



Cartoon by [John Jonik](#)

George Bush's War on Nature

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Jubilant Republicans, focused solely on headlines and human events, may imagine that the most significant harbinger for America's future was the banging of a gavel on Jan. 6, 2003, opening the 108th Congress. Finally, GOP partisans may conclude, they call the shots.

But the Republicans could be wrong. Last September, a significantly more powerful event occurred in the windblown silences of the Arctic. In 2002, the second hottest year on record, scientists saw Arctic Ocean ice coverage shrink by more than at any time since satellite measurements were first made a quarter century ago. And, they say, continued melting could leave the Arctic nearly ice-free by summer 2050. In a related report, University of Colorado researchers found that globally warmed glaciers are melting faster than expected, possibly upping ocean levels by as much as 1.5 feet by 2100, far

exceeding earlier U.N. estimates of the 2- to 4-inch contribution made by glacial ice to sea rise.

Americans need to listen intently to those balmy Arctic winds, see the water rising, and then turn a cold, pragmatic eye toward our Washington leadership to decide just how much Republican environmental policies contradict clear messages relayed by the earth. It could be that our leaders are viewing the world through a distorted lens, and that their corporate worldview and sometimes their fundamentalist Christian faith are guiding them to an interpretation of reality based not on scientific fact, but on dogma. We should take lessons from history, looking to the example of Stalinist Russia to see the human misery that comes from sacrificing scientific objectivity to political ideology. Or look to the Iraqi deserts, not in search of oil, but to observe ancient archeological evidence that proves the dire consequences that result when leaders ignore environmental indicators. Today those global indicators are screaming at us.

World population, topping 6 billion, has already left 1.1 billion people without safe drinking water, says the United Nations Environment Program. The earth is poisoned by 500 million tons of hazardous waste annually. Fisheries are collapsing, croplands eroding, and forests shrinking -- from 5 billion to 2.9 billion hectares in the last century, says Worldwatch Institute. And 20 percent of all species could go extinct by 2030, cautions Pulitzer Prize-winning entomologist Edward O. Wilson.

Despite these apocalyptic warnings, the federal government -- with Republicans in control of the White House, Congress and the judiciary -- has launched the largest rollback of environmental law ever. The Bush administration seems determined to undo much of the good done since Earth Day 1970, when 20 million Americans defended the planet in the biggest mass demonstration in U.S. history.

Republican Sen. James Inhofe of Oklahoma is poised to become Bush's lieutenant in the assault. As the new chairman of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, he unseats Jim Jeffords, I-Vt., an environmental champion who advanced legislation to curb global warming. Inhofe, by contrast, is a Big Oil backer who once characterized the Environmental Protection Agency as "the Gestapo bureaucracy" and has earned a zero rating from the League of Conservation Voters three years running.

Under Inhofe, hearings to oppose Bush's anti-environmental agenda are improbable, as are subpoenas for administration documents divulging shoddy science or corporate

complicity. "Teddy Roosevelt is rolling over in his grave," Alys Campaigne, legislative director of the Natural Resources Defense Council, said in the Bureau of National Affairs Environmental Report.

Bush and Inhofe will likely move to modify or overturn the National Environmental Policy Act Amendments of 1975. This Magna Carta of environmental law requires study, disclosure and public comment on the environmental impacts of federal projects. Bush has already demanded that "excessive red tape" be hacked from the law, fast-tracking road and airport construction and cutting the public out of a once democratic process.

The president is attacking the Clean Air Act of 1970, another cornerstone of environmental law. Late last year, Bush proposed rules to weaken the act's new source review, which requires the installation of state-of-the-art pollution-control equipment in modernizing factories. The new rules allow industrial air pollution to continue at levels that, according to the American Lung Association, now kill 10,000 Americans annually.

Bush's proposed "Clear Skies" initiative also undermines air quality. Like developers who christen subdivisions with the prettified names of the nature they destroy, "Clear Skies" won't enhance the air at all, but will further pollute it, says the NRDC.

