

"hook and bullet environmentalists." We know that wilderness, clean water, clean air, and curbs on urban sprawl are essential to wildlife habitat, and thus to our sports. That's why most hunters and fishermen are strongly committed to a clean environment. And most parents know that every time they get their children a drink of water from the tap, they're pouring into their children whatever Corporate America has poured into the water supply. Parents in cities with high rates of childhood asthma, caused by toxic emissions in the air—they're environmentalists, too. We may differ stylistically from our tree-hugger friends, but the result is the same.

Whether you care about hunting and fishing, drinking the water, or breathing the air, you should know this: George W. Bush has been a one-man wrecking crew on the environment. On clean water, his attitude is "Let them drink Perrier." Clean air? Let them buy a ranch out far away from the city. That's what Bush did.

### **"Please Don't Pollute": Bush Let His Contributors Design "Voluntary" Pollution Controls**

Some of the biggest sources of air pollution in Texas are what are known as "grandfathered companies." Now "grandfather" has a kindly, gentle connotation, but in this context it's better to think of them as dirty old men. "Grandfathered companies" are companies whose plants were under construction or already up and running—and belching fumes—when the 1971 Clean Air Act was passed. Thirty-six percent of industrial air pollution in Texas comes from these dirty old men.<sup>1</sup>

Here's how Bush dealt with the dirty old men: he *asked them not to pollute*. Pretty please. With sugar on top. I'm not kidding. In 1997, Bush pushed a *voluntary* permits plan for the dirty old men. Voluntary! Texas didn't have voluntary rules on speeding when I was collecting tickets on I-35. Why the hell should corporate polluters be expected to voluntarily comply with emissions controls?

Because to W, they're not just corporate polluters. They're contributors. Bush allowed grandfathered-company representatives who had contributed to his campaign to help draft the Bush environmental plan.

## **chapter 7**

### **To Die For: Bush and the Environment**

"There's no such thing as being too closely aligned to the oil business in West Texas."

*(Lubbock Avalanche Journal, 3/30/78)*

"Bush represents the biggest threat to the environment of any leading major party presidential candidate."

*(Deb Callahan, president, League of Conservation Voters, 1/13/00)*

"We believe the air crisis is due to the intentional acts and conscious indifference of Governor Bush."

*(Meg Haem of the Texas Air Crisis Campaign, a coalition of forty-four environmental groups, Dallas Morning News, 10/20/99)*

Like me, George W. Bush is a hunter and a fisherman. Unlike me, George W. Bush is also a total suck-up to corporate polluters.

Guess which impulse W sides with when the two collide?

You're getting good at this. At every critical juncture as governor of Texas, Bush has sided with the big-money corporate polluters and against the environment. Of course, the big-money polluters have also sided with Bush. That makes him kind of a happy booker on the environment.

You don't have to wear Birkenstocks and sing Raffi songs to be an environmentalist. Most hunters and fishermen are what's known as

From 1994 to 1999, Bush took \$1,371,795 in gubernatorial and presidential campaign contributions from grandfathered companies' PACs and company officials. Why not just eliminate the middleman and let the corporate polluters run the state? Now do you see why I call Bush a happy hooker?

Of the 984,000 tons of air pollution produced by grandfathered companies, 741,009 tons—75 percent—came from companies that have donated \$500 or more to Bush's gubernatorial races from 1994 to 1998. In 1999 Bush accepted at least \$11,500 from a grandfathered company that had written in a 1997 letter sent to Bush's environmental policy director and to other dirty old men, "In early March, while discussing the National Ambient Air Quality Standards Issue with Governor Bush, he asked us to work with his office to develop the concepts of a voluntary program."<sup>2</sup>

But if Bush was cleaning up in terms of campaign contributions, his voluntary plan wasn't doing much to clean up the air. Though Bush claimed his voluntary plan was a success, one year after implementing the program less than one half of 1 percent of emissions from the grandfathered plants had been reduced. In 1999, only three of the thirty-six plants that had pledged to reduce emissions had actually done so.<sup>3</sup>

Now, do I have any proof that those contributions in any way affected Bush's decision-making process? No. But something stinks—and it's more than just the polluted air.

### **We're Number One! Houston Passes Los Angeles as Dirtiest City in America**

I grew up in a little town not far from Houston. Houston is a great city, full of piss and vinegar. As any Houstonian will tell you, the first word spoken from the surface of the moon was "Houston." And yet, Houston has always had something of an inferiority complex. The Dallas Cowboys were always winning Super Bowls. The Houston Oilers never even went to the Super Bowl—until they moved to Al Gore's Nashville.

