

## BOOK REVIEW

### RUMORS OF MY DEMISE . . . A REVIEW OF *BREAK THROUGH: FROM THE DEATH OF ENVIRONMENTALISM TO THE POLITICS OF POSSIBILITY*

BY  
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“. . . have been greatly exaggerated.”<sup>1</sup>  
Mark Twain

Every few years a sect few of us have heard of, having proclaimed that the world will end at midnight, files into a stadium in Florida or Los Angeles to greet the void. They draw the usual publicity, and their pronouncements are covered on the evening news. I have always wondered what happened the next day when the sun came up instead, showing them terribly, and fortunately for all of us, wrong. In what condition did they leave the stadium, where did they go and what did they do? Now, I think I know. They wrote a book about how right they were.

Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger have done much the same in their new book, *Break Through: From The Death of Environmentalism To The Politics of Possibility*.<sup>2</sup> You may remember that this pair of public relations specialists made national headlines in the Summer of 2004 with an essay entitled *The Death of Environmentalism*<sup>3</sup> which they dropped on, of

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<sup>1</sup> Various versions of “the report of my death has been greatly exaggerated” have been attributed to Mark Twain. *See, e.g.*, THE OXFORD DICTIONARY OF AMERICAN QUOTATIONS 548–49 (Hugh Rawson & Margaret Miner eds., 2006).

<sup>2</sup> TED NORDHAUS & MICHAEL SHELLENBERGER, *BREAK THROUGH: FROM THE DEATH OF ENVIRONMENTALISM TO THE POLITICS OF POSSIBILITY* (2007) [hereinafter *BREAK THROUGH*].

<sup>3</sup> TED NORDHAUS & MICHAEL SHELLENBERGER, *THE DEATH OF ENVIRONMENTALISM: GLOBAL WARMING POLITICS IN A POST-ENVIRONMENTAL WORLD* (2004), *available at* [http://www.thebreakthrough.org/PDF/Death\\_of\\_Environmentalism.pdf](http://www.thebreakthrough.org/PDF/Death_of_Environmentalism.pdf) [hereinafter *DEATH OF*

all vulnerable places, the annual meeting of the Environmental Grantmakers Association.<sup>4</sup> They were not only going to make headlines. They were going to kick over the money tables in the temple. Environmentalism was moving too slow. It was time to wipe the slate.

As events soon proved, they were quite mistaken. In the data they selected and their central example—the failure of the environmental community to stop climate change<sup>5</sup>—they quite underestimated both the challenge and what was happening in response. Their reaction has been to write a book that retools the arguments they made before in what is now a post-*An Inconvenient Truth*,<sup>6</sup> *Massachusetts v. Environmental Protection Agency*<sup>7</sup> world, and add to it some chapters on “Possibility,” which turns out to be better messaging. If environmentalism, by some sort of unacknowledged dumb luck, is still alive after all, they would still prescribe remedies for it, remedies that remain dramatic in their rhetoric but quite modest in content. That theirs are well-intentioned criticisms we can accept without question, and at times useful ones—although the radical right has seized on them as validation of its rather weird pathology. They remain hobbled, however, by perceptions that are only partially true and that lead them to a Happy Days scenario that is more than a little dangerous. To understand this, we need to begin where they did and track their journey.

The *Death of Environmentalism*, a rather eye-catching overstatement, rested on four legs. The environmental movement is in-grown and has ignored the alliances needed to change society.<sup>8</sup> Its leadership is missing the big picture.<sup>9</sup> Its politics have relied on doom and gloom, rather than positive scenarios.<sup>10</sup> The great demonstration of these failings is the movement’s inability to arrest global warming.<sup>11</sup> Case pretty much closed. Then came the kicker, which of course attracted the most attention: the authors had become “convinced” that modern environmentalism “must die so that something new can live.”<sup>12</sup> We needed to burn the village to save it.

