

Taking the Lead in Environmentalism

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"The attitude toward nature...is a matter so basic to one's outlook or philosophy of life that we often tend to overlook it....[N]ature [is] something which is given and something which is finally inscrutable. This is equivalent to saying that...it [is] the creation of a Creator. There follows from this attitude an important deduction, which is that man has a duty of veneration toward nature and the natural. Nature is not something to be fought, conquered and changed according to any human whims. To some extent, of course, it has to be used. But what man should seek in regard to nature is not a complete dominion but a *modus vivendi*—that is, a manner of living together, a coming to terms with something that was here before our time and will be here after it. The important corollary of this doctrine, it seems to me, is that man is not the lord of creation, with an omnipotent will, but a part of creation, with limitations, who ought to observe a decent humility in the face of the inscrutable."

"It seems wiser to be moderate in our expectations of nature, and respectful; and out of so simple a thing as respect for the physical earth and its teeming life comes a primary joy, which is an inex-

haustible source of arts and religions and philosophies."

"We may say that religion...implies a life in conformity with nature....[T]he natural life and the supernatural life have a conformity to each other which neither has with the mechanistic life....[A] wrong attitude towards nature implies, somewhere, a wrong attitude towards God, and the consequence is an inevitable doom. For a long enough time we have believed in nothing but the values arising in a mechanised, commercialised, urbanised way of life: it would be as well for us to face the permanent conditions upon which God allows us to live upon this planet."

MANY OF OUR POLITICIANS, pundits, and radio entertainers who call themselves "conservatives" would quite likely go into fits of rage over those three quotations—dangerously radical sentiments of New Age ecofreaks, or the like, out to subvert and destroy capitalism and Western civilization. And, unfortunately, there are far too many who would follow them. But that merely shows how far so many of our "conservatives" have fallen.

The first quotation is from Richard Weaver's essay "The Southern Tradition."¹ The second is from his mentor, John Crowe Ransom, in *I'll Take My Stand*.² The third is from T. S. Eliot's *The Idea of a Christian Society*.³ And those quota-

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tions were written long before our environmental problems had become acute. They express a point of view that Weaver explicitly developed throughout his works, and that can be found, although scattered and less developed, in much by Russell Kirk.⁴

I believe that in the twenty-first century, conservative scholars will *finally* have to come to terms with environmentalism, in its widest sense. I also believe that those three quotations illustrate that this means a return to the wisdom of our "Founding Fathers," much of which has been lost today to political opportunism, to entertainers seeking popularity by playing on middle class prejudices and calling that "conservatism," and, for that matter, to sheer hypocrisy.

In the twenty-first century—*early* in the century—conservative scholars will, at long last, have to come to terms with environmentalism and environmental issues. This is vital because we face some daunting and unprecedented problems that must be solved, and those solutions, I will argue, require the application of fundamental principles of conservatism. Many may find that ironic, given the virulent anti-environmental attitude today of many who call themselves "conservatives." But that merely shows the extent to which a major disinformation campaign has badly affected our public discourse. So first I must say a word or two towards correcting that.

When I say we must come to terms with environmentalism, that does *not* mean that conservative scholars will have to adapt to some left-wing anti-capitalist ideology. Unfortunately, too many "conservative" politicians and pundits and entertainers have been spreading that kind of nonsense about environmentalism and environmentalists. Despite the fevered imaginations of these "conservatives," leftists of that type barely exist in the American environmental movement, and they play no more than a fringe role.

They are no more important to environmentalism than paranoid militias are to conservatism.

