Environmental Politics
Geoffrey Heal
Columbia Business School

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Environmental conservation need not, and indeed should not, be a partisan political issue. Conservatives, after all, are in principle interested in conserving, and that is what conservation is about. Historically as much the province of Republicans and Democrats in the United States, environmental conservation in the last decades has become a primarily a Democratic concern. Two of the best Presidents from an environmental perspective were both Republicans – Teddy Roosevelt and Richard Nixon. The third of the top three environmental presidents was Lyndon Johnson.

Roosevelt is widely seen as one of the founders of the American environmental movement. "The conservation of our natural resources and their proper use constitute the fundamental problem which underlies almost every other problem of our national life," he told Congress in 1907. He also remarked that in the same year that "The nation behaves well if it treats the natural resources as assets which it must turn over to the next generation increased and not impaired in value." These two remarks presage many contemporary ideas: that conservation can be central to good economic performance, and that we should see the environment as an asset, as natural capital on which we can earn a return if it is well-managed. Roosevelt seems to have understood this a century ago, long before the environmental community.

The environmental group Environmental Defense Fund (EDF) on their web site list Roosevelt as an Environmental Hero. According to them, he proclaimed that "A nation that destroys its soils destroys itself. ... Forests are the lungs of our land, purifying the air and giving fresh strength to our people." He backed up these words by protecting 150 national

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1 Gmh1@columbia.edu. This paper was prepared for The Irrational Economist, a meeting to celebrate Howard Kunreuther's seventieth birthday. It is an extract from chapter 11 of Managing a Small Blue Planet, forthcoming.
forests. In all, according to EDF, Roosevelt protected some 230 million acres of national land. He also founded the National Park system, creating five National Parks and the National Park Service to manage them. (He also won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1906, a predecessor to Al Gore in that respect, but for his role in mediating in the Russo-Japanese War rather than for his environmental work.)

Roosevelt’s role in environmental conservation is widely known: Lyndon Johnson’s and Richard Nixon’s roles are not, and so deserve to be set out in more detail. Johnson commented that

“"[t]he air we breathe, our water, our soil and wildlife, are being blighted by poisons and chemicals which are the by-products of technology and industry. The society that receives the rewards of technology, must, as a cooperating whole, take responsibility for [their] control. To deal with these new problems will require a new conservation. We must not only protect the countryside and save it from destruction, we must restore what has been destroyed and salvage the beauty and charm of our cities. Our conservation must be not just the classic conservation of protection and development, but a creative conservation of restoration and innovation."

Johnson’s administration was responsible for the following items of legislation:

- Clear Air, Water Quality and Clean Water Restoration Acts and Amendments
- Wilderness Act of 1964,
- Endangered Species Preservation Act of 1966,
- National Trails System Act of 1968,
- Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968,
- Land and Water Conservation Act of 1965,
- Solid Waste Disposal Act of 1965,
- Motor Vehicle Air Pollution Control Act of 1965,
- National Historic Preservation Act of 1966,
- Aircraft Noise Abatement Act of 1968, and

Many of these were the predecessors of legislation that still today forms the backbone of America’s environmental policy: the Endangered Species Preservation Act is the forerunner of the Endangered Species Act, and the Clear Air, Water Quality and Clean Water Restoration Acts and Amendments set the framework for the air and water quality
legislation that we have today. Johnson was on occasions rather passionate on environmental issues: he commented that "There is no excuse for a river running red with blood from slaughterhouses. There is no excuse for paper mills pouring sulfuric acid into the lakes and streams of the people of this country. There is no excuse – and we should call a spade a spade – for chemical companies and oil refineries using our major rivers as pipelines for toxic waste. There is no excuse for communities to use other people’s rivers as a dump for their raw sewage."2

Nixon continued this torrent of environmental legislation, and was on occasions almost as passionate in his comments. I quote here at length from his 1973 State of the Union Address, because to a generation that thinks of Nixon largely in terms of Watergate, it is so surprising. Here are some parts of that address:

"President Abraham Lincoln, whose memory we are honoring this week, observed in his State of the Union message in 1862 that "A nation may be said to consist of its territory, its people, and its laws. The territory," he said, "is the only part which is of certain durability."