After the flash of its initial flame, *The Death of Environmentalism* took quite a dousing. In fact, the Sierra Club had started building alliances with urban and African Americans as early as 1975<sup>13</sup> and the National Wildlife

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ENVIRONMENTALISM].

<sup>4</sup> Kate Sheppard, *Life After the Death of Environmentalism*, AMERICAN PROSPECT, Oct. 11, 2007, [www.prospect.org/cs/articles?article=life\\_after\\_the\\_death\\_of\\_environmentalism](http://www.prospect.org/cs/articles?article=life_after_the_death_of_environmentalism) (last visited Apr. 13, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> DEATH OF ENVIRONMENTALISM, *supra* note 3, at 6–7.

<sup>6</sup> AN INCONVENIENT TRUTH (Paramount Pictures 2006).

<sup>7</sup> 127 S.Ct. 1438 (2007).

<sup>8</sup> DEATH OF ENVIRONMENTALISM, *supra* note 3, at 6.

<sup>9</sup> *Id.* at 7.

<sup>10</sup> *Id.* at 14.

<sup>11</sup> *Id.* at 14–16.

<sup>12</sup> *Id.* at 10.

<sup>13</sup> See Interview by Ann Lage with J. William Futrell, *Love for the Land and Justice for its People: Sierra Club National and Southern Leader, 1968–1982*, in SIERRA CLUB LEADER II: 1960S–1970S, 10–11 (1982), available at <http://ia331330.us.archive.org/0/items/sierraclubleaders02lagerich/sierraclubleaders02lagerich.pdf> (discussing a Sierra Club leader’s involvement in outreach in New Orleans during the 1970s).

Federation brought in a whole separate constituency of blue-collar, hunting and fishing America.<sup>14</sup> The Environmental Policy Center's coalitions with labor were responsible for remarkable legislative initiatives,<sup>15</sup> as was its celebrated link with the California Proposition 65 tax revolt against pork-barrel water projects. Western ranchers are now leading the fight for alternatives to coal and gas leasing in the Rocky Mountain West<sup>16</sup> and the environmental justice movement is a prime driver in Louisiana, Southern California, and New York City.<sup>17</sup> In 2006, environmental political action committees (PACs) were instrumental in the defeat of some of the most hostile members of Congress in memory, starting with House Resources Committee Chair Michael Pombo.<sup>18</sup> If you look in only one direction you are likely to miss the play at the other end of the field.

*The Death of Environmentalism* also took a shot at the leaders of environmental organizations, whom they characterized as individually smart but collectively blind.<sup>19</sup> When one thinks of the initiatives of the Environmental Defense Fund, Greenpeace, Green Seal, and The Nature Conservancy, to name but a few, lack of foresight hardly comes to mind. Their strategies run the gamut from hard-nosed lobbying and law enforcement to free market incentives, landscape easements, corporate partnerships, electoral politics, advertising campaigns, boycotts, product labeling, children's literature, television programs, teaching materials, and so it goes. These are among the most competitive and individualistic enterprises in America. It is a jungle out there, not a monolith, and in constant evolution. Those that do not adapt, fail. To perceive them, in the aggregate, as headless is correct, and whether that is a problem or a strength is a worthy question. But to dismiss them as limited to old, failed programs is willfully blind.

The doom and gloom charge was fair as far as it goes. There is a lot of bad environmental news out there—no one is making this stuff up—and the direct mail fundraising of many groups is sure to feature pup seals or a clear cut mountainside. My guess is that the authors, as environmental consultants, may have tested a few of these mailings themselves. Fact is, people respond to things in trouble and they tend not to respond to things

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<sup>14</sup> See Mark Sagoff, *The Great Environmental Awakening*, AMERICAN PROSPECT, Nov. 30, 2002, available at [http://www.prospect.org/cs/articles?article=the\\_great\\_environmental\\_awakening](http://www.prospect.org/cs/articles?article=the_great_environmental_awakening).