There is nothing inherently left-wing or anti-capitalist about environmentalism. It only refers to a concern about some or all of the ways in which we have degraded our planet and a desire to correct them. As Frances Cairncross of *The Economist* says, "The environment is an issue without any obvious political home."⁵ Indeed, British political philosopher John Gray contends that concern for the environment is most compatible with Burkean traditionalist conservatism and as the argument here will show, I believe he is right.⁶

We should deal with environmental issues by applying conservative principles to the major problems we face. Yet for the past 30 years and more, conservative scholars have almost completely ignored the environment, so our input into public debate and policy formation has been virtually nonexistent. The only significant exceptions are a few libertarian economists who advocate "free market environmentalism."⁷ They claim that a lack of clearly defined and enforceable property rights has led to many of our environmental problems. (Air pollution from a factory, for example, violates the property rights of its victims, but under our current laws victims cannot enforce their rights.) Other problems have been created by governmental interventions into the market, subsidizing destructive actions that would not otherwise take place. (Most of the damage to our national forests is due to subsidized logging, in places that never would be cut if the timber companies had to pay all of the costs.) Unfortunately, most of these libertarians are ideologues. They have some excellent ideas, but those ideas tend to get lost in their utopian rhetoric and blind worship of markets.

The abdication on environmental questions by conservative scholars has

also been damaging because we have offered no corrective to the anti-environmental “conservatives.” The latter have adopted three general tactics: either to attack some basically irrelevant fringe group of “ecofreaks” and assert that all environmentalists are like that; or to trot out some maverick who denies the overwhelming consensus of scientists on some issue; or to whine about the “costs” of cleaning up pollution, preferring to leave the status quo where innocent victims have to pay those costs. There is, of course, absolutely nothing conservative about any of that. But it has forced environmentalists to turn to the liberals and the bureaucrats, where they have found support. However, it cannot be stressed enough, given the current disinformation campaign, that there is *nothing* inherently liberal or leftist or anti-capitalist about environmentalism.

The result of all this at the policy level is that liberals and bureaucrats have over the past 30 years or so developed an intricate and elaborate “command and control” system of regulation. In many cases, for example, specific pollution control technologies are required in factories. In other cases, limits are set for each plant’s emissions. The system has little or no flexibility. It offers no incentives for industries to clean up their emissions more than required, or to develop new technologies for greater clean up. And the system is far more expensive than it need be.

The bureaucrats and the liberals are now discovering that correcting market failures (“internalizing externalities”) and then letting market forces take over from there is often the most effective policy. Conservatives *should* have told them that three decades ago—but did not. Consider, for example, the provisions in the Clean Air Act Amendments of 1990 which control sulfur dioxide emissions from power plants. Under the old system, each plant would have been required to install

specific expensive technologies (scrubbers) to reduce emissions. Instead, the new law sets a cap on total emissions. Each power plant has a quota, but its managers can decide how to meet that limit and these quotas can be bought and sold. Low-cost plants can clean up more than required and sell the remaining quotas to high-cost plants. The system saves enormous amounts of money because each plant can use the cheapest and best way that works for it. Overall, the marketable quota scheme should save utilities between \$2 and \$3 billion per year—yet total emissions are capped.⁸ (Notice that with the old regulations there is no total limit on emissions, only regulations for individual sources.)

Market-based incentives such as these are consistent with conservative principles and could have been used for pollution control from the start. But conservative scholars chose to be disengaged and “conservative” politicians and pundits chose to be mere obstructionists. We now have environmental laws that are more expensive, less effective, and less flexible than they could have been if conservatives had played a positive role in policy making. On the basis of “better late than never,” in the twenty-first century we should be engaged in extending market-based pollution control programs wherever possible.

But now we face new and greater challenges. We face several daunting environmental problems that are unprecedented in human history. To meet these challenges requires, first of all, getting our underlying principles right and critiquing those who act on wrong ones. Both are clearly tasks for conservative scholars.