So Houston yearns for recognition. But not this kind. In 1999, Houston overtook Los Angeles as the city with the dirtiest air in Amer-

ica. Houston had the most violations of federal health ozone standards. It also had a higher number of peak days than Los Angeles. Ozone is really nasty stuff. It's a key component of smog, and a respiratory irritant. Breathing it is painful, dirty—and dangerous.<sup>4</sup> A 1999 study conducted by the city of Houston shows that Houston's air pollution may have caused at least 435 premature deaths and as many as 1,196 new cases of chronic bronchitis annually. Dirty air is also expensive. Houston has spent between \$2.9 billion and \$3.1 billion on health problems attributable to the city's ozone and airborne particles.<sup>5</sup> Hundreds of people die before their time. Thousands sick with bronchitis. And billions spent to deal with it.

I hope the Bush campaign chokes on its dirty money.

If it seems like I'm getting personal to you, it's because this *is* personal to me. I have eight nieces and nephews (soon to be nine) growing up in Texas. Four of them (soon to be five!) in the Houston area. These babies have to breathe the crap and crud that Bush's contributors are spewing into the air. So when I see statistics about hundreds of people dying before their time, and thousands more fighting bronchitis for their next breath, they're not just statistics to me. They are potentially my nieces and nephews, my brothers and sisters-in-law; or my dad, retired and fishing in Galveston.

Of course, my family's kids aren't the only ones at risk. As a result of Bush's flawed plan, almost 230,000 Texas children in seven urban counties may be exposed to as much as 295,000 tons of air pollution each year because they attend schools within two miles of older industrial plants that are under Bush's voluntary permit program.<sup>6</sup>

And—who'd of thought it?—it seems almost that none of the schools that are next to the filth-spewing factories are elite private academies. Can you imagine the coincidence? Stunning, isn't it? So once again, under the Compassionate Conservative, it's the poor who suffer most. A 1999 study found that 10 percent of the Hispanic and African-American children in Houston's inner cities suffer from asthma—twice the level previously measured just two years before. Asthma sufferers are especially threatened by increases in ozone levels, as those pollutants are known to irritate the condition and trigger attacks.<sup>7</sup>

It's not just asthma sufferers who are harmed by this. In 1999, ozone in Houston was so bad that Harris County judge Robert Eckels announced a new system to notify area schools when the smog levels made it dangerous for students to practice sports outside. On high smog days—let's call them "Bush Days"—athletes had experienced "coughing fits and other respiratory problems," according to the *Houston Chronicle*. It's outrageous. How would you feel if your son was a high school athlete getting sick just from breathing the air at football practice?

To give you an idea of just how bad it is, the national standard for ozone is 125 parts per billion; the highest reading in Deer Park, a blue-collar part of Houston, was 251 parts per billion in October 1999.<sup>8</sup>

And there's no doubt that Bush bears responsibility for this. A coalition of forty-four environmental groups called the Texas Air Crisis Campaign released a report in 1999 detailing how Texas air quality had deteriorated under Bush. "We believe the air crisis is due to the intentional acts and conscious indifference of Governor Bush, his appointees to the Texas Natural Resource Conservation Commission and the Legislature. There are both sins of omission and sins of commission," said Meg Haem of the campaign. The group blamed Bush's poor vehicle emissions program and his allowing grandfathered companies to continue polluting with no mandatory regulations.<sup>9</sup>

And yet Bush just doesn't seem to care. Texas cities have repeatedly failed federal emissions standards since 1994, and Bush did little about the problem. A city is demoted in air pollution status by the federal government if it exceeds permissible ozone limits more than once a year from 1994 to 1996: Dallas, for example, exceeded them nine times in 1994, fifteen times in 1995, and four times in 1996. In 1999, Bush's environmental administrators claimed they did not have enough warning to get a clean air plan together.<sup>10</sup> Not enough warning? Didn't the twenty-eight violations in three years kinda give you a clue?