<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., Robert Gordon, *Poisons in the Fields: The United Farm Workers, Pesticides, and Environmental Politics*, 68 PAC. HIST. REV. 51 (1999) (discussing the Environmental Policy Center's alliance with the United Farm Workers Union in the 1970s in the push for safer working conditions in the agricultural industry, and specifically, an industry-wide ban on cancer-causing pesticides).

<sup>16</sup> See, e.g., Susan Moran, *The Energy Challenge: Strangers as Allies*, N.Y. TIMES, Oct. 20, 2007, at C1, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/20/business/20coal.html?fta=y>.

<sup>17</sup> See, e.g., Eileen G. Jones, *Environmental Justice in the New Millennium*, in *Proceeding of the 2000 Louisiana Environmental State of the State Conference* (R.F. Kazmierczak, Jr. & L.J. Tuibodeaux eds.), available at <http://www.agecon.lsu.edu/ESOS-V%20Proceedings/pdf/Jones.pdf>.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Doyle, *Environmentalists Put Down 'Western Rebellion'*, MCCLATCHY NEWSPAPERS, Nov. 8, 2006, available at [http://www.mcclatchydc.com/staff/michael\\_doyle/story/15093.html](http://www.mcclatchydc.com/staff/michael_doyle/story/15093.html).

<sup>19</sup> BREAK THROUGH, *supra* note 2, at 25, 34–35.

that aren't. Where the doom-and-gloom-doesn't-work charge fails is with the author's *bête noir*, climate change. The story that swung the tide was Al Gore's AN INCONVENIENT TRUTH,<sup>20</sup> and there was nothing light about that message. After years of pounding, people finally got it. Getting such a thing takes time. Even the Supreme Court got it, and with these particular Justices that is saying a great deal.<sup>21</sup> We did not get there by saying All's Well.

Which leaves *The Death of Environmentalism's* main allegation: if environmentalists were so good why hadn't they won the war on climate change? Which is like blaming the police for a crime wave. Here was a country traumatized by 9-11, then the Afghanistan invasion and the Iraq war, followed by horrendous civilian casualties and the revelations of torture, Abu Ghraib, domestic wire-tapping, and renditions abroad. We were, to say the least, a little distracted. Here was also an Administration that was suppressing information on climate change,<sup>22</sup> muzzling its own scientists,<sup>23</sup> prohibiting their attendance at conferences, redacting their reports,<sup>24</sup> publishing reports instead concocted by industry lobbyists,<sup>25</sup> forcing out an EPA Administrator who had assured us that addressing global warming would be the President's top environmental priority,<sup>26</sup> accusing both academics and environmentalists of hallucinations (in the words of one of its Senate leaders, "the worst hoax ever perpetuated on the American people"),<sup>27</sup> and this is before we get to the office of the Vice President. Here were all three branches of government solidly in the hands of the party that was denying even the fact of climate change. And the environmentalists didn't turn that around? Send them packing, the authors say.

The fact is, despite this monolithic opposition, environmentalists were in fact turning it around. They stopped every hostile initiative relating to it from the ill-named Clear Skies Initiative<sup>28</sup> to the opening of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to oil drilling, and have beaten back a series of EPA

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<sup>20</sup> AN INCONVENIENT TRUTH, *supra* note 6.

<sup>21</sup> *Massachusetts v. Env'tl. Prot. Agency*, 127 S.Ct. 1438, 1455 (2007).

<sup>22</sup> *Scientists Rip into Bush's Policy, Charge 'Suppression of Information,'* SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER, Feb. 19, 2004. See also SPECIAL INVESTIGATIONS DIVISION, U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES COMM. ON GOV'T REFORM—MINORITY STAFF, POLITICS AND SCIENCE IN THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION 16–20 (2003), available at [http://oversight.house.gov/features/politics\\_and\\_science/pdfs/pdf\\_politics\\_and\\_science\\_rep.pdf](http://oversight.house.gov/features/politics_and_science/pdfs/pdf_politics_and_science_rep.pdf).