The environmental problems we have faced so far have been largely localized— toxic dumps, polluted rivers and lakes, smog in cities. But now we confront a new situation entirely. Economist Robert Solo explains:

Throughout his habitat on earth, [man's] technologies have been formed on the assumption that the autonomous system that produces the environment needed for life cannot be reached by what we do nor destroyed by us. And here, I think, a crucial change has come. The [earth's] life system itself is no longer beyond the reach of man's technology nor beyond his power to disarrange, degrade, and destroy. This is a danger no age has ever faced before. The volume of activity and the magnitude of consumption increase with terrifying rapidity, and technology, following an ancient momentum, takes no account of the limited capacity of the biosphere to rearrange what man disarranges.⁹

Moreover, some of the ways in which we are altering the world and its ecosystems are irreversible, at least on any time scale of interest to human beings. And there are other ways in which our new environmental challenges differ from past global threats, such as the danger of nuclear war. The new problems stem from the everyday actions of ordinary people, and they are actually happening right now.

Let us consider briefly three of these problems and then look at the conservative principles that will have to be adopted by our society if we are to solve them.

1. We are changing the composition of the earth's atmosphere by emitting enormous quantities of greenhouse gases, primarily carbon dioxide, from burning fossil fuels. The result, as virtually all climate scientists contend, will be global warming. In fact, it has probably already begun. And the climate models project increases in global temperature far greater and far faster than have ever been experienced in recorded human history. There are enormous uncertainties about the consequences, especially at the regional and local levels. Possibilities include more severe storms and weather extremes (hurricanes, heat waves, droughts, and floods), rising sea

levels with coastal flooding and salt intruding into ground water supplies, shifting of climate zones toward the poles far faster than ecosystems can adapt, spreading of tropical diseases into new areas, and the like. There is also a risk of potentially devastating "surprises," since the climate might react by making rapid, unpredictable changes.¹⁰

2. By our actions we are causing extinction of species far faster than natural. We are, in fact, causing a collapse of biodiversity comparable to the catastrophic extinction events in geological history from which it took millions of years for life on earth to recover. And we are doing so from a position of enormous ignorance. We do not know what benefits we might derive from these vanishing plants and animals. We do not know what roles they play in the web of life. And we do not know at what point whole ecosystems might collapse, as one after another of their living parts are snuffed out.¹¹

3. We depend on all sorts of "ecosystem services" that nature provides us for free. These include soil formation, purification of air and water, pollination of crops, and detoxification and decomposition of our wastes. The value to us of these services is enormous. One group of scholars examined a *partial* list of such services and estimated their monetary value at nearly twice the entire global gross national product.¹²

Ecologists tell us that by our actions we are now interfering with these processes in all sorts of ways and degrading the ability of the ecosystem to provide these services.¹³ But since they are not bought and sold in markets, their value does not appear anywhere in the national accounts and they are almost always ignored in our economic decision making, both public and private.

If we are to meet these environmental challenges with anything close to an adequate response, it seems to me that it will only be on the basis of several funda-

mental conservative principles. Consequently, it will be up to conservative scholars to develop this philosophical foundation in the environmental context and apply it to policy. I believe five principles, in particular, are crucial here: 1. Society is intergenerational—posterity matters. 2. Prudence is the primary political virtue. 3. Piety, especially piety toward nature, must be our basic attitude. 4. People must take responsibility for the consequences of their actions. 5. Materialism is not an acceptable base for human life.

1. Conservatives insist that we should always treat society as intergenerational. The *locus classicus*, of course, is Edmund Burke's description of society as "a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born."¹⁴ Consequently, we have obligations to future generations. As Burke wrote:

[O]ne of the first and most leading principles on which the commonwealth and the laws are consecrated, is lest the temporary possessors and life-renters in it, unmindful of what they have received from their ancestors, or of what is due to their posterity, should act as if they were the entire masters; that they should not think it amongst their rights to cut off the entail, or commit waste on the inheritance... hazarding to leave to those who come after them, a ruin instead of an habitation.¹⁵

Yet this is precisely what we are doing. We may be having all sorts of fun today, wasting fossil fuels, paving over any place that looks nice, "mining" our forests and groundwater, draining wetlands, and the like. It is our children and grandchildren, not ourselves, who will have to cope with the greatly altered climate we have already committed them to. They are the ones who will inherit a world considerably depleted of its biological wealth and who will have to pay for the loss of ecosystem services.

