The Reagan Years: Environmentalists Tremble

Whether rightly or wrongly, environmentalists fear the incoming Administration will be less kind to their causes

The environmental movement has had a nightmare and awakened to find it is true: Ronald Reagan is President-elect and the Senate is in Republican hands.

President Carter gave plum jobs to leaders of the environmental movement and supported many of their causes. Reagan, at least to judge by his rhetoric, could scarcely be less sympathetic. His hostility to government regulation has given rise to fears that the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) may be severely restrained or even abolished. The Clean Air Act, without Edmund Muskie in the Senate to protect it, may be reduced in scope, along with much other environmental legislation.

Whether rightly or wrongly, many environmentalists are deeply concerned about what the next 4 years may bring. Says Lewis Regenstein, of the Fund for Animals, "I feel as though I've got one foot in the grave and the other on a banana peel." Representatives of other groups are more muted in their reactions and express the hope that Reagan may develop a more sophisticated appreciation of environmental values than that expressed in his campaign utterances.

Environmentalists are particularly dismayed at the prospect of working with a Republican Senate, one that is stripped of such champions as John C. Culver (D–Iowa) and Frank Church (D–Idaho). But although little in the way of pro-environmental legislative initiatives can be expected, some environmentalists favor in principle the Republican emphasis on state and local initiatives, and hope Reagan's goal of reduced federal spending will cut down on pork barrel public works projects such as dams.

That apart, prospects for the Reagan years are not encouraging from the environmentalists' perspective. To judge from his public statements, Reagan clings to the concept that environmental protection and economic growth are fundamentally incompatible, and commonly lumps environmentalists together with those who espouse a "no-growth" economy. He appears to regard environmental protection as a rather ephemeral value that may be attended to after the basic substantive matters—renewed economic growth and an all-out campaign to increase energy production—are well under way, environmentalists believe.

Environmental issues were discussed in the campaign not for their own sake but in the context of the Republican interest in cutting back federal regulations. According to a one-page environmental position paper, "We should return to the states the primary responsibility for environmental regulation in order to increase responsiveness to local conditions." Reagan's task force on regulation, headed by economist Murray Weidenbaum of the American Enterprise Institute, has fingered EPA as the main target. Reagan's people generally regard EPA as being in the hands of "environmental extremists"; they want to turn around the regulatory approach of that agency, as well as that of the Labor Department's Occupational Safety and Health Administration, so as to reflect much greater attention to the economic consequences of regulations and their effects on employment and the energy supply.

Representative David Stockman (R–Mich.) voiced the general attitude when he said that EPA has "rules that would practically shut down the economy if they were put into effect . . . . This is the critical agency. You need a whole new mindset down at EPA or you're not going to do anything about regulation."

Reagan's environmental record as governor of California was "mixed," according to Michael McCloskey, director of the Sierra Club. McCloskey says Reagan "often ended up signing environmental legislation he had opposed if there was enough public interest and pressure." A rundown of his actions as governor, compiled by the Sierra Club Bulletin, reveals that Reagan tried to prevent the state from taking action to clean up auto emissions, resisted coastal zone management planning, fought government funding for mass transit, approved extension of the state highway system, and opposed expansion of the state parks system. (It was in 1966 that he made his famous remark—"A tree is a tree. How many more do you need to look at?"—in reference to the proposed expansion of Redwood National Park.) On the other hand, Reagan did sign California's water pollution law, said to be the strongest in the country.

In the years after being governor, Reagan, on his radio program and elsewhere, expressed what environmentalists regard as a fairly consistent anti-environmentalist line. He attacked the EPA's ban on DDT, and defended the baby seal killing program, saying it had been "unjustly maligned." He has complained that the wilderness system has protected too much forest from the timber industry. He is an ardent supporter of the Sagebrush Rebellion, which favors returning public lands in the West to private ownership.

Reagan has said that there are "no environmental problems" associated with nuclear energy. He wants to throw public lands open to oil shale exploration and go full speed ahead on offshore oil drilling. He has even cast energy conservation in a dim light, saying that "at best, it means we will run out of energy a little more slowly."