<sup>23</sup> Andrew C. Revkin, *Climate Expert Says NASA Tried to Silence Him*, N.Y. TIMES, Jan. 29, 2006.

<sup>24</sup> Andrew C. Revkin, *Bush vs. the Laureates: How Science Became a Partisan Issue*, N.Y. TIMES, Oct. 19, 2004. See also ROSS GELBSPAN, *BOILING POINT: HOW POLITICIANS, BIG OIL AND COAL, JOURNALISTS, AND ACTIVISTS ARE FUELING THE CLIMATE CRISIS—AND WHAT WE CAN DO TO AVERT DISASTER* 42 (NY Basic Books 2004) [hereinafter *BOILING POINT*].

<sup>25</sup> See Revkin, *supra* note 24; see also, generally *BOILING POINT*, *supra* note 24 at 44–61.

<sup>26</sup> Jeremy Symons, *How Bush and Co. Observe the Science*, WASH. POST, July 13, 2003; see also *EPA's Whitman Submits Resignation Letter*, CNN, May 21, 2003, <http://www.cnn.com/2003/ALLPOLITICS/05/21/whitman.resigns/> (last visited Apr. 12, 2008).

<sup>27</sup> Zachary Coile, *Senator Says Warming by Humans Just a Hoax*, S. F. CHRON., Oct. 11, 2006; see also *BOILING POINT*, *supra* note 24, at 37.

<sup>28</sup> EPA: Clear Skies, <http://www.epa.gov/clearskies> (last visited Apr. 13, 2008).

retreats on automobile emissions<sup>29</sup> and coal power plants.<sup>30</sup> (Using, by the way, another bugaboo to the authors, command and control requirements and the rule of law). If climate change has not been a more volatile issue in the 2008 Presidential campaign it is because the leading candidates all agree that serious measures need to be taken. There are times in history when not losing is winning, and this was one. And then it happened, the public got it, and the Supreme Court ratified it in a *Brown v. Board of Education*<sup>31</sup>-like opinion. Climate change was happening and it was wrong. Like so many seismic shifts, this one built slowly, reached a tipping point, and wham. Major industries have come on board, as has the Vatican, as have leaders of evangelical churches.<sup>32</sup> Even the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, long paralyzed by the energy industry, has approved climate change legislation bunching massive subsidies for alternative energy.<sup>33</sup>

Of course, no one of sound mind could now declare victory. Indeed, no sound person could even *predict* victory over a phenomenon so long ignored and so deeply tied to lifestyles that have become “rights,” perverse government subsidies, and the political status quo. Here we have the State of Louisiana, with the most to lose from sea level rise in America,<sup>34</sup> refusing to endorse fuel efficiency standards or carbon dioxide controls. If the devastation of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita was insufficient to wake these people up, it is beyond reality to blame environmentalists for not closing the deal. There is just too much money in oil and gas. This was and remains a terribly steep slope.

With these understandings, we can move to the author’s second try, *Break Through*, in less detail because its perceptions are the same, although embellished with numerous allusions to well-known authors and scientists. Once past the foreplay (the history of environmentalism in sixteen pages), we have separate essays that, sequentially, blame environmentalists for failing to stop the deforestation of the Brazilian Amazon,<sup>35</sup> treat with disdain the growing environmental justice movement,<sup>36</sup> take a swipe at those protesting the celebrated Cape Wind project<sup>37</sup> (the authors are apparently

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<sup>29</sup> See, e.g., *Massachusetts v. Env’t. Prot. Agency*, 127 S.Ct. 1438 (2007).

<sup>30</sup> Felicity Barringer, *Appellate Panel Rejects E.P.A. Emission Limits*, N.Y. TIMES, Feb 9, 2008.

<sup>31</sup> *Brown v. Bd. of Educ. of Topeka*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954).

