When you get into your first toxics fight, the hardest thing to understand is the government. Corporations you can understand. Corporations only exist to return a profit to their investors. They are also supposed to obey the law, but no one expects a corporation to have a conscience or to "do good" if it's not required by law and if it's going to cost real money. (Corporations sometimes sponsor "meaningful" events, like concerts on Sunday TV, to give the appearance of doing good, but most people recognize this as part of a game plan for turning profit.)

Modern corporations, pursuing profit, are dangerous, at least the ones playing with hazardous chemicals. To protect themselves, Americans look to government. The power of government is supposed to shield us from the stupidity or the malevolence of corporations. When you get into a toxics fight, the hardest thing to understand is that the government isn't protecting you and doesn't seem to be interested in protecting you. This is a rude shock.

Governments develop their own agenda. In some sense, government is simply an extension of business. From local zoning boards up to the President, government can be viewed this way. But there's something else at work as well. To some extent, governments have their own agenda, independent of business—maintain stability, keep things the way they are, reduce the rate of change. The indelicate way to phrase this is "CYA—cover your ass" meaning don't risk anything, don't go out on a limb, don't take chances--don't do what's right, do what's safe. Bureaucracies take on a life of their own, serving their own goals, not the goals of the people they were set up to serve. The main goal of a bureaucracy is to survive; doing anything is secondary.

Once you understand that the government isn't going to protect you--isn't even trying to protect you but rather is trying to protect itself against you—you are ready to deal in the real world. Now you have two alternatives: (1) put on your hip boots, enter the swamp of electoral politics and try to reform government from the inside, or (2) become a citizen activist and work on government not through government.

If you have taken the second route, this book's for you: The Citizens Toxics Protection Manual from John O'Connor and friends at the National Campaign Against Toxic Hazards. This is the best 10 pound manual. It's a steal at $25 from: National Campaign, 20 East Street, Suite 601, Boston, MA 02111; phone (617) 482-1477.

--Peter Montague, Ph.D.