplates the meaning that reigns in everything there is ... Meditative thinking demands of us that we engage ourselves with what, at first sight, does not go together.

-- Martin Heidegger, *Memorial Address*

What do we worry about when we worry about global warming? Is it the refugee crisis that will be caused when Caribbean nations are flooded? If so, shouldn't our focus be on building bigger sea walls and disaster preparedness?

Is it the food shortages that will result from reduced agricultural production? If so, shouldn't our focus be on increasing food production?

Is it the potential collapse of the Gulf Stream, which could freeze upper North America and northern Europe and trigger, as a recent Pentagon scenario suggests, world war?

Most environmental leaders would scoff at such framings of the problem and retort, "Disaster preparedness is not an environmental problem." It is a hallmark

of environmental rationality to believe that we environmentalists search for "root causes" not "symptoms." What, then, is the cause of global warming?

For most within the environmental community, the answer is easy: too much carbon in the atmosphere. Framed this way, the solution is logical: we need to pass legislation that reduces carbon emissions. But what are the obstacles to removing carbon from the atmosphere?

Consider what would happen if we identified the obstacles as:

- The radical right's control of all three branches of the US government.
- Trade policies that undermine environmental protections.
- Our failure to articulate an inspiring and positive vision.
- Overpopulation.
- The influence of money in American politics.
- Our inability to craft legislative proposals that shape the debate around core American values.
- Poverty.
- Old assumptions about what the problem is and what it isn't.

The point here is not just that global warming has many causes but also that the solutions we dream up depend on how we structure the problem.

The environmental movement's failure to craft inspiring and powerful proposals to deal with global warming is directly related to the movement's reductive logic about the supposedly root causes (e.g., "too much carbon in the atmosphere") of any given environmental problem. The problem is that once you identify something as the root cause, you have little reason to look for even deeper causes or connections with other root causes. NRDC attorney David Hawkins, who has worked on environmental policy for three decades, defines global warming as essentially a "pollution" problem like acid rain, which was addressed by the 1990 Clean Air Act amendment. The acid rain bill set a national cap on the total amount of acid rain pollution allowed by law and allowed companies to buy pollution credits from other companies that had successfully reduced their emissions beyond the cap. This "cap-and-trade" policy worked well for acid rain, Hawkins reasons, so it should work for global warming, too. The McCain-Lieberman "Climate Stewardship Act" is based on a similar mechanism to cap carbon emissions and allow companies to trade pollution rights.

Not everyone agrees that the acid rain victory offers the right mental model. "This is not a problem that will be solved like acid rain," said Phil Clapp, who founded National Environmental Trust a decade ago with foundations that recognized the need for more effective public campaigns by environmentalists.

"Acid rain dealt with a specific number of facilities in one industry that was already regulated," Clapp argued. "It took just 8 years, from 1982 to 1990, to pass. Global warming is not an issue that will be resolved by the passage of one statute. This is nothing short of the beginning of an effort to transform the world energy economy, vastly improving efficiency and diversifying it away from its virtually exclusive reliance on fossil fuels. The campaign to get carbon emissions capped and then reduced is literally a 50-year non-stop campaign. This is not one that everybody will be able to declare victory, shut up shop, and go home."

That lesson was driven home to Clapp, Hawkins, and other leaders during the 1990s when the big environmental groups and funders put all of their global warming eggs in the Kyoto basket. The problem was that they had no well-designed political strategy to get the U.S. Senate to ratify the treaty, which would have reduced greenhouse gas reductions to under 1990 levels. The environmental community not only failed to get the Senate to ratify Kyoto, industry strategists -- in a deft act of legislative judo -- crafted an anti-Kyoto Senate resolution that passed 95 -- 0.

The size of this defeat can't be overstated. In exiting the Clinton years with no law to reduce carbon emissions -- even by a miniscule amount -- the environmental community has no more power or influence than it had when Kyoto was negotiated. We asked environmental leaders: what went wrong?

"Our advocacy in the 1990s was inadequate in the sense that the scale of our

objectives in defining victory was not calibrated to the global warming need," answered Hawkins. "Instead it was defined by whatever was possible. We criticized Clinton's proposal for a voluntary program to implement the Rio convention agreement [that preceded Kyoto] but we didn't keep up a public campaign. We redirected our attention to the international arena and spent all of our efforts trying to upgrade President Bush Sr.'s Rio convention commitments rather than trying to turn the existing commitments into law. We should have done both."

Responding to the complaint that, in going 10 years without any action on global warming the environmental movement is in a worse place than if it had negotiated an initial agreement under Clinton, Clapp said, "In retrospect, for political positioning we probably would have been better off if, under the Kyoto protocol, we had accepted 1990 levels by 2012 since that was what Bush, Sr. agreed to in Rio. I don't exempt myself from that mistake."

After the Kyoto Senate defeat, Clapp and others focused their wrath on Vice President Al Gore, who was one of the country's strongest and most eloquent environmentalists. But Gore had witnessed Kyoto's 95 -- 0 assassination in the Senate and feared that the tag "Ozone Man" -- pinned on him for his successful advocacy of the Montreal Protocol's ban on ozone-destroying CFCs -- would hurt his 2000 presidential campaign.

The environmental hit on Al Gore culminated in an April 26, 1999 *Time* magazine article titled, "Is Al Gore a Hero Or a Traitor?" In it the *Time* reporter describes a meeting where environmental leaders insisted that Gore do more to phase out dirty old coal power plants. Gore shot back, "Losing on impractical proposals that are completely out of tune with what is achievable does not necessarily advance your cause at all."

The public campaign against Gore generated headlines but inspired neither greater risk-taking by politicians nor emboldened the Vice President. Instead, the author of *Earth in the Balance* spent much of the 2000 race downplaying his green credentials in the false hope that in doing so he would win over undecided voters.

Perhaps the greatest tragedy of the 1990s is that, in the end, the environmental community had still not come up with an inspiring vision, much less a legislative proposal, that a majority of Americans could get excited about.

Everybody Loses on Fuel Efficiency

Great doubt: great awakening.

Little doubt: little awakening.

No doubt: no awakening.

