THE Atlantic online The Atlantic Monthly | Digital Edition

SEPTEMBER 2000

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

cumbersome.

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

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

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

the tone of his environmental rhetoric, and the Democratic Party's, from gloom to optimism. Not only are most ecological trends in the United States now positive, but this is an accomplishment for which liberal government deserves much of the credit. If one is going to argue, as Democrats like to, that government improves people's lives, one needs examples of success. Environmental protection is among the leading government success stories of the postwar era, but voters seem not to know it (polls show that the public believes the air and the water are growing more polluted, not less), so the government does not get credit. An important reason for the public's false belief in the decline of the U.S. environment is doomsday pronouncements of the sort Gore himself favors. If a President Bush adopted a theme of environmental optimism, voters might think he was being a Pollyanna. If a President Gore did the same, it would be a striking message and might help to reinforce the public's faith in government.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Gregg Easterbrook is a contributing editor of *The Atlantic* and a senior editor of *The New Republic* and Beliefnet.com. His most

recent book is *Beside Still Waters: Searching for Meaning in an Age of Doubt* (1998).

Illustration by Patrick Oliphant.

The Atlantic Monthly; *September 2000; Green Surprise - 00.09 (Part Two); Volume 286, No. 3; page 17-24.*