Moreover, the orthodox economics that dominates current policy making "justifies" this sort of irresponsibility by "discounting" the future. This works just like figuring compound interest, only in reverse. A small amount of money invested at compound interest becomes a considerable fortune in 100 or so years. In discounting, the *present* value (to *present* people) of that fortune a century away is calculated to be worth very little. But discounting applies to costs as well as to benefits, including costs of catastrophes. So, in the mind of an orthodox economist, it is worth spending but very little today to prevent the risk of a catastrophe to our grandchildren or great grandchildren (e.g., some of the possible effects of global warming).

To a conservative this must be simply unacceptable. While discounting may be reasonable for an individual or company making an investment decision for the next few years, it is irresponsible and even unethical when applied to social decision making that can have enormous impacts on our posterity.

There is a considerable debate in the fields of environmental ethics and ecological economics over our obligations to future generations. But you will find very few conservative scholars represented in that literature. In the twenty-first century, we must inject the conservative perspective into that debate and advocate it as a basis for policy.

2. Edmund Burke ranked prudence as "the first of all virtues."¹⁶ One of Russell Kirk's last books is titled *The Politics of Prudence*. He calls prudence "the great virtue in politics," and explains that it means "judging any public measure by its long-run consequences."¹⁷ Prudence, thus, is closely connected with our obligations to future generations.

This virtue is surely needed above all else in confronting the environmental challenges of the twenty-first century—and it is a virtue conspicuously lacking in

our current approaches to them. For example, we have already raised the amount of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere far above the level they have ever been in the last 160,000 years—that is, over the last complete climatic cycle of ice age and deglaciation.¹⁸ Yet we continue on our merry way, spewing out ever more of these gases every year, even though the solution to this problem is to use energy more efficiently in ways that will actually save us money.¹⁹ In altering the composition of the atmosphere, in causing massive decline in the earth's biodiversity, in degrading the ecosystems on whose services we depend, we are conducting uncontrolled and irreversible experiments with the entire planet. Surely that is the absolute height of imprudence.

3. Piety is a virtue often stressed by our "Founding Fathers," and that includes piety toward nature, as is well illustrated by the three quotations at the beginning. It is a virtue conspicuously lacking in far too many of our "conservative" politicians and journalists and radio entertainers. Every one of those "conservatives" should be required to *study* and *absorb* those words by Weaver and Ransom and Eliot. As Weaver insisted throughout his career, one of the things that is required if we are to restore our civilization is piety toward nature. And he condemned our ruthless attacks on nature and our wanton destruction of the natural world as far worse than mere mistakes or bad policy; they are nothing less than sins.²⁰

Conservative scholars must work for the recovery of this virtue in our society. With a proper attitude of piety toward nature, many of our environmental problems would never have happened. Causing the extinction of myriads of forms of life, for example, is surely impious in the extreme. Or look at our national forests, which have been devastated by massive, unsustainable clearcutting, the most de-

structive type of logging. It leaves the place looking like a battlefield from World War I and severely degrades the forest ecosystem's ability to provide all sorts of services. It exposes the soil to severe erosion, which reduces its ability to regenerate trees. The sediment washes into the streams, degrading them as habitats for fish (which also hurts the sport and commercial fishing industries). The erosion also causes problems for towns and cities downstream that use the water. An intact forest, on the other hand, protects its entire watershed, and it is perfectly possible to get the wood we need in ways that keep the forest ecosystems intact. The same is also true of other ecosystems which we use. If we approached them with piety, we could live in harmony with them and be better off in the long run for it.

4. As Midge Decter said, one of the fundamental conservative beliefs is "the taking of responsibility for what one does and what one is."²¹ This principle has actually been adopted, sometimes, by our politicians—for example, in welfare reform (to make people take responsibility for their own lives) and in "getting tough on crime" (to hold criminals responsible for the damage they do).