Bush's "Healthy Forests" initiative likewise suffers from Orwellian doublespeak, felling Western forests to save them. Disguised as a measure for curbing wildfires, the plan invites logging companies to cut healthy trees in national forests while reducing public oversight. Ironically, the probable cause of recent catastrophic fires is global warming, a problem that most Republicans deny.

California last year passed the nation's first law to control greenhouse gas emissions from motor vehicles. But the Bush administration has virtually gone to war against the state's environmental initiatives, seeking to extend oil-drilling rights off the California coast and to overturn regulations requiring automakers to sell a zero-emissions vehicle.

This Congress will likely discontinue the requirement that corporate polluters contribute to Superfund, leaving taxpayers to pay for toxic waste cleanup. Both presidents Ronald Reagan and George Bush Sr. supported Superfund, with Bush Jr. the first Republican president not to back reauthorization.

Under the Republicans, bigger oil-company tax breaks are likely, heightening

the nation's vulnerability to terrorism through dependence on foreign energy, while paying lip service to wind and solar power. Republicans will almost surely launch another assault on the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and other public lands -- reserves that are an insignificant drop in the barrel compared to total U.S. demand.

When the Pentagon used Sept. 11 and the war on terrorism in an effort to get its training exercises exempted from eight environmental laws, including the Endangered Species Act, the GOP-dominated House gave full approval. The lame-duck Democratic Senate rejected all but an exemption to the Migratory Bird Treaty, a "compromise" that allows the military to blast rare migratory birds like the American eagle in the defense of freedom.

This case illustrates Republican arrogance. The Los Angeles Times reported that an administration lawyer, arguing for military readiness, contended that naturalists benefit when the military kills birds because "bird-watchers get more enjoyment spotting a rare bird than they do spotting a common one."

Environmentalists are appealing the military exemption, but another political sea change diminishes their chances of getting a fair hearing. Congressional Republicans blocked many of President Clinton's judicial appointments, leaving over 100 federal judgeships open. With the Senate Judiciary Committee now in GOP hands, the courts could take a hard swing to the right, putting the environment further at risk.

The U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit holds almost exclusive jurisdiction over environmental law, hearing cases concerning federal authority, involving the powers of the Environmental Protection Agency, for example. Senate Republicans blocked two Clinton appointments to the court, setting the stage for a bench packed with Bush conservatives. It is they who will likely hear the Migratory Bird Treaty appeal. Conservative judges appointed now could shape environmental law for decades.

Certainly, the Republican environmental onslaught will face enormous opposition, with new initiatives likely to be tied up in court. For example, just hours after the administration published rules weakening the Clean Air Act's new source review, nine Northeastern states filed a legal challenge to the levels of pollution allowed by Bush's plan. But in the meantime, damage done could be huge. Children crippled by pollution-aggravated asthma are not easily cured; public lands, once drilled, cannot be restored to wilderness. The obvious reasons behind Republican anti-environmentalism have been

often stated but deserve review: George Bush and Dick Cheney come from old-line industry and possess an old-line industrial worldview. They are oilmen who believe in the efficiency of the marketplace, an efficiency that for them is synonymous with virtue. They are unreconstructed capitalists -- that's their operating system, as surely as Windows drives most personal computers.

Such marketplace-minded Republicans tend to label environmentalists as either frivolous tree-huggers or dangerous monkey-wrenching eco-terrorists. They dismiss good environmental science as the doomsaying of the loony left. Almost by definition, they lack an understanding of such concepts as sustainability, carrying capacity, biodiversity, or webs of interdependence, all crucial ideas for ecologists.

Even if Bush and his allies were to understand these principles, economic and political factors are a heavy counterweight. Republicans, for example, see lower oil prices as good for the economy, and a strong economy as improving chances for reelection. For that reason, low gas prices in the short term become a primary public-policy goal above long-term health and environmental considerations.

And of course, promoting any policies that go against immediate economic goals would pit the administration against strong corporate interests. The American auto industry, for example, remains a powerful economic engine in many states; if SUV sales are keeping domestic automakers afloat, the automakers will resist spending millions to impose tough new fuel-efficiency standards on SUVs.