-- *Zen koan*

By the end of the 1990s, environmentalists hadn't just failed to win a legislative agreement on carbon, they had also let a deal on higher vehicle fuel efficiency standards slip through their fingers.

Since the 1970s environmentalists have defined the problem of oil dependency as a consequence of inadequate fuel efficiency standards. Their strategy has rested on trying to overpower industry and labor unions on environmental and national security grounds. The result has been massive failure: over the last 20 years, as automobile technologies have improved exponentially, *overall mileage rates have gone down, not up.*

Few beat around the bush when discussing this fact. "If the question is whether we've done anything to address the problem since 1985, the answer is no," said Bob Nordhaus, the Washington, D.C. attorney who served as General Counsel for the Department of Energy under President Clinton and who helped draft the Corporate Average Fuel Economy or "CAFE" (pronounced "café") legislation and the Clean Air Act. (Nordhaus is also the father of one of the authors of this report.)

The first CAFE amendment in 1975 grabbed the low-hanging fruit of efficiency to set into place standards that experts say were much easier for industry to meet than the standards environmentalists are demanding now. The UAW and

automakers agreed to the 1975 CAFE amendment out of a clearly defined self-interest: to slow the advance of Japanese imports.

"CAFE [in 1975] was backed by the UAW and [Michigan Democrat Rep. John] Dingell," said Shelly Fiddler, who was Chief of Staff for former Rep. Phil Sharp who authored the CAFE amendment before becoming Chief of Staff for the Clinton White House's Council on Environmental Quality. "It got done by Ford and a bunch of renegade staffers in Congress, not by environmentalists. The environmental community didn't originate CAFE and they had serious reservations about it."

Thanks to action by US automakers and inaction by US environmental groups, CAFE's efficiency gains stalled in the mid-1980s. It's not clear who did more damage to CAFE, the auto industry, the UAW or the environmental movement.

Having gathered 59 votes -- one short of what's needed to stop a filibuster -- Senator Richard Bryan nearly passed legislation to raise fuel economy standards in 1990. But one year later, when Bryan had a very good shot at getting the 60 votes he needed, the environmental movement cut a deal with the automakers. In exchange for the auto industry's opposition to drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, environmentalists agreed to drop its support for the Bryan bill. "[I]t was scuppered by the environmentalists, of all people," *New York Times* auto industry reporter Keith Bradsher notes bitterly.³

Tragically, had Bryan and environmentalists succeeded in 1991, they would have dramatically slowed the rise of SUVs in the coming decade and reduced the pressure on the Refuge -- a patch of wilderness that the Republicans again used to smack around environmentalists under President George W. Bush. The environmental community's failure in 1991 was compounded by the fact that the Bryan bill "helped scare Japanese automakers into producing larger models," a shift that ultimately diminished the power of both the UAW and environmentalists.

"Where was the environmental movement?" asks Bradsher in his marvelous history of the SUV, *High and Mighty*. "[A]s a slow and steady transformation began taking place on the American road, the environmental movement stayed silent on SUVs all the way into the mid-1990s, and did not campaign in earnest for changes to SUV regulations until 1999."

Finally, in 2002, Senator John Kerry and Senator John McCain popped up with another attempt to raise CAFE standards. Once again environmentalists failed to negotiate a deal with UAW. As a result, the bill lost by a far larger margin than it had in 1990. The Senate voted 62-38 to kill it.

From the perspective of even the youngest and greenest Hill staffer, the political power of environmental groups appeared at an all-time low.

Environmental spokespersons tried to position their 2002 loss as a victory, arguing that it provided them with momentum going forward. But privately almost every environmental leader we interviewed told us that CAFE -- in its 2002 incarnation -- is dead.

Given CAFE's initial 10 years of success, from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, it made sense that environmentalists saw CAFE as a good *technical tool* for reducing our dependence on oil and cutting carbon emissions. Unfortunately, the best technical solutions don't always make for the best politics. Senators don't vote according to the technical specifications of a proposal. They make decisions based on a variety of factors, especially how the proposal and its opposition are framed. And no amount of public relations can help a badly framed proposal.

Bradsher argues pointedly that "Environmentalists and their Congressional allies have wasted their time since the days of the Bryan bill by repeatedly bringing overly ambitious legislation to the floors of the House and Senate without first striking compromises with the UAW. The sad truth is that by tilting the playing field in favor of SUVs for a quarter of a century, government regulations have left the economy of the Upper Midwest addicted to the production of dangerous substitutes for cars. Any fuel-economy policy must recognize this huge social and economic problem."

In light of this string of legislative disasters one might expect environmental

leaders to reevaluate their assumptions and craft a new proposal.⁴ Instead, over the last two years, the environmental movement has made only the tactical judgment to bring in new allies, everyone from religious leaders to Hollywood celebrities, to reinforce the notion that CAFE is the only way to free America from foreign oil.

The conventional wisdom today is that the auto industry and the UAW "won" the CAFE fight. This logic implies that industry executives represent what's best for shareholders, that union executives represent what's best for workers, and that environmentalists represent what's best for the environment. All of these assumptions merit questioning. Today the American auto industry is in a state of gradual collapse. Japanese automakers are eating away at American market share with cleaner, more efficient, and outright *better* vehicles. And American companies are drawing up plans to move their factories overseas. None of the so-called special interests are representing their members' interests especially well.

There is no better example of how environmental categories sabotage environmental politics than CAFE. When it was crafted in 1975, it was done so as a way to save the American auto industry, not to save the environment. That was the right framing then and has been the right framing ever since. Yet the environmental movement, in all of its literal-sclerosis, not only felt the need to brand CAFE as an "environmental" proposal, it failed to find a solution that also worked for industry and labor.

By thinking only of their own narrowly defined interests, environmental groups don't concern themselves with the needs of either unions or the industry. As a consequence, we miss major opportunities for alliance building. Consider the fact that the biggest threat to the American auto industry appears to have nothing to do with "the environment." The high cost of health care for its retired employees is a big part of what hurts the competitiveness of American companies.