It is probably not Reagan's beliefs as much as his lack of intellectual sophistication and his willingness to embrace "facts" of indeterminate origin that unsettle environmentalists—as witness statements made in some of his few campaign references to the environment. Not only did Reagan tell Ohio miners that air pollution was "substantially" under control (a comment made during a 10-day smog crisis in Los Angeles), but he went on to state that 80 percent of nitrogen oxide pollution is caused by vegetation, and blamed Mount St. Helen's—in a statement containing multiple errors—for contributing more sulfur dioxide "than has been released in the last 10 years of automobile driving."

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Another, less publicized example of naïveté came in response to a question

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about the Administration's report on the year 2000. Reagan, averring that things probably weren't all that bad, claimed there were "farm studies, based on the tillable land on earth, and based on if they are farmed at the level of American farming worldwide, that the earth can support a population of 28 billion people."

It was not until October that Reagan assembled a task force on the environment. Headed by Dan W. Lufkin, chairman of the finance committee of Columbia Pictures and member of the executive committee of the National Audubon Society, the task force contains a number of well-respected figures including two former heads of EPA.* But it is not clear how much influence the task force will have on future policy, given Reagan's state priorities.

Environmentalists are not expecting much in the way of good news from the next Congress. The election results have already made themselves felt in the House passage, on 12 November, of the Senate version of the Alaska Lands Bill. The House measure had been more protectionist, but Representative Morris Udall (D-Ariz.), chairman of the Interior and Insular Affairs Committee, decided to forgo any amendments in the interests of getting the bill into law before the next Congress.

The most vulnerable item on Congress's agenda for next year will be the Clean Air Act, which will be up for reauthorization. Industry groups—particularly steel and power companies—have made it clear they intend to go all out in battling pollution ceilings, and they are likely to find sympathetic ears among Reagan supporters who have already named the act as a target for overhaul.

Several wildlife measures, which probably won't be dealt with in the brief lame duck session, will also be in greater peril in the next Congress. Among them is an amendment to the Lacey Act that would toughen provisions against wildlife smugglers. This is opposed by Senator James A. McClure (R-Idaho), who is succeeding Henry M. Jackson (D-Wash.) as chairman of the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources. A measure to tighten restrictions on trade in ivory from African elephants now has a dubious future, as does the Marine Mammal Protection Act—which potentially will conflict with offshore oil exploration—which is up for reauthorization next year. However, wildlife protection is expected to fare far better than laws that have a direct impact on industry, such as solid waste, toxic substances, and air and water pollution control.

EPA-Documerica/Gene Daniels Photo

What Reagan holds trees to blame for

The sun sets on Los Angeles smog.

Amid all the gloom, environmentalists are sure about one bright spot—that, as Charles Roberts of the National Wildlife Federation says, the election was "not a referendum on environmental protection." Scarcely a word on the issue was breathed by the major presidential candidates, but, says Sierra Club director McCloskey, in local races where the environment was an issue it fared well—as evidenced in the reelections of Representative Udall and Senator Gary Hart (D-Colo.)

Environmentalists are not necessarily hostile to the Republican creed of fiscal restraint or to the notion that the federal government has overextended itself. But if the Administration sets about to dismantle the regulatory structure that has been built up over the past decade, environmentalists predict a fierce backlash from the public. "They're going to have a firestorm," predicts John Grandy of Defenders of Wildlife. "If he tries to fight, he will have one of the bloodiest fights he's ever seen," says another environmentalist.

Many cite an analysis of opinion polls sponsored by the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) as evidence that the environmental ethic has a firm grip on the minds and hearts of the American public. Russell Peterson, former head of CEQ and now president of the National Audubon Society, predicts that Reagan will not have his Republican Senate for long if public opinion on the environment is ignored. He points out that while the Reagan people want to go full steam ahead on nuclear power and synfuels, the polls show that the areas in which the public would like to see the most progress are conservation and solar power.

There seem to be two basic directions that leaders in the environmental movement believe need to be followed in the next few years. First, says Peterson, "We environmentalists must do more to develop dollar measures of the advantages of protecting the environment. Too many of the benefits now can only be measured qualitatively." Economist Weidenbaum helped stir up the antiregulatory furor by claiming that all government regulation was costing American industry more than $100 billion a year. Antiregulatory forces have latched onto this finding as evidence that environmental regulation is contributing to inflation. Yet economist Myrick Freedman of Bowdoin College, in a study for CEQ on the air quality act, found that the benefits outweighed the costs by several billion dollars. Environmentalists believe that much more such analyses, by disinterested parties, are required to demonstrate that environmental and economic progress are not by nature conflicting but are, in the long run, interdependent.