Hence the power of corporate campaign contributions. Earthjustice, a nonprofit public-interest law group, reports that in the 2000 campaign, Bush-Cheney and the Republican National Committee received \$44 million in contributions from the fossil-fuel, chemical, timber and mining industries -- more than was offered by these interests to all federal Democratic candidates and party committees combined. "The Bush administration's anti-environmental agenda doesn't just appear to be made-to-order for polluting and extractive industry interests," said Earthjustice. "It is." In 2002, the bond between polluters, extractors and Republicans persisted: GOP candidates received \$14.6 million from oil and gas companies, for example, while Democrats got just \$3.7 million, says the nonpartisan Center for Responsive Politics.

However, beyond all these more obvious anti-environmental motivations lies a more deep-seated cause, one tougher for the secular mind to grasp -- especially for those who

trust in unbiased science as a guiding principle of environmental policy. Difficult as it may be to believe, many of the right-wing conservatives who have great influence in the Bush administration and now in Congress are governed by a higher power.

In his book "The Carbon Wars," Greenpeace activist Jeremy Leggett tells how he stumbled upon this otherworldly agenda. During Kyoto Protocol climate change negotiations, Leggett candidly asks Ford Motor Co. executive John Schiller how opponents of the pact could believe there is no problem with "a world of a billion cars intent on burning all the oil and gas available on the planet." The executive asserts first that scientists get it wrong when they say fossil fuels have been sequestered underground for eons. The earth, he says, is just 10,000 years old -- not 4.5 billion years old, the age widely accepted by scientists.

Then Schiller drops the bomb: "You know, the more I look, the more it is just as it says in the Bible." The Book of Daniel, he tells Leggett, predicts that increased earthly devastation will mark the End Time and return of Christ. Paradoxically, Leggett notes, many fundamentalists see dying coral reefs, melting ice caps and other environmental destruction not as an urgent call to action but as God's will. Within the religious right worldview, the wreck of the earth is Good News!

Some true believers, interpreting biblical prophecy, are sure they will be saved from the horrific destruction brought by ecosystem collapse. They'll be raptured: rescued from earth by God, who will then rain down seven ghastly years of misery on unbelieving humanity. During this tribulation, a powerful ruler led by Satan and called the antichrist will rule the world. Then Jesus will come in glory to defeat Satan's forces at the battle of Armageddon. His return marks the Millennium, when the Lord restores the earth to its green pristine condition, and the faithful enjoy a thousand years of peace and prosperity.

U.S. fundamentalists number in the tens of millions, but not all of them believe literally in this apocalyptic vision, warns Joan Bokaer, an expert on the religious right, formerly of the Center for Religion, Ethics and Social Policy at Cornell University. That would be an oversimplification, she says. Some, no doubt, don't even dwell on environmental issues. But many do hold ideas antithetical to the environment.

One powerful fringe group, the Reconstructionists, don't speak of the End Time at all, Bokaer notes. They put the onus for the Lord's return not in the hands of biblical prophecy, but in their own political activism. Reconstructionists say Christ will only

return when a righteous nation acts to purge unrepentant sinners and applies biblical law to its populace. They want to spread the Gospel in a political context, making the Bible the foundation of U.S. jurisprudence. That includes an end to environmental regulation.

Reconstructionists believe the Lord will provide, and their view is laid out in "America's Providential History," a religious-right high school history textbook: "The secular or socialist has a limited resource mentality and views the world as a pie ... that needs to be cut up so everyone can get a piece," write authors Mark Beliles and Stephen McDowell. "In contrast, the Christian knows that the potential in God is unlimited and that there is no shortage of resources in God's Earth. The resources are waiting to be tapped."

In another passage, the writers explain: "While many secularists view the world as overpopulated, Christians know that God has made the earth sufficiently large with plenty of resources to accommodate all of the people." Fossil fuels and forests are like the loaves and fishes, Reconstructionists say, miraculously multiplying for true believers.

Such misinformed viewpoints would be of little import except that, in the 1980s, they began permeating the Republican Party. That's when Republican strategists, eager to broaden the party's narrow base of wealthy corporate supporters, partnered with religious right leaders like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson who agreed to politicize their followers and bring them into the GOP, according to Bokaer.