"G.M. covers the health care costs of 1.1 million Americans, or close to half a percent of the total population," wrote the *New York Times'* Danny Hakim recently.⁵ "For G.M., which earned \$1.2 billion [in profits] last year, annual health spending has risen to \$4.8 billion from \$3 billion since 1996 ... Today, with global competition and the United States health care system putting the burden largely on employers, retiree medical costs are one reason Toyota's \$10.2 billion profit in its most recent fiscal year was more than double the combined profit of the Big Three."

Because Japan has national health care, its auto companies aren't stuck with the bill for its retirees. And yet if you were to propose that environmental groups should have a strategy for lowering the costs of health care for the auto industry, perhaps in exchange for higher mileage standards, you'd likely be laughed out of the room, or scolded by your colleagues because, "Health care is not an environmental issue."

The health care cost disadvantage for US producers is a threat that won't be overcome with tax incentives for capital investments into new factories, or consumer rebates for hybrids. The problem isn't just that tax credits and rebates won't achieve what we need them to achieve, which is save the American auto industry by helping it build better, more efficient cars. The problem is also that these policies, which the environmental community only agreed to after more than two decades of failure, have been thrown into the old CAFE proposal like so many trimmings for a turkey.

Environmentalists -- including presidential candidate John Kerry, whose platform includes the new turkey trimmings -- as well as industry and labor leaders, have yet to rethink their assumptions about the future of the American auto industry in ways that might reframe their proposal. Some environmental "realists" argue that the death of the American auto industry -- and the loss of hundreds of thousands of high-paying union jobs -- isn't necessarily a bad thing for the environment if it means more market share for more efficient Japanese vehicles. Others say saving the American auto industry is central to maintaining the Midwest's middle class.

"I don't like to bribe everyone into good behavior, but it's not bad to help the unions," said Hal Harvey. "We need jobs in this country. Union members are swing voters in a lot of states. And a livable wage is ethically important."

Like Harvey, most environmental leaders are progressives who support the union movement on principle. And though many have met with labor leaders about how to resolve the CAFE quagmire, the environmental movement is not articulating how building a stronger American auto industry and union movement is central to winning action on global warming. Rather, like everything else that's not seen as explicitly "environmental," the future of the union movement is treated as a tactical, not a strategic, consideration.

California's recent decision to require reductions in vehicle greenhouse gas emissions over the next 11 years was widely reported as a victory for environmental efforts against global warming. In fact, coming after over two decades of failure to reverse the gradual decline of fuel efficiency, the decision is a sign of our weakness, not strength. Automakers are rightly confident that they will be able to defeat the California law in court. If they can't, there is a real danger that the industry will persuade Congress to repeal California's special right to regulate pollution under the Clean Air Act. If that happens, California will lose its power to limit vehicle pollution altogether.

Today's fleet-wide fuel efficiency average is the same as it was in 1980, according to the Union of Concerned Scientists. This quarter century of failure is not due to one or two tactical errors (though there were plenty of those, as we describe above). Rather, the roots of the environmental community's failure can be found in the way it designates certain problems as environmental and others as not. Automakers and the UAW are, of course, just as responsible as environmentalists for failing to form a strategic alliance. The lose-lose-lose that is the current situation on automobiles is the logical result of defining labor, environmental and industry self-interests so narrowly.

Before his death, David Brower tried to think more creatively about win-win solutions. He spoke often about the need for the environmental community to invest more energy in changing the tax code, a point reporter Keith Bradsher emphasized in *High and Mighty*. "Environmentalists have a history of not taking notice of tax legislation, and paid no attention whatsoever to the depreciation and luxury tax provisions for large light trucks. More egregiously, environmental groups ignored SUVs in the 1990 battle over the Bryan bill, and even disregarded the air-pollution loopholes for light trucks in the 1990 clean air legislation."⁶

Some in the environmental community are trying to learn from the failures of the last 25 years and think differently about the problem. Jason Mark of the Union of Concerned Scientists told us that he has begun the search for more carrots to the Pavley stick. "We need to negotiate from a position of strength. Now is the time for us to propose incentive policies that make sense. We've been working on tax credits for hybrids. Now we need to come up with tax credits for R&D into reduced emissions, and something to ease the industry's pension and health burdens. No one has yet put a big pension deal on the table for them. None of this has yet been explored."

In the end, all sides are responsible for failing to craft a deal that trades greater efficiency for targeted federal tax credits into R&D. One consequence of Japan's public policies that reward R&D with tax credits, suggests Mark, is that Japanese automakers are run by innovation-driven engineers whereas American automakers are run by narrowly focused accountants. For Pavley to inspire a win-win-win deal by industry, environmentalists and the UAW, all three interests will need to start thinking outside of their conceptual boxes.

Winning While Losing vs. Losing While Losing

Failure is an opportunity.
-- Tao Ti Ching

In politics, a legislative defeat can either be a win or a loss. A legislative loss can be considered a win if it has increased a movement's power, energy, and influence over the long-term. Witness the religious right's successful effort to ban partial-birth abortions. The proposal succeeded only after several failed attempts. Because it was anchored to core values, not technical policy specs, the initial defeats of the ban on partial-birth abortions paved the way for eventual victory.

The serial losses on Rio, Kyoto, CAFE, and McCain-Lieberman were not framed in ways that increase the environmental community's power through each successive defeat. That's because, when those proposals were crafted, environmentalists weren't thinking about what we get out of each defeat. We were only thinking about what we get out of them if they succeed. It's this mentality that must be overthrown if we are to craft proposals that generate the power we need to succeed at a legislative level.

The thing everyone from the Pew Charitable Trusts to Rainforest Action Network agrees on is the size of the problem. "What we are trying to achieve is a fundamental shift in the way this country (and the world) produces and consumes energy," said Pew's Environment Director Josh Reichert. "I am confident that we will get there, primarily because I believe that we have no choice. But how long it will take, and how much will be sacrificed because of the delay, remains to be seen."

Greg Wetstone of the NRDC concurred. "There's an awareness in the scientific community and the public that this is the most important and difficult environmental challenge we've ever faced. We're not, unfortunately, seeing progress yet in Congress or the Bush Administration."