<sup>32</sup> See, e.g., Jeff Nesmith, *Major Industries Endorse Mandatory Climate Change Action*, COX NEWS SERVICE, Jan. 24, 2007, [http://www.coxwashington.com/news/content/reporters/stories/2007/01/24/BC\\_CLIMATE23\\_1STLD\\_COX.html](http://www.coxwashington.com/news/content/reporters/stories/2007/01/24/BC_CLIMATE23_1STLD_COX.html) (last visited Apr. 13, 2008); *The Faithfully Green Try a ‘Carbon Fast’ for Lent*, WASH. POST, Feb. 24, 2008, at N-04.

<sup>33</sup> America’s Climate Security Act, S. 2191, 110th Cong. (as reported by S. Comm. on Env’t and Pub. Works, Dec. 5, 2007).

<sup>34</sup> Coastal & Marine Geology Program, U.S. Geological Survey, Subsidence and Sea-Level Rise in Southeastern Louisiana: Implications for Coastal Management and Restoration, <http://coastal.er.usgs.gov/LA-subsidence/> (last visited Apr. 13, 2008) (“The Mississippi River delta plain is subject to the highest rate of relative sea-level rise (3 ft. per century) of any region in the Nation.”).

<sup>35</sup> BREAK THROUGH, *supra* note 2, at 41.

<sup>36</sup> *Id.* at 66.

<sup>37</sup> *Id.* at 89.

into the alternative energy business, and good for them, but whether Cape Wind will actually prevent a single coal unit from coming on line or, rather, simply keep the rates a little cheaper remains to be seen), castigates the greens for thinking climate change is only a pollution control issue<sup>38</sup> (which leaves us wondering about the greens they talk to), and a repeat chapter on the death of environmentalism,<sup>39</sup> with the very same title, basically saying that they were right the first time. At which point one wonders, why write the book?

The answer, if one is to be found, lies in the second part, *The Politics of Possibility*, which attacks environmentalists for their unrelenting negativism,<sup>40</sup> when what they should do instead is offer hope and vision. Economic development, they explain, is not the environmental problem, it is the solution.<sup>41</sup> The fact is, they enthuse, human beings have not only survived on the planet, “*we’ve thrived*,”<sup>42</sup> a point reminding me of a letter I once received from an engineer to whom I had recommended reading Barry Commoner’s *The Closing Circle*,<sup>43</sup> a seminal book written well within its bounds, my colleague replied that, having read it, he was delighted “it is the environment that is having a crisis and not the people.”<sup>44</sup> To use increased human populations as an indicator of planetary health is not exactly axiomatic; just ask the lemmings. An opposite case could be as easily made, or at least acknowledged. The greater danger with the message is that it undercuts the hard work of environmentalism ahead. For public relations purposes, *Happy Days* is certainly an easier sell. But for all the bike lanes, windmills, and recycling centers we build, the big money, by orders of magnitude, is still going towards more coal plants, more highways, and the very practices that are bringing the roof down. Within this scenario, unilateral disarmament is not the answer.

Environmentalists have also missed the boat, apparently, in their cautious support for adaptive measures in response to climate change, ignoring the fact that change is here. This is of course a difficult balancing act for the environmental community. On the one hand, denying these changes is like denying the onset of old age, but on the other hand to concede them as meritorious takes the pressure off of those who are knowingly and profitably causing them. Better, the authors say, to ally ourselves with those positive thinkers who would protect people and move them out of harms way. Spoken, perhaps, as one who has never had the unpleasantness of trying to persuade people to pull back from hurricane-prone beaches and who have no intention of getting out of harm’s way so long as the government pays their flood insurance. To say nothing of the

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<sup>38</sup> *Id.* at 105.

<sup>39</sup> *Id.* at 130.

<sup>40</sup> *Id.* at 155–273.

<sup>41</sup> *Id.*

<sup>42</sup> *Id.* at 151.

<sup>43</sup> BARRY COMMONER, *THE CLOSING CIRCLE: NATURE, MAN, AND TECHNOLOGY* (1971).