Unfortunately, when environmental issues are under consideration, our politicians forget all about this principle. After all, most of our environmental problems are simply the result of people and industries refusing to take responsibility for the consequences of their actions. Pollution and environmental degradation, in other words, are not just poor policies or inefficient allocation of resources; they are *moral faults*. Industries that pollute are evading responsibility for cleaning up after themselves; they prefer to make innocent victims pay those costs. Global warming is the result of people wasting fossil fuels now without even trying to use them efficiently. (Every gallon of gasoline we burn puts 20

pounds of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere, but sales of gas guzzlers increase every year.)

Yet time after time in recent years “conservative” politicians and journalists have pushed for “deregulation” of industry and spouted statistics showing the enormous “costs” of regulation. Now, there may be better ways of cleaning up pollution (such as the market-based schemes suggested earlier). But at least regulation is an *attempt* to make industries take responsibility for proper disposal of their wastes. And those cost figures by themselves are very misleading. Maybe they merely show how much damage those industries used to get away with. The relevant question is: how much *should* those polluters pay to keep from doing harm to the public? A principled conservative would propose *replacing* inefficient and inflexible regulations with a *more effective* market-based system. But *no* principled conservative could advocate “deregulation” and let it go at that.

Conservative scholars should direct attention to the proper placement of responsibility in all the different types of environmental degradation. And that will be especially important in relation to our new, unprecedented challenges.

5. Finally, conservatives are not materialists. Russell Kirk never tired of reminding us that maximizing production and consumption is not the purpose of human life. Richard Weaver contended that to save the human spirit we need to recreate a non-materialistic society. “[N]on-materialistic views of the world,” he wrote, “have flourished for most of our history, have inspired our best art and held together our healthiest communities. This is, indeed, the ‘natural’ view, whereas the other is symbolic of spiritual decadence.”²²

Conservative scholars need to inject this principle into the environmental debate, because so many of the ways in which our planet is being degraded are

“justified” by claiming that cleaning up properly would “hurt profits” or “reduce growth.” But principles and a healthy world to live in are far more important than a few more baubles to consume and discard. If a company cannot make a profit without imposing its wastes and their costs on innocent victims, then that company should not be in business. And the concern for “growth” almost always means nothing more than increases in the gross national product. But the GNP is *not* a measure of human welfare and it was never meant to be. More complete indices of our economy show that while GNP has been increasing, our overall economic well-being has been in a steady decline since the mid 1970s.²³ And William Bennett’s *Index of Leading Cultural Indicators* shows a corresponding drastic drop in our social well-being.²⁴ A non-materialistic approach to public policy is needed to put all of these factors into proper perspective, so conservative scholars have much to contribute.

In the limited space here, I have focused primarily on three of the greatest environmental challenges we face in the twenty-first century. It is, in the end, not at all ironic that *conservative* principles are required to confront problems that are unprecedented in human history. The principles of conservatism, as Russell Kirk so often reminded us, are Permanent Things, so there could be no better foundation for dealing with unique situations. But conservative principles should be applied to solving many other environmental problems of less than global reach as well.

Conservative scholars must now take the lead in environmentalism. We must join the public debate and in a positive way, because reasonable and adequate responses to meet the new environmental challenges can only be found on the basis of the conservative philosophy. Our present approach is completely unacceptable, because it simply writes off

the future—and everything else—so long as we are making money today. We should consider what the implications of our principles are in an environmental context. Exactly what are our obligations to future generations, in terms of natural resources (both renewable and non-renewable) and environmental degradation? How should those obligations affect policy making? How should prudence guide us when our actions are global and irreversible in their effects? What differences would piety toward nature make in our use of the natural world, which use is now almost always governed by the narrowest of economic considerations? What would it mean to hold people and companies responsible for the environ-

mental consequences of their actions, and within what limits should responsibility apply? What are the implications of a non-materialistic philosophy for assessing our current economic and political policies? Conservative scholars should also be vigilant to condemn all of the ways in which self-styled “conservative” politicians and entertainers so often violate principles in pursuit of campaign contributions and ephemeral popularity. Finally, we should also play a positive role in the policy debate, applying our principles and the answers to questions such as those above to solving environmental problems and restoring health to our world.