After the Senate voted against McCain-Lieberman 55 to 43 in October 2003, Kevin Curtis of the National Environmental Trust spoke for the community when [he told Grist Magazine](#) that "It's a start. This may seem to be a defeat now, but in the end it's a victory. A bill that gets at least 40 votes has a fair chance of passing if it's reintroduced."

Not everyone agrees that McCain-Lieberman is helping the environmental community. Shelley Fiddler said, "It is completely spurious for anyone to call this loss a victory."

Even though Senators McCain and Lieberman have watered down the carbon caps to win more votes, it's not clear that environmentalists can muster the strength to pass the Climate Stewardship Act through the Congress. Reichert predicts that McCain Lieberman will pass the Senate by the end of 2005, but acknowledges that the House will be much harder.

The political calculation environmentalists are making now is how subsidies for cleaner coal and carbon sequestration could win over the coal and electric industries, as well as the United Mineworkers. While we believe that the situation in China and other developing countries makes investments into cleaner coal technologies and sequestration an urgent priority, it is a disturbing sign that, once again, environmentalists are putting the technical policy cart before the vision-and-values horse. Investments in cleaner coal should be framed as part of an overall vision for creating jobs in the energy industries of the future, not simply as a technical fix.

In some ways McCain-Lieberman offers the worst of all worlds. Not only does it fail to inspire a compelling vision that could change the debate and grow the political power of environmentalists, it also disappoints at the policy level. "Even if McCain-Lieberman were enacted it wouldn't do a hell of a lot of good," said one well-known Washington energy attorney. "It's a minor decrease in carbon. If you look at what's necessary, which is stabilizing emissions, McCain-Lieberman isn't going to make a dent. We need 50 -- 70 percent reductions. Part of the job is to stay the course and keep pushing. But another part of the job is to come up with a more thought-through program."

Passing McCain-Lieberman will require more than buying off or out-flanking industry opponents. It will also require beating savvy neocon strategists who have successfully turned the regulation of carbon emissions into the *bête noire* of the conservative movement.

And if the political prospects for action on global warming appear daunting in the U.S., don't look to China for uplift: the 1.2 billion person country, growing at 20 percent a year, intends to quadruple the size of its economy in 30 years and bring 300 gigawatts -- nearly half of what we use each year in the US -- of dirty coal energy on-line.

The challenge for American environmentalists is not just to get the US to dramatically overhaul its energy strategy but also to help developing countries like China, India, Russia and South Africa do so as well. That means environmental groups will need to advocate policies like technology transfer, ethical trade agreements, and win-win joint ventures. The carbon threat from China and other developing countries drives home the point that a whole series of major policies not traditionally defined as "environmental," from industrial policy to trade policy, will be needed to deal with global warming.

The question that must be put to proposals like McCain-Lieberman is this: will its continuing defeat -- or its eventual passage -- provide us with the momentum we need to introduce and pass a whole series of proposals to reshape the global energy economy? If not, then what will?

Environmentalism as Though Politics Didn't Matter

With public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it, nothing can succeed. Consequently, he who molds public sentiment goes deeper than he who enacts statutes or pronounces decisions.
-- Abraham Lincoln

Ross Gelbspan captured the pragmatic sentiment held by most environmentalists when he told us, "I view McCain-Lieberman like Kyoto: ineffectual but hugely important and indispensable for setting up a mechanism to regulate carbon."

When we told him that Eric Heitz, executive director of the Energy Foundation, predicted to us that the US will have a "serious federal carbon regime in five years," Gelbspan replied, "It can't wait even a couple of years. The climate is changing too quickly. We have to start faster."

In *Boiling Point* Gelbspan accuses environmental leaders of "being too timid to raise alarms about so nightmarish a climate threat" and for settling for too little. "Take the critical issue of climate stabilization -- the level at which the world agrees to cap the buildup of carbon concentrations in the atmosphere," Gelbspan writes. "The major national environmental groups focusing on climate -- groups like the Natural Resources Defense Council, the Union of Concerned Scientists, and the World Wildlife Federation -- have agreed to accept what they see as a politically feasible target for 450 parts per million of carbon dioxide ... [That] may be politically realistic, it would likely be environmentally catastrophic."

In our interview, Gelbspan told us that environmentalists' failure to achieve more is "because they operate in Washington and they accept incremental progress. If they can get two more miles on a CAFE standard that would be a huge accomplishment for them. But compared to the need to cut emissions 70 or 80 percent it's nothing. They're scared they'll be marginalized by calling for big cuts. They are taking the expedient route even as we see the scientists sounding the alarms and saying it's too late to avoid the significant disruptions."

The alternative Gelbspan advocates is the unfortunately titled "WEMP" proposal -- the World Energy Modernization Plan -- to reduce carbon emissions by 70 percent worldwide in three ways: 1) shifting subsidies from polluting industries to clean industries; 2) creating a fund to transfer clean technology to the developing world; and 3) ratcheting up a "Fossil Fuel Efficiency Standard" by five percent per year. It's a program Gelbspan says is strong enough to deal with the global warming crisis while creating millions of good jobs around the world. It might even, he writes, help "create conditions supportive of a real peace process in Israel" (though he acknowledges that the latter is a "highly improbable fantasy").

Intrigued by this big vision, we asked him about the political strategy for passing WEMP.

"It's not a hard one," he answered. "You have to get money out of politics. If you did that you would have no issue. I don't see an answer short of real campaign finance reform. I know that sounds implausible, but the alternative is massive climate change."

We asked, "Are you saying we have to get campaign finance reform before we can get action on global warming?" At this Gelbspan backed down. "I don't know

what the answer to that is. I really don't."

What is so appealing about *Boiling Point* is Gelbspan's straight-talk when it comes to the size of the crisis: we must cut carbon emissions by 70 percent as soon as possible or it's the end of the world as we know it. In his book Gelbspan positions himself as something of a Paul Revere attempting to wake the legions of sleeping environmentalists. Yet none of the environmental leaders we interviewed expressed any denial about what we're facing. On the contrary, they all believe the situation is urgent and that big steps must be taken -- at least eventually. Their point is that you have to crawl before you can walk and walk before you can run.