The other thrust for the environmental movement will be at the grass roots level. According to Janet Brown, head of the Environmental Defense Fund, the election result "sharpens for us the need to find other fora besides the federal one." CEQ chairman Gus Speth believes

*Other members of the task force are: Washington lawyer Daniel J. Boggs; former Council on Environmental Quality head John Busterud; former New York State environmental commissioner Henry Diamond; California businessman James R. Kliegel; California fish and game commissioner Norman B. Livermore, Jr.; Raymond J. Nesbit, director of the National Wildlife Federation; former Nature Conservancy head Patrick F. Noonan; Nathanial P. Reed, member of the executive committee of the National Audubon Society; Washington attorney Michele Metrinko Rollins; former EPA administrator William Ruckelshaus; former Federal Energy Administration official James L. Sweeney; Robert D. Tollision, economist at Virginia Polytechnic Institute; and Russell Train, now head of World Wildlife Fund-U.S.

more attention now needs to be paid to organization at state and local levels, and in particular developing a more explicit involvement in electoral politics.

Some in the environmental movement believe that its future now lies in action at the village green level, not with federal policies framed in Washington. Others hope that the Reagan Administration, like its predecessors, can be brought around. But the general prognosis among environmentalists is that a period of federal neglect, be it benign or otherwise, is the likely lot of their cause during the next 4 years.—CONSTANCE HOLDEN

The Reagan Years: Regrouping on Education

Reagan will not move to abolish new department immediately; National Education Association mulls over Carter defeat

The Department of Education was created a year ago on a narrow vote in Congress and after a long fight in which President Carter had to push hard to win. The new Cabinet-level agency was generally opposed by Republicans and the 1980 GOP platform said the party "encourages the elimination of the federal Department of Education." On the campaign trail, Ronald Reagan had no kind words for the DE, at one point saying of the department, "I believe it is naïve to think that it is anything but a first step toward federalized education in the land."

By forming the department Carter redeemed a 1976 campaign promise. Establishment of the new department was widely regarded as a quid pro quo for support by the National Education Association (NEA), which for years coveted Cabinet status for education and placed itself conspicuously in the Carter camp in his two national campaigns.

All of this suggests that DE, with a $14.2-billion annual budget, will shortly be dismantled and NEA will find itself very much on the outside when Reagan reorganizes official Washington. Not necessarily so, or at least not in a reflexive, quick-draw way that some people expect of a Reagan regime.

The President-elect said that he will appoint a new Secretary of Education and indicated that he wants a close look taken at education activities before any major decision on organization is made. In the view of one staff member on the minority side of House Education and Labor Committee, abolition of DE is "a couple of years off, if it ever happens. Reagan is a pragmatist. He realizes that it takes a lot of energy to [abolish] a department." Organizational forms have "very little impact on policy." Certainly, "there will be intense study" of the organizational options, but the staff member expects the Administration to "concentrate on programmatic and regulatory issues."

This does not mean that, on the Hill, hard feelings toward DE have evaporated. Representative John N. Erlenborn (R-Ill.), second ranking Republican on the House Education and Labor Committee, says he intends to introduce legislation to abolish the department. His bill would reestablish a Department of Health, Education and Welfare and transfer all DE programs to the resurrected HEW.

The performance of DE since it went on its own has apparently won few admirers in Congress. Pennsylvania Republican Senator Richard S. Schweiker, who sits on both the authorization and appropriations subcommittees for education, has been a vocal critic. Schweiker, who opposed creation of DE, recently told a meeting of student financial aid administrators, "In my wildest imagination I never thought the final product would be as bad as the new department is."

Schweiker said the most recent set of DE "horror stories" emerged during Senate education subcommittee hearings on reauthorization of the higher education act when DE persistently failed to provide information the panel needed to carry out its work.

Schweiker, who chose not to run for reelection, will not return to the Senate. He is, however, rumored to be a live prospect for Secretary of Education. In any case, criticism of DE seems unlikely to halt. Senate minority staffers note that recently released DE regulations on provision of bilingual education in the schools seem particularly calculated to inflame those who seek to minimize federal regulation of public schools.

As for NEA, will it be chastised for blotting its political copy book? Certainly, the biggest of the education associations cannot expect to influence Administration appointments in the education bureaucracy. And NEA's long nurtured hopes for general aid to education

Win some, lose some

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