Working through fundamentalist, Pentecostal and charismatic churches, the Christian Coalition has promoted right-wing Republican candidates by mailing voter guides at election time -- 30 million in 1994; another 45 million in 1996; and 70 million in 2000 to support candidate Bush, reported the watchdog group People for the American Way.

As it turns out, politicians who ally themselves with the religious right are also rabidly anti-environmental. Those who score high with the Christian Coalition almost invariably score low with the League of Conservation Voters.

According to the Washington-based People United for Separation of Church and State, 178 House members in the last Congress allied themselves with the religious right, earning barely a 15 percent average approval rating with the League of Conservation Voters. In the 108th Congress, Republican leadership hails almost exclusively from the religious right, scoring a perfect 100 percent with the Christian Coalition, but getting barely a 4 percent average approval rating from the conservation group.

Among them are Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist and Assistant Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert, and Majority Whip Roy Blunt. These leaders seem ready to aggressively move the religious right agenda forward: DeLay has bluntly said that the Almighty is using him to promote "a biblical worldview" in American politics, according to Paul Krugman in the New York Times.

Also among those holding an extreme fundamentalist perspective is Inhofe, reports Americans United for Separation of Church and State. "When we win this revolution in November, you'll be doing the Lord's work, and He will richly bless you for it!" Inhofe declared at the Christian Coalition's Road to Victory Conference last October.

And George W. Bush? He and Attorney General John Ashcroft make no secret of being born again. According to the Nation, Bush's "walk with Jesus" began in 1985 when Billy Graham visited him in Kennebunkport, Maine. While Graham doesn't support the politicizing of Christianity, one has to wonder how Bush's conversion (whether real or a ploy) has helped him justify anti-environmental positions to himself and others.

The Republican Party platform in Bush's home state warns of what to expect from a federal government guided by religious-right radicalism. "The Republican Party of Texas reaffirms the United States of America as a Christian Nation," the platform says, and seeks to nullify the separation between church and state. It would abolish the Environmental Protection Agency, Department of Energy and Department of Education. It dismisses global warming as "myth." And it promotes public school education "based upon biblical principles," not upon secular humanism, which teaches Darwinian evolution theory and a scientific worldview. If the Texas Republican Party platform became the law of the land, America would become a very different place. Whether the Republican Party's attack on nature is based on corporate piracy or fundamentalist ideology, the result is similar. With environmental laws removed as braking mechanisms, the role of the federal government as environmental guardian is repealed, and industry is given free rein to destroy.

In such a brave new world, office holders and bureaucrats, embracing the corporate or fundamentalist worldview, will be unable to see, or may even willfully engineer, what many ecologists recognize as the looming global environmental crisis.

In the early days of the current administration, the news was full of instances where Bush appointed foxes to guard the henhouse: Gale Norton, a mining industry lobbyist, became secretary of the interior. Steven Griles, a lobbyist for major coal interests, was appointed Norton's second-in-command. The list goes on.

Now, the Washington Post reports a more disturbing trend. Bush "has begun a broad restructuring of the scientific advisory committees that guide federal policy," says the Post. These largely anonymous committees of scientists, lawyers and academics make recommendations vital to determining health and environmental risk.

Replaced, for example, were 15 members of a 17-member Department of Health and Human Services committee that assesses the impacts on human health of low-level exposure to environmental chemicals. New Bush-imposed panel appointees include chemical-industry advocates and a California scientist who helped defend Pacific Gas and Electric Co. against the real-life Erin Brockovich.

More troubling is W. David Hager, one of Bush's nominees to the influential Food and Drug Administration panel on women's health policy. Hager, says Maureen Dowd of the New York Times, has a resume "more impressive for theology than gynecology." Hager emphasizes the restorative power of Jesus Christ in one's life and recommends specific Scripture readings to treat headaches, eating disorders and premenstrual syndrome. One wonders how his radical fundamentalism may cloud his scientific objectivity.