What's frustrating about *Boiling Point* and so many other visionary environmental books -- from *Natural Capitalism* by Paul Hawken, and Amory and Hunter Lovins to *Plan B* by Lester Brown to *The End of Oil* by Paul Roberts -- is the way the authors advocate technical policy solutions as though politics didn't matter. Who cares if a carbon tax or a sky trust or a cap-and-trade system is the most simple and elegant policy mechanism to increase demand for clean energy sources if it's a political loser?

The environmental movement's technical policy orientation has created a kind of myopia: everyone is looking for short-term policy pay-off. We could find nobody who is crafting political proposals that, through the alternative vision and values they introduce, create the context for electoral and legislative victories down the road. Almost every environmental leader we interviewed is focused on short-term policy work, not long-term strategies.

Political proposals that provide a long-term punch by their very nature set up political conflicts and controversy on terms that advance the environmental movement's transformative vision and values. But many within the environmental movement are uncomfortable thinking about their proposals in a transformative political context. When we asked Hal Harvey how he would craft his energy proposals so that the resulting political controversy would build the power of environmentalists to pass legislation, Harvey replied, "I don't know if I want a lot of controversy in these packages. I want astonishment."

PART II

Going Beyond Special Interests and Single Issues

To be empty of a fixed identity allows one to enter fully into the shifting, poignant, beautiful, and tragic contingencies of the world.
-- Stephen Batchelor, *Verses from the Center*

The marriage between vision, values, and policy has proved elusive for environmentalists. Most environmental leaders, even the most vision-oriented, are struggling to articulate proposals that have coherence. This is a crisis because environmentalism will never be able to muster the strength it needs to deal with the global warming problem as long as it is seen as a "special interest." And it will continue to be seen as a special interest as long as it narrowly identifies the problem as "environmental" and the solutions as technical.

In early 2003 we joined with the Carol/Trevelyan Strategy Group, the Center on Wisconsin Strategy, the Common Assets Defense Fund, and the Institute for America's Future to create a proposal for a "New Apollo Project" aimed at freeing the US from oil and creating millions of good new jobs over 10 years. Our strategy was to create something inspiring. Something that would remind people of the American dream: that we are a can-do people capable of achieving great things when we put our minds to it.

Apollo's focus on big investments into clean energy, transportation and efficiency is part of a hopeful and patriotic story that we are all in this economy together. It allows politicians to inject big ideas into contested political spaces, define the debate, attract allies, and legislate. And it uses big solutions to frame the problem -- not the other way around.

Until now the Apollo Alliance has focused not on crafting legislative solutions but rather on building a coalition of environmental, labor, business, and community

allies who share a common vision for the future and a common set of values. The Apollo vision was endorsed by 17 of the country's leading labor unions and environmental groups ranging from NRDC to Rainforest Action Network.

Whether or not you believe that the New Apollo Project is on the mark, it is at the very least a sincere attempt to undermine the assumptions beneath special interest environmentalism. Just two years old, Apollo offers a vision that can set the context for a myriad of national and local Apollo proposals, all of which will aim to treat labor unions, civil rights groups, and businesses not simply as means to an end but as true allies whose interests in economic development can be aligned with strong action on global warming.

Van Jones, the up-and-coming civil rights leader and co-founder of the California Apollo Project, likens these four groups to the four wheels on the car needed to make "an ecological U-turn." Van has extended the metaphor elegantly: "We need all four wheels to be turning at the same time and at the same speed. Otherwise the car won't go anywhere."

Our point is not that Apollo is the answer to the environmental movement's losing streak on global warming. Rather we are arguing that all proposals aimed at dealing with global warming -- Kyoto, McCain-Lieberman, CAFE, carbon taxes, WEMP, and Apollo -- must be evaluated not only for whether they will get us the environmental protections we need but also whether they will define the debate, divide our opponents and build our political power over time.

It is our contention that the strength of any given political proposal turns more on its vision for the future and the values it carries within it than on its technical policy specifications. What's so powerful about Apollo is not its 10-point plan or its detailed set of policies but rather its inclusive and hopeful vision for America's future.

"There was a brief period of time when my colleagues thought I was crazy to grab onto Apollo," said Sierra Club Executive Director Carl Pope, a co-chair of the Apollo Alliance. "They kept looking at Apollo as a policy outcome and I viewed it as a way of reframing the issue. They kept asking, 'How do you know [Teamsters President] Jimmy Hoffa, Jr. is going to get the issue?' I answered, 'Jimmy Hoffa, Jr. isn't! I'm not doing policy mark-up here, I'm trying to get the people that work for Jimmy Hoffa, Jr. to do something different.'"

Getting labor to do something different is no easier than getting environmentalists to. Its problems are similar to those of the environmental movement: lack of a vision, a coherent set of values, and policy proposals that build its power. There's no guarantee that the environmental movement can fix labor's woes or vice versa. But if we would focus on how our interests are aligned we might craft something more creative together than apart. By signifying a unified concern for people and the climate, Apollo aims to deconstruct the assumptions underneath the categories "labor" and "the environment."

Apollo was created differently from proposals like McCain-Lieberman. We started by getting clear about our vision and values and then created a coalition of environmentalists, unions, and civil rights groups before reaching out to Reagan Democrats and other blue-collar constituents who have been financially wrecked by the last 20 years of economic and trade policies. These working families were a key part of the New Deal coalition that governed America through the middle of the last century. Though ostensibly liberal on economic issues, Reagan Democrats have become increasingly suspicious of American government and conservative on social issues, including environmentalism, due in no small part to the success of conservatives in consistently targeting this group with strategic initiatives. And yet more than 80 percent of Reagan Democrats, our polling discovered, support Apollo -- higher rates even than college-educated Democrats.

Irrespective of its short-term impact on US energy policy, Apollo will be successful if it elevates the key progressive values noted above among this critical constituency of opportunity. Viewed as part of a larger effort to build a true, values-based progressive majority in the United States, Apollo should be conceived of as one among several initiatives designed to create bridge values for this constituency to move, over time, toward holding consistent and coherent views that look more and more like those of America's progressive and

environmental base.