In recent years, however, we have come to realize that what Lincoln called our "territory"—that is, our land, air, water, minerals, and the like—is not of "certain durability" after all. Instead, we have learned that these natural resources are fragile and finite, and that many have been seriously damaged or despoiled.

To put it another way, we realized that self-destructive tendencies were endangering the American earth during the 1960’s in much the same way as conflicting political forces had endangered the body politic during the 1860’s.

When we came to office in 1969, we tackled this challenge with all the power at our command. Now, in 1973, I can report that America is well on the way to winning the war against environmental degradation—well on the way to making our peace with nature.

Day by day, our air is getting cleaner. In virtually every one of our major cities, the levels of air pollution are declining.

Month by month, our water pollution problems are also being conquered, our noise and pesticide problems are yielding to new initiatives, our parklands and protected wilderness areas are increasing. .................

2 EPA web site, Lyndon B. Johnson and the Environment
We can be proud of our record in this field over the past 4 years. But a record is not something to stand on, it is something to build on. Nineteen important natural resources and environmental bills which I submitted to the last Congress were not enacted. In the coming weeks, I shall once again send these urgently needed proposals to the Congress so that the unfinished environmental business of the 92nd Congress can become the first environmental achievements of the 93rd Congress. ..............

The energy crisis was dramatized by fuel shortages this winter. We must face up to a stark fact. We are now consuming more energy than we produce in America. A year and a half ago I sent to the Congress the first Presidential message ever devoted to the energy question. I shall soon submit a new and far more comprehensive energy message containing wide-ranging initiatives to insure necessary supplies of energy at acceptable economic and environmental costs. In the meantime, to help meet immediate needs, I have temporarily suspended import quotas on home heating oil east of the Rocky Mountains. ...........

Second, because there are no local or State boundaries to the problems of our environment, the Federal Government must play an active, positive role. We can and will set standards. We can and will exercise leadership. We are providing necessary funding support. And we will provide encouragement and incentive for others to help with the job. But Washington must not displace State and local initiative. We shall expect the State and local governments--along with the private section--to play the central role in this field.

Third, the costs of pollution should be more fully met in the free marketplace, not in the Federal budget. For example, the price of pollution control devices for automobiles should be borne by the owner and the user, not by the general taxpayer. People should not have to pay for pollution they do not cause.

I include the comments about energy policy because they are still so relevant today and because they show how little has actually been done since the need for action was first recognized in 1973, over thirty years ago. Both Johnson and Nixon were riding an environmental wave, generated by recognition of the impact that industrial growth was having on air, water and the countryside, and by concerns about the impact of this pollution on human health. Strangely, this was an issue that had not been a part of the public policy debate earlier. One of the main forces driving this wave was Rachel Carson's 1963 book Silent Spring, which spoke out about the impact of pesticides on the health of human and non-human creatures. Her work led to the eventual banning of DDT, one of the main pesticides of that era, and more generally to an awareness that many applications of science and technology have unintended consequences for us and for other animals. The title Silent Spring is a reference to the impact of pesticides on bird populations, many of
which were threatened by the bioaccumulation of pesticides used on crops. Pesticides remain on both crops and insects: some birds eat crops and some insects, and as a result the pesticides accumulate in their bodies. If birds of prey now eat the smaller insect-eating or crop-eating birds, they receive a dose of the pesticides that have accumulated in their small bodies. DDT was found to lead to thinning of the shells of eggs of birds, and populations of hawks feeding on smaller birds experienced a sharp drop in reproductive rates. Silent Spring had a huge impact, becoming the subject of a movie, a TV documentary and staying at the top of the New York Times best-seller list for several weeks.

This was the background that allowed Johnson and Nixon to pass environmental legislation unprecedented in scope and extent. In 1970 Nixon commented to the leaders of the Sierra Club that "All politics is a fad. Your fad is going right now. Get what you can, and here's what I can get for you." And he proceeded to get a remarkable amount for them. His legislative achievements include the National Environmental Policy Act, the establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency, the Clean Air Act, the banning of DDT, the Clean Water Act and the Endangered Species Act. All of this legislation has continued to form the basis of our environmental policy for the last three decades, and no subsequent president has come close to this level of environmental activism.