The administration has repeatedly turned a blind eye to good science. When the National Academy of Sciences came to Bush in 2001 with a report saying that global warming was real, serious and human-caused, he ignored it. When the Environmental Protection Agency sent a 2002 report to the United Nations saying that global warming will result in "rising seas, melting ice caps and glaciers, ecological system disruption, floods, heat waves, and more dangerous storms," Bush rejected it as a document "put out by the bureaucracy."

Marty Jezer, writing for the Online Common Dreams News Center, notes, "One has to go back to the Stalinist era of the Soviet Union to find such a display of political arrogance and ignorance of science."

At that time, Trofim Lysenko told Josef Stalin that Charles Darwin's theory of evolution and Gregor Mendel's theory of heredity were wrongheaded "bourgeois science," not

suited to a communist state. Lysenko's ideologically based science professed that the environment can alter genes and cause evolutionary change within a single generation. Under the right conditions, he said, a wheat seed can produce rye. Or a tropical palm seed, soaked in cold water, can have its genetics retuned to thrive in a chilly climate.

With Stalin's blessing, Lysenko purged Russia's scientific leadership; researchers were silenced, sent to Siberia, killed. His principles were used to guide Soviet agriculture, with disastrous results. While the rest of the world explored genetic science, leading to the green revolution, Russia resisted, declaring evolution's tenets "reactionary and decadent."

Lysenko's theories were practiced on collective farms on a massive scale, displacing traditional agricultural knowledge and killing millions in the Russian famine of 1931-33.

His beliefs were exported to China, says Joseph Becker, author of "Hungry Ghosts: Mao's Secret Famine." Farmers were told that seeds of the same species act like "comrades," and wouldn't compete with each other. Chinese farmers were ordered to plant up to 15 million seedlings per 2.5 acres, rather than the scientifically proven 1.5 million, helping bring on history's worst famine. An estimated 30 million people starved to death between 1958 and 1961.

Lysenkoism, repudiated by the Soviets in the 1960s, stands as a warning to those now controlling the U.S. federal government. When truth in science is sacrificed to corporate ideology or religious-right theology, we ignore the true workings of the natural world at our peril. When the bottom line and/or religious fervor rather than sound science guide our decisions, we are traveling blind and at the mercy of unforeseen consequences.

But it seems that Bush has already taken a plank from the Texas Republican Party platform. In a move to blunt new U.S. global-warming research, he has launched a four-year study to ascertain "precisely how much climate change between 1950 and now was human-caused." Prominent climate experts, like Princeton University's Michael Oppenheimer, say the study may merely rehash issues most scientists consider settled. Critics see the new study as intended to delay federal action on the problem -- years lost in Lysenko-like denial, as we edge toward an unseen precipice that is the threshold of runaway global warming. "The danger is that while they're continuing to do the research, the window of opportunity to avoid dangerous global warming is closing," said Oppenheimer.

Again, look to Texas to see what impact a worldview "based upon biblical principles" can have. Last fall, the Texas Board of Education rejected several environmental science textbooks, including one titled "Environmental Science: Creating a Sustainable Environment," according to Audubon Magazine. Critics forced the book ban primarily on ideological grounds, calling the text "vitriol against Western civilization and its primary belief systems." Another science book was approved only after the publisher agreed to remove entire sections on climate change, which were deemed offensive. The decision reaches far beyond the Lone Star State: Texas is America's second-largest textbook buyer, so the expurgated texts will likely be sold in other states.

In 2000, the Kansas school board briefly removed Darwinian evolution from the state's science standards and tests, while similar campaigns have been pushed in over 20 states, says People for the American Way. Last spring, two Republican congressmen from Ohio, John Boehner and Steve Chabot, pressured their state's school board unsuccessfully to introduce creationism, disguised as "intelligent design," into school curricula.