Despite Apollo's political strengths, it irked many environmental leaders who believe that if we don't talk about regulation we won't get regulation. Nowhere does policy literalism rear its head more than in arguments against Apollo's focus on investment. That's because instead of emphasizing the need for command-and-control regulations, Apollo stresses the need for greater public-private investments to establish American leadership in the clean energy revolution -- investments like those America made in the railroads, the highways, the electronics industry and the Internet. "We've been positive publicly about Apollo," Hawkins said, "but not positive policy-wise because it doesn't have binding limits, either on CAFE or carbon."

Van Jones believes Apollo represents a third wave of environmentalism.

"The first wave of environmentalism was framed around conservation and the second around regulation," Jones said. "We believe the third wave will be framed around investment."

The New Apollo Project recognizes that we can no longer afford to address the world's problems separately. Most people wake up in the morning trying to reduce what they have to worry about. Environmentalists wake up trying to increase it. We want the public to care about and focus not only on global warming and rainforests but also species extinction, non-native plant invasives, agribusiness, overfishing, mercury, and toxic dumps.

Talking at the public about this laundry lists of concerns is what environmentalists refer to as "public education." The assumption here is that the American electorate consists of 100 million policy wonks eager to digest the bleak news we have to deliver.

Whereas neocons make proposals using their core values as a strategy for building a political majority, liberals, especially environmentalists, try to win on one issue at a time. We come together only around elections when our candidates run on our issue lists and technical policy solutions. The problem, of course, isn't just that environmentalism has become a special interest. The problem is that all liberal politics have become special interests. And whether or not you agree that Apollo is a step in the right direction, it has, we believed, challenged old ways of thinking about the problem.

Getting Back on the Offensive

Far better to dare mighty things, to win glorious triumphs, even though checkered by failure, than to take rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy much nor suffer much, because they live in the gray twilight that knows not victory, nor defeat.

-- Theodore Roosevelt, 1899

Industry and conservative lobbyists prevent action on global warming proposals by framing their attacks around an issue of far greater salience for the American people: jobs. The industry opposition claims that action on global warming will cost billions of dollars and millions of jobs. They repeat this claim, *ad nauseum*, through bogus studies, advertisements, lobbying, public relations, and alliance building among businesses and labor unions.

The environmental leaders we interviewed tended to reinforce the industry position by *responding* to it, in typical literal fashion, rather than attack industry for opposing proposals that will create millions of good new jobs.

In a written statement, Pew's Josh Reichert said, "Ultimately, the labor movement in this country needs to become positively engaged in efforts to address climate change. They need to recognize that, if done properly, reducing greenhouse gases will not be detrimental to labor. On the contrary, it will spawn industries and create jobs that we don't have now."

The unspoken assumptions here are a) the problem, or "root cause," is "greenhouse gases", b) labor must accept the environmental movement's framing of the problem as greenhouse gases, and c) it's the responsibility of labor to get

with the program on global warming.

The problem is that environmental leaders have persuaded themselves that it's their job to worry about "environmental" problems and that it's the labor movement's job to worry about "labor" problems. If there's overlap, they say, great. But we should never ever forget *who we really are*.

"Global warming is an apt example of why environmentalists must break out of their ghetto," said Lance Lindblom, President and CEO of the Nathan Cummings Foundation. "Our opponents use our inability to form effective alliances to drive a wedge through our potential coalition. Some of this is a cultural problem. Environmentalists think, 'You're talking to me about your *job* -- I'm talking about *saving the world!*' Developing new energy industries will clearly help working families and increase national security, but there's still no intuition that all of these are consistent concerns."

The tendency to put the environment into an airtight container away from the concerns of others is at the heart of the environmental movement's defensiveness on economic issues. Our defensiveness on the economy elevates the frame that action on global warming will kill jobs and raise electricity bills. The notion that environmentalists should answer industry charges instead of attacking those very industries for blocking investment into the good new jobs of the future is yet another symptom of literal-scleroritis.

Answering charges with the literal "truth" is a bit like responding to the Republican "Swift Boats for Truth" ad campaign with the facts about John Kerry's war record. The way to win is not to defend -- it's to attack.

Given the movement's adherence to fixed and arbitrary categories it's not surprising that even its best political allies fall into the same traps. At a Pew Center on Global Climate Change conference last June, Senator John McCain awkwardly and unsuccessfully tried to flip the economic argument on his opponents: "I think the economic impact [of climate change] would be devastating. Our way of life is in danger. This is a serious problem. Relief is not on the way."

Senator Lieberman did an even worse job, as one might expect from someone who makes conservative arguments for liberal initiatives: "Confronting global warming need not be wrenching to our economy if we take simple sensible steps now."

There is no shortage of examples of environmentalists struggling to explain the supposed costs of taking action on global warming. A June poll conducted for environmental backers of McCain-Lieberman found that 70 percent of Americans support the goals of the Climate Stewardship Act "despite the likelihood it may raise energy costs by more than \$15 a month per household." In the online magazine *Grist*, [Thad Miller approvingly cites](#) a study done by MIT's Joint Program on the Science and Policy of Global Change that "predicts household energy expenditures under the bill would increase by a modest \$89."

More good news from the environmental community: not only won't we kill as many jobs as you think, we only want to raise your energy bill a little bit!

For nearly every environmental leader we spoke to, the job creation benefits of things like retrofitting every home and building in America were, at best, afterthoughts. A few, however, like Eric Heitz of the Energy Foundation, believe that the economic development argument should be front and center.

"I think the Apollo angle is the best angle," he said. "There are real economic benefits here. The environmental community is focused too much on the problem. It's a shift we've only started to make, so it's not unexpected that it's happening slowly. The pressure becomes overwhelming as Canada and Japan begin to move on us."

When asked what excites him the most about the movement against global warming, Hal Harvey, too, pointed to economic development. "Let's go for the massive expansion of wind in the Midwest -- make it part of the farm bill and not the energy bill. Let's highlight the jobs and farmers behind it," he said.

Talking about the millions of jobs that will be created by accelerating our transition to a clean energy economy offers more than a good defense against industry attacks: it's a frame that moves the environmental movement away from apocalyptic global warming scenarios that tend to create feelings of helplessness and isolation among would-be supporters.