<sup>44</sup> Letter from Frank Costagliola, Consultant, Gen. Physics Corp., to Oliver Houck, Counsel, Nat’l Wildlife Fed’n (Jan. 10, 1972) (on file with author).

mega-billion dollar construction projects now emerging as “adaptations” to climate change, to include a Great Wall of levees along the Louisiana coast and a new wave of dams on the West’s already diminishing rivers.<sup>45</sup> Some adaptations are not all that positive.

What the environmental movement needs, the authors conclude, is an affirmative message like those of Winston Churchill and Martin Luther King that will draw middle America away from the conveniences of its SUVs and throw-away lifestyles towards a better world which, quoting this time the author Bill McKibben, is driven no longer by “environmentalism” but by something new.<sup>46</sup> Ok, I’m ready. I am turning the pages eagerly, looking for the punch line, the new message. I plow through a chapter called “Pragmatism” and another called “Greatness” and then, to my surprise, the book ends. Thinking that I have missed something, I comb back over the text, searching for clues. What I find is that the authors’ new, post-environmentalism will not deny the second and third world their go at U.S. lifestyles and standards of living. That would be unsuccessful, and unfair. Nor can we expect the American consumer to reduce its appetite for larger cars, mansions in exurbia, and electric toothbrushes. (I am reminded of the testimony of a White House official that he was in full support of a strong wetlands permitting program, “but we don’t want to hurt people carrying it out.”)<sup>47</sup> The “Politics of Possibility” are, instead, to get ahead of the parade, promising material wealth to everyone because of, and here it gets fuzzy . . . windmills? I see references to a “clean energy society,” but even Exxon-Mobil’s advertisements have gotten that far. Where’s the beef? It turns out that the beef is in a new message. Only, the authors don’t provide one.

My father used to tell me, when I’d complain to him that I knew what I wanted to say but just couldn’t find the words, that I was wrong. When you know what you want to say, he said, the words will come. Which is the way this book leaves the reader. It finds the words for what it does not like, but it does not find the words for what it wants. The challenge of environmentalism has always been to re-order a deeply-entrenched and destructive status quo. Whether we can do this with booming economic and population growth is to me at the least questionable, but a deserving debate. It may be that, as the Chicago-school economists and the World Trade Organization would have it, economic progress solves the whole thing. On the other hand, in a recent article in the *New York Times*, Jared Diamond notes that individual Americans consume more than half the resources of individuals in other developed countries and thirty-two times the per capita rate of the underdeveloped world.<sup>48</sup> This is before China really cranks up. He simply presents the math.

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<sup>45</sup> See Patrik Jonsson, *Can A ‘Leaky’ Levee Save the Louisiana Coast?*, THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR, Jan. 24, 2007; see also *Hurricane Aftermath, Stopping the Surge*, THE TIMES-PICAYUNE, Oct. 25, 2005, at A-9.

<sup>46</sup> BREAK THROUGH, *supra* note 2, at 129.

<sup>47</sup> Oliver A. Houck, *More Net Loss of Wetlands: The Army-EPA Memorandum of Agreement on Mitigation Under the § 404 Program*, 20 ENVTL. L. REP. 10212, 10215 (1990).

<sup>48</sup> Jared Diamond, Op-Ed., *What’s Your Consumption Factor?*, N.Y. TIMES, Jan. 2, 2008.

To date, nobody has the answer but a lot of people are trying. A positive spin on the solution will be welcome, and no one witnessing the Presidential campaign of Barack Obama can deny the power of hope. At the end of the day, however, whoever is in the White House will have to wrestle with the American lifestyle and Diamond's consumption factor of thirty-two to one. To say that the environmental movement needs positive messages is a useful reminder, but does not advance the ball. If a more pollution free, diverse, and sustainable world is not enough for positive, then our ears are open for something better. In the meantime, a little more respect for those who have made hard gains against long odds and are working towards the same ends with a highly imaginative and widely diverse array of tools would seem to be in order. Telling their funders, or now the American public, that environmentalists are off the mark and only you are on it is not. The next book needs fewer sling shots and more answers.