### Don't Drink the Water Either

The Texas Center for Policy Studies took a look at water quality in Texas, and found that Bush has a slightly better record on water than he does on air pollution—but not much. "The overall water quality in

Texas' classified reservoirs has declined since 1992," according to the center's study. In addition, "a third of the state's rivers and streams probably violate federal water quality standards, though no one is certain because the state declines to test them all."<sup>11</sup>

To his credit, Bush did propose increased funds for evaluations of polluted streams, and other efforts, but his proposal failed to request the additional state employees necessary to carry out this work. The League of Conservation Voters said Bush didn't push his funding recommendations with the legislature, and as a result, while the legislature did pass some additional money for evaluation of polluted streams, the legislature did not approve the funding necessary for other critical water quality programs—a move that could lead to more lax enforcement and increased water pollution problems.<sup>12</sup>

### The Watchdogs Are Laptops

There's that phrase again: "lax enforcement." Seems like that phrase keeps popping up whenever we look at Bush's record on the environment. Why has his enforcement of environmental laws been so lax? Because that's the way Bush wants it.

State Representative Lon Burnham of Fort Worth says, "State environmental officials appointed by Bush have been a disaster, and it started the month he took office. Bush has shown a total disregard for public health and an allegiance to private profit."<sup>13</sup> Now, Lon's a Democrat, and a former comrade of mine from Texas Democratic campaigns, so you might be a tad skeptical when he calls Bush's appointees "a disaster." So decide for yourself:

All of Bush's appointees to the Texas Natural Resource Conservation Commission (TNRCC, and pronounced "Train Wreck") had pro-industry, anti-regulation backgrounds. All of them. Every one of 'em.<sup>14</sup> And you know George. At Harvard Business School they taught him to delegate. So he puts the corporate bigwigs in charge of his environmental agency, and lets them do what they will. I don't blame them; I really don't. When someone puts a fox in charge of guarding the henhouse, you don't blame the fox.

As part of its continuing mission to cater to corporate polluters,

Bush's TNRCC has adopted a policy of giving companies up to two weeks' notice before routine inspections. "Who isn't going to look good when the inspector comes if you have this much advance notice?" asked Mary Kelly of the Texas Center for Policy Studies. A TNRCC memo issued in September 1995 states, "Ideally, this notification should occur one to two weeks prior to the inspection date." Officials at the commission say this is necessary to ensure company personnel are available when inspections are made.<sup>15</sup> It's also just good manners. And W is nothing if not well bred.

Under Bush, TNRCC has been especially troubled by allegations of environmental racism. At least nine civil rights complaints against the TNRCC were filed with the EPA from 1994 to 1999, more than against any other state environmental agency in the nation. The complaints charge that the TNRCC allows excess pollution in areas that are predominantly Hispanic, African-American, or poor. "The TNRCC's handling of [one of the cases] is another example that Governor George Bush Jr.'s environmental justice program at TNRCC is a complete sham," said Neil Carman, a former state air pollution official and the clean air director of the Texas chapter of the Sierra Club.<sup>16</sup>

### When Pollution Levels Exceed the Limits, Just Raise the Limits

After Dallas violated the federal standard for ozone twenty-six times in one summer, Bush's TNRCC sprang into action. With alacrity, with dispatch, with a liveliness rarely seen in a bureaucracy, they proposed bold action to bring Big D's air in compliance with federal clean air standards.

They asked the EPA to lower the standards.

Kind of like in *This Is Spinal Tap* when the band insists their amplifier is louder because the knob goes to 11. One TNRCC commissioner asked the staff to come up with a scientific defense of the lower standard. "It seems that Texas is trying to clean up the air with statistics instead of pollution control. This is a bad idea," said Ron White, the director of environment for the radical lefty American Lung Association.<sup>17</sup>

### Bush Donors Turned Superfund into "Corporate Welfare"

In their study "Superfund a Super Deal for Texas Polluters," Texas Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER) showed that industries that developed the Bush-supported plan to overhaul state Superfund laws had given Bush at least \$3.5 million in his 1994 and 1998 gubernatorial campaigns. According to PEER, the relationship between industry campaign contributions and Bush shows "how industry was able to turn a Superfund program that was designed to clean up communities contaminated by toxic pollution into another corporate welfare program," and "these industries have long had clout in Texas state government, but it was not until George W. Bush was elected Governor that industry was able to get legislation signed to take the teeth out of the state Superfund law."<sup>18</sup>

### The Bottom Line

Texas is, in highly biased opinion, the most beautiful state in America. It has sprawling forests, breathtaking canyons, hundreds of miles of rivers—and a governor who has allowed his corporate donors to trash it. Bush's willingness—eagerness—to allow polluters to make children sick just from breathing the air had better give you pause. Unless, of course, you don't plan on breathing if W becomes president.