Once environmentalists can offer a compelling vision for the future we will be in a much better position to stop being Pollyanna about the state of their politics. And once we have an inspiring vision we will have the confidence we need to "take a cold, hard look at the facts," in the words of *Good to Great* author Jim Collins.

Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I have a dream speech" is famous because it put forward an inspiring, positive vision that carried a critique of the current moment within it. Imagine how history would have turned out had King given an "I have a nightmare" speech instead.

In the absence of a bold vision and a reconsideration of the problem, environmental leaders are effectively giving the "I have a nightmare" speech, not just in our press interviews but also in the way that we make our proposals. The world's most effective leaders are not issue-identified but rather vision and value-identified. These leaders distinguish themselves by inspiring hope against fear, love against injustice, and power against powerlessness.

A positive, transformative vision doesn't just inspire, it also creates the cognitive space for assumptions to be challenged and new ideas to surface. And it helps everyone to get out of their "issue" boxes.

Toward the end of his life, King began reaching out to labor unions and thinking about economic development. He didn't say, "That's not my issue," as today's liberal leaders do. He didn't see his work as limited to ending Jim Crow.

Environmentalists have a great deal to learn from conservatives. Today, when right-wing strategist Grover Norquist proposes a big agenda like sweeping tax cuts, his allies understand that his unspoken agenda is to cripple the federal government's ability to pay for services like health care, public education, and the enforcement of labor and environmental laws. Special interests seeking cuts to worker safety programs are, for example, more likely to join alliances around Norquist's vision of less taxes than an alliance built around "somebody else's issue," like cutting investments into clean energy.

Because today's conservatives understand the strategic importance of tax cuts for killing social programs, never do they say, "That's not my issue."

A Path for the Crossing

Our company has, indeed, stumbled onto some of its new products. But never forget that you can only stumble if you're moving.

-- Richard Carlton, former CEO, 3M Corporation

While it's obvious that conservatives control all three branches of government and the terms of most political debates, it's not obvious why. This is because environmentalists and other liberals have convinced themselves that, in politics, "the issues" matter and that the public is with us on categories such as "the environment" and "jobs" and "health care." What explains how we can simultaneously be "winning on the issues" and losing so badly politically?

One explanation is that environmentalists simply can't build coalitions well because of turf battles. Another says that environmentalists just don't have enough money to effectively do battle with polluting industries. Another says that we environmentalists are just too nice. These statements all may be true. What's not clear is whether they are truly causes or rather symptoms of something far deeper.

Issues only matter to the extent that they are positioned in ways linking them to proposals carrying within them a set of core beliefs, principles, or values. The role of issues and proposals is to activate and sometimes change those deeply held values. And the job of global warming strategists should be to determine which

values we need to activate to bring various constituencies into a political majority.

For social scientists, values are those core beliefs and principles that motivate behavior -- from who you vote for to which movie to see. These values determine political positions and political identities (e.g., environmentalist or not, Republican or Democrat, conservative or progressive).

The scientists who study values understand that some values are traditional, like so-called "family values," others are modern, like "liberal" enlightenment values, and others (like consumer values) fit into neither category. These values inform how individuals develop a range of opinions, on everything from global warming to the war in Iraq to what kind of SUV to buy.

Conservative foundations and think tanks have spent 40 years getting clear about what they want (their vision) and what they stand for (their values). The values of smaller government, fewer taxes, a large military, traditional families, and more power for big business are only today, after 40 years of being stitched together by conservative intellectuals and strategists, coherent enough to be listed in a "contract with America." After they got clearer about their vision and values, conservatives started crafting proposals that would activate conservative values among their base and swing voters.

Once in power, conservatives govern on all of their issues -- no matter whether their solutions have majority support. Liberals tend to approach politics with an eye toward winning one issue campaign at a time -- a Sisyphean task that has contributed to today's neoconservative hegemony.

Environmental groups have spent the last 40 years defining themselves *against* conservative values like cost-benefit accounting, smaller government, fewer regulations, and free trade, without ever articulating a coherent morality we can call our own. Most of the intellectuals who staff environmental groups are so repelled by the right's values that we have assiduously avoided examining our own in a serious way. Environmentalists and other liberals tend to see values as a distraction from "the real issues" -- environmental problems like global warming.

If environmentalists hope to become more than a special interest we must start framing our proposals around core American values and start seeing our own values as central to what motivates and guides our politics. Doing so is crucial if we are to build the political momentum -- a sustaining movement -- to pass and implement the legislation that will achieve action on global warming and other issues.

"Most foundations accept these categorical assumptions just as our grantees do," said Peter Teague, the Environment Director of the Nathan Cummings Foundation. "We separate out the category of 'the environment.' We assign narrowly focused issue experts to make grants. We set them up to compete rather than cooperate. And we evaluate our progress according to our ability to promote technical policy fixes. The bottom line is that if we want different results we have to think and organize ourselves in a dramatically different way."

Environmental funders can take a page from the world of venture capitalists who routinely make and write-off failed investments, all while promoting an environment of vigorous debate over what worked and what didn't. Just as the craziest ideas in a brainstorming session often come just before a breakthrough, some of the business world's most spectacular failures (e.g. Apple's Newton handheld) come just before it's most stunning successes (e.g., the Palm Pilot). It is this mentality that inspired one prominent business strategist to suggest that the motto for CEOs should be, "Reward success and failure equally. Punish only inaction."²

Pew's Josh Reichert deserves credit for learning from the venture capitalist model. Pew commissions serious research, pays for top legal, public relations and advertising talent, and funds campaigns that achieve results. To no small extent, Reichert shares the credit for the public vigor of grantee Phil Clapp and the National Environmental Trust. But bringing in top talent is pointless if we are unwilling to critically examine the assumptions underneath our strategies.

Kevin Phillips recently argued in *Harper's Magazine* that the decline of liberalism

began because "liberal intellectuals and policy makers had become too sure of themselves, so lazy and complacent that they failed to pay attention to people who didn't share their opinions."

Environmentalists find themselves in the same place today. We are so certain about what the problem is, and so committed to their legislative solutions, that we behave as though all we need is to tell the literal truth in order to pass our policies.