1. Richard M. Weaver, *The Southern Essays of Richard M. Weaver*, ed. George M. Curtis III and James J. Thompson, Jr. (Indianapolis, 1987), 220-221. 2. John Crowe Ransom, “Reconstructed but Unregenerate,” in *Twelve Southerners, I’ll Take My Stand* (New York, 1951; first published 1930), 9. 3. T. S. Eliot, *Christianity and Culture* (New York, 1949), 48-49. 4. See John R. E. Bliese, “Richard M. Weaver, Russell Kirk, and the Environment,” *Modern Age* 38, (1996), 148-158. 5. Frances Cairncross, “Costing the Earth (Survey),” *The Economist* (September 2, 1989), 5. 6. John Gray, *Beyond the New Right* (London, 1993), 124. 7. For example, Terry L. Anderson and Donald R. Leal, *Free Market Environmentalism* (San Francisco, 1991). 8. General Accounting Office, *Air Pollution: Allowance Trading Offers an Opportunity to Reduce Emissions at Less Cost* (GAO/RCED-95-30; Washington, D.C., 1994). 9. Robert Solo, “Problems of Modern Technology,” *Journal of Economic Issues*, 8 (1974), 863. 10. The disinformation campaign has been particularly intense on this issue. For an authoritative summary, in lay terms, of the current scientific knowledge see John Houghton, *Global Warming: The Complete Briefing*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, 1997). Houghton was Chief Executive of the United Kingdom Meteorological Office until his retirement and he is currently co-chairman of the Scientific Assessment Working Group of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. 11. See, for example, Edward O. Wilson, *The Diversity of Life* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992). 12. Robert Costanza, et al., “The Value of the World’s Ecosystem Ser-

vices and Natural Capital,” *Nature*, 387 (1997), 253-260. 13. See, for example, Gretchen C. Daily, et al., “Ecosystem Services: Benefits Supplied to Human Societies by Natural Ecosystems,” *Issues in Ecology*, 2 (Spring 1997), 1-16. 14. Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. L. G. Mitchell (Oxford, 1993), 96. 15. *Ibid.*, 95. 16. *Ibid.*, 62. 17. Russell Kirk, *The Politics of Prudence* (Bryn Mawr, 1993), 170. 18. J. M. Barnola, et al., “Vostok Ice Core Provides 160,000-Year Record of Atmospheric CO₂,” *Nature*, 329 (1987), 408-414. 19. See, for example, Amory B. Lovins and L. Hunter Lovins, *Climate: Making Sense and Making Money* (Old Snowmass, Colo., 1997). The claims that reducing greenhouse gases will be enormously expensive are all based on the assumption that we are now almost perfectly efficient in using energy. That assumption, of course, bears virtually no relation to reality. 20. Richard M. Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago, 1948), 171. 21. Quoted in Edwin J. Feulner, Jr., *The March of Freedom: Modern Classics in Conservative Thought* (Dallas, 1998), 170. 22. Richard M. Weaver, *The Southern Tradition at Bay*, ed. George Core and M. E. Bradford (New Rochelle, N.Y., 1968), 391-392. 23. For example, Clifford Cobb, Ted Halstead and Jonathan Rowe, *The Genuine Progress Indicator* (San Francisco, 1995); Clifford W. Cobb and John B. Cobb, Jr., *The Green National Product: A Proposed Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare* (Lanham, Md., 1994). 24. William J. Bennett, *The Index of Leading Cultural Indicators* (New York, 1994).