Perhaps surprisingly, there is no evidence that the state of the environment actually mattered to Richard Nixon, as it clearly did to Teddy Roosevelt. He appeared to have no personal involvement in the issues on which he legislated so effectively, but rather saw these as issues on which he could compete with his Democratic opponents. Environment was an area in which he could steal his opponents' ideas and pre-empt their moves. As the remark he made to the Sierra club – cited above – indicated, he was a sharp politician who saw that the times required environmental action and provided the voting public with what it wanted.

Today we are at a time rather like the 1960s and early 1970s: there is again a widespread intuition that we are doing something potentially disastrous to the

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environment. There is no-one as eloquent Rachel Carson in Silent Spring, but Al Gore has
certainly had an impact with An Inconvenient Truth and his Nobel Prize, as has the
Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and other official reports that reinforce the
same points about the changes we are forcing in our most basic environmental systems, as
have the stream of television documentaries about the threats to forests and to marine life.

There is actually a major difference between the environmental issues we face today
and those that precipitated the flurry of legislation under Johnson and Nixon. The
difference is local versus global, pollution that damages the area in which it is created
versus environmental damage that affects the world as a whole. Ozone depletion, climate
change and deforestation all affect the entire globe. Their consequences are truly global –
and may paradoxically often be invisible to the people who are causing the damage. We are
impinging on the operation of global systems on which all of us depend: that is different
from the more localized pollution that was recognized in the 1960s and addressed, quite
successfully, by Presidents Johnson and Nixon and in equivalent legislation in other
advanced countries in the 1960s and 1970s. Another difference is that the population of the
earth has roughly doubled over the intervening forty years, and living standards have also
risen by a factor of between two and three, so that the impact of economic activity is now
vastly greater than it was when Rachel Carson was writing. The potential for damage has
risen massively.

Why are conservatives in the U.S. currently so hostile to environmental issues, when
there is a great tradition of environmentalism from the conservative side? Why do
conservatives make an exception for environmental conservation? Answering this takes me
outside my field, but I will try anyway. I think there are two parts to an answer. One is that
there has been a change in conservative ideology, and the other concerns the rise of climate
change and its threat to powerful corporations in the U.S.

When I say there has been a change in conservative ideology, I am speaking loosely:
 conservatism was without an overarching ideology, and has recently developed one, belief
in the power of free markets. Reagan was referring to this in his statements that the
government is the problem not the solution. From about the 1980s on, a strong component
of American conservatism was a belief that unaided and unfettered markets represented an
ideal state. In this they were following the preaching of the conservative demi-god Milton Friedman. From an economic perspective this faith is unfounded, and Friedman in his role as a scholar was aware of this fact and even alluded in footnotes. But his followers were and are not. From the perspective of an ardent free marker, environmental problems are a threat: they require government intervention in the economy, and are a logical stake through the heart of belief in unadorned markets. It’s hard to believe that we need to solve environmental problems and also believe that the government is the problem and not the solution! Believing both leads to what psychologists call cognitive dissonance – split personality in more common parlance. So many conservatives ignore environmental problems, pretend that they don’t exist. Roosevelt and Nixon did not have this problem: in their days, conservatism was consistent with a role for the government.

Compounding this ideological change is an empirical one, the rise of climate change as an issue. Climate change threatens the fossil fuel industry, the oil coal and gas industries. They are the sources of most greenhouse gases and stand to be affected most by restrictions on their emissions. The United States, more than any other industrial country, is a major producer of fossil fuels. Though relatively few know this, the U.S. is the world’s third largest oil producer. First is Saudi Arabia at ten million barrels per day (mbd), then Russia at about eight, and then the U.S. at about seven. No other country consistently produces more than four. So America is a petro-state, and the oil industry is a powerful political force. The U.S. is also a major coal producer, and the coal industry has also been active in lobbying against the reality of climate change, and when the reality was accepted in lobbying against the need for action.

The rise of free-market conservatism and the power of the coal and oil lobbies explain why American conservatives no longer wish to conserver the environment, although their predecessors played a noble role in this endeavor. This is probably changing: as I write, in the midst of the financial crisis of 2008, the belief in the power of unadulterated markets is visibly waning. And with both Presidential candidates backing

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4 Reference NYT article or ..
action on climate change, that fight has clearly been lost. It will be interesting to see if conservatives redevelop a taste for conservation in the environmental realm.