Environmentalists need to tap into the creative worlds of myth-making, even religion, not to better sell narrow and technical policy proposals but rather to figure out who we are and who we need to be.

Above all else, we need to take a hard look at the institutions the movement has built over the last 30 years. Are existing environmental institutions up to the task of imagining the post-global warming world? Or do we now need a set of new institutions founded around a more expansive vision and set of values?

If, for example, environmentalists don't consider the high cost of health care, R&D tax credits, and the overall competitiveness of the American auto industry to be "environmental issues," then who will think creatively about a proposal that works for industry, workers, communities and the environment? If framing proposals around narrow technical solutions is an ingrained habit of the environmental movement, then who will craft proposals framed around vision and values?

One thing is certain: if we hope to achieve our objectives around global warming and a myriad of intimately related problems then we need to take an urgent step backwards before we can take two steps forward.

Anyone who has spent time near wide and wild rivers know that crossing one on stepping stones requires first contemplating the best route. More often than not you must change your route halfway across. But, at the very least, by planning and pursuing a route you become conscious of the choices that you are making, how far you've really come, and where you still must go.

We in the environmental community today find ourselves head-down and knee-deep in the global warming river. It's time we got back to shore and envisioned a new path for the crossing.

Footnotes

1 The term "framing" -- once associated with activities like "framing the constitution" or "framing legislation" -- is today being used by environmentalists and other progressives as a more sophisticated-sounding term for "spinning." The work of linguist George Lakoff on how conservatives more effectively frame public debates than liberals is being badly misinterpreted. Lakoff argues that progressives need to reframe their thinking about the problem and the solutions. What most within the community are saying is that we simply need to use different words to describe the same old problems and solutions. The key to applying Lakoff's analysis is to see vision, values, policy, and politics all as extensions of language.

2 This apt term was coined by a Packard program officer.

3 Keith Bradsher, *High and Mighty*, Perseus: New York, 2002. Bradsher also cites historian Jack Doyle's *Taken for a Ride: Detroit's Big Three and the Politics of Pollution* (New York: 2001).

4 Bradsher, as well as many other observers, has faulted the environmental community for doing next to nothing to tap into a concern about SUVs that is far more salient among the public than efficiency: safety. Environmentalists never ran a serious anti-SUV campaign based on the thousands of dead Americans who would have been alive today had the industry produced cars instead of SUVs. Apparently, in the minds of the community's leaders, safety is "not an environmental issue."

5 September 16, 2004.

6 Page 77.

7 Quoted in Jim Collins' *Good to Great*.

About the Authors

Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus look forward to hearing from readers of this report and meeting with teams interested in their Strategic Values Project, as described in the introduction. They can be emailed at Michael@TheBreakthrough.org and Ted@EvansMcDonough.com.

Michael Shellenberger is a strategist for foundations, organizations and political candidates. He is executive director of the [Breakthrough Institute](#), an organization advancing strategic initiatives to build a progressive majority, and president of [Lumina Strategies](#), a political consulting firm. In 2003 Michael co-founded the Apollo Alliance, a coalition of labor, environment, business, and civil rights leaders working to win passage of a New Apollo Project to create three million new energy jobs and free America from foreign oil in ten years.

Also in 2003 Michael co-founded the Business Ethics Network, which is organizing a nation-wide campaign to hold Wal-Mart accountable for its labor and environmental practices. He is the author of "Race to the Top: A Report on Ethical Business Campaigns." And in early 2004 Michael launched a campaign to put Martin Luther King, Jr. on the twenty-dollar bill -- [PutKingonthe20.com](#). Michael is a co-founder with Ted Nordhaus of the Strategic Values Science Project.

In 1996 Michael co-founded and grew Communication Works to be California's largest public interest communications firm. Michael's work at Communication Works focused on publicizing the plight of Nike's factory workers with Global Exchange. He oversaw strategic communications for the campaign to protect the Headwaters redwood forest and in 1997 helped defeat a federal initiative that would have increased the incarceration of children in adult jails and prisons. In 2001 he merged Communication Works with Fenton Communications, which is the country's largest progressive PR and advertising agency.

Michael has written articles on issues on the economy, energy, and foreign policy for *L.A. Times*, *the American Prospect*, *the Philadelphia Inquirer* and *the San Diego Union Tribune*. Michael is fluent in Spanish and Portuguese and holds a Masters Degree in Anthropology from University of California, Santa Cruz. He lives in El Cerrito, California.

Ted Nordhaus is vice president of Evans/McDonough, one of the country's leading opinion research firms with offices in Washington, D.C., Oakland and Seattle. Ted specializes in crafting strategic initiatives aimed at reframing old debates in ways that build power for his clients. In 2003, Ted helped the Apollo Alliance to frame its proposal for a "New Apollo Project," which has brought together the country's leading environmental groups and labor unions around a bold vision of energy independence.

Ted is also the co-founder and director of Strategic Values Science Project, a joint venture of Evans/McDonough, the Canadian market research firm Environics, and Lumina Strategies, a political strategy firm. Strategic Values has been commissioned to use corporate marketing research to create a Values Road Map for creating a progressive majority around core values, not political issues.

Ted got his start in politics with the Public Interest Research Groups (PIRGs), where he served as campaign director for California. Later, as campaign director for Share the Water, a coalition of environmentalists, fishermen, farmers, and urban water agencies, Ted oversaw campaigns to reform federal water policies in California. For two years Ted served as executive director of the Headwaters Sanctuary Project where he played a critical role in securing landmark environmental protections for the Headwaters Redwood Forest in Northern California. Before turning to polling Ted was a political strategist for Next Generation where his clients included Environmental Defense, the California Futures Network, and Clean Water Action.

At Evans/McDonough, Ted specializes in land use and transportation issues, and brings more than 10 years of experience to interpreting survey research and moderating focus groups. His other clients include Oakland's Safe Passages program to keep youth in school and out of trouble, the Alameda County Waste Management Authority, the Contra Costa and Solano County transportation authorities, and the San Francisco Water Transit Authority.

Ted holds a BA in history from the University of California, Berkeley.

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