Here, the parallels with Lysenko become uncomfortably close. Should efforts to de-emphasize the teaching of evolutionary theory actually succeed, one wonders how we could hope to confront tough environmental problems -- training scientists, for example, to fight the virulent new strains of bacteria that have evolved resistance to potent antibiotics. Or, for another example: In his book "The Beak of the Finch," environmental journalist Jonathan Weiner tells how the U.S. cotton industry is threatened with collapse because of *Heliothis virescens*, a moth that has evolved total resistance to all pesticides. Frustrated entomologist Martin Taylor notes the irony of the equivalence between the Cotton Belt and Bible Belt. "It's amazing," Taylor notes, "that cotton growers are having to deal with these pests in the very states whose legislatures are so hostile to the theory of evolution. Because it is evolution itself they are struggling against in their fields every season. These people are trying to ban the teaching of evolution while their own cotton crops are failing because of evolution. How can you be a creationist farmer anymore?"

For those who think the teaching of environmental science is safe in our schools, or that evolution vs. creationism is a dead issue, listen to this comment from Tom DeLay, one of the most powerful men in Congress. He has suggested that the Columbine, Colo., school shootings occurred "because our school systems teach our children that they are nothing but glorified apes who have evolutionized out of some primordial mud." With such leaders at the helm, it becomes necessary to ask where precisely we are being led. Six

thousand years ago, the arid Iraqi wastes over which U.S. tanks may soon roll flourished with amber waves of grain. Today, our government stands ready to launch an attack by the most advanced technological civilization ever against the ancient source of our species' first great historical trauma: humankind's original eviction from Eden.

The modern nation of Iraq is built upon the ruins of Sumer, the world's earliest civilization. Resourceful Mesopotamian city-states like Ur on the Tigris and Euphrates rivers invented writing, the wheel, sailboats, animal-drawn plows, metalwork, the potter's wheel, and mapmaking. They originated large professional armies, imperialism and bureaucracy. They were also the first to develop an urban lifestyle, inhabiting great cities like Ur, and temporarily insulating themselves from nature's harsh realities.

They made the desert bloom with "grainfields, date plantations, fishponds, and gardens of lettuce, onions, lentils, garlic and cress," says "Ecology of Eden" author and historian Evan Eisenberg. They created a human-made paradise on earth, a realm echoed in their mythology where we find the precursors of Eden: a paradise called Dilman, a holy land of palm trees and sweet waters blessed by the gods.

Also in Sumer, we find the first nation to track its economic progress through hard-nosed business records. It is partly through those ledgers that scientists learned why Sumer collapsed.

The Sumerians built impressive irrigation systems that produced a bountiful surplus, feeding a booming population and supporting an administrative, military and religious elite. While leaders sought greater riches through warfare, and priests guided those wars through astrological forecasts, environmental mismanagement caused Sumer's power to erode.

The grand irrigation system that made Sumer possible also destroyed it. The arid soil became waterlogged. Evaporating water left salt deposits behind. Records show that in southern Mesopotamia at about 3500 B.C., equal amounts of wheat and barley grew. Then salt-intolerant wheat began to be replaced by more salt-tolerant barley, until by 1700 B.C., wheat was abandoned entirely. As salinity worsened, crops failed. Fields turned to desert and the Sumerians abandoned their cities, writes Clive Ponting in "A Green History of the World."

In 1936, archeologist Leonard Woolley was stunned at the contrast between southern Iraq's past and present. He wrote that it was impossible to imagine that "the blank waste ever blossomed, and bore fruit for the sustenance of a busy world."

The Sumerians, distracted by human matters, had destroyed the natural basis of their wealth. They ignored the implications of failing harvests, though meticulously tracking the decline much as CNN follows the falling NASDAQ. Walled up in urban centers, busied with commerce and war, they never took action to sustain themselves.

As America girds for international conflict, our government, dominated by corporate interests and the religious right, seems about to make the same mistake. While able to wield the greatest war machine in history, we seem unable to squarely face the threat of climate change, to clean up deadly coal-burning power plants or nuclear waste that could contaminate the planet for millennia. We, like Sumer, seem ready to march off to war and ask for answers from the stars, while ignoring the sinking fortunes of our own fields and forests.

Sumerian leaders and the priests of Ur had little idea of the scientific mechanisms at work out at the edge of town, where the human-dominated realm ended and that of nature began. We are in similar peril, but can't plead ignorance as an excuse.
