Here we begin our annual review of the key events of 2001.

As the NEW YORK TIMES reported November 18, "Before the attacks, environmentalists seemed to have political momentum in casting President Bush as unfriendly to the environment and his administration as beholden to the extractive industries. But in the last two months, environmentalists have been stymied for fear of appearing unpatriotic or even petty in the face of a national crisis."[8] Sensing hesitancy and confusion among environmentalists, since 9/11 the President and his corporate lieutenants have taken the offensive to:

** Abandon negotiations for a treaty to control global warming:[8]
** Shelf a plan to reduce air pollution from coal-burning power plants because a nation engaged in a war-without-end against terrorism can't risk power shortages:[8]
** Reverse a Clinton administration policy that stopped road-building, oil and gas leasing, and most new logging in 60 million acres of nearly-untouched national forests;[8,9]
** Reverse the phase-out of snowmobiles in national parks:[8]
** Grease the skids for mining corporations to dig for gold, copper, zinc and lead on public lands. Under rules set during the Clinton administration, the government could stop new mines "likely to cause substantial irreparable harm to water quality and other natural resources." No longer.[8,10]
** Ease energy-conservation standards for air conditioners:[8]
** Make it easier for home-builders and commercial developers to eliminate wetlands:[8]
** Prevent the re-introduction of grizzly bears in the Northwest;[8]
** Cut funding 50% for research and development into renewable sources of energy, and provide $34 billion in additional subsidies to the oil, coal, gas, and nuclear industries.[10]
** Drill for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska.[8]

Mr. Bush's most far-reaching achievements, however, are these:

** The House of Representatives suspended its rules of debate on Nov. 27 to rush through a reauthorization of the Price-Anderson Act which severely limits the nuclear industry's liability for radioactive errors, oversights, slips, goofs, flubs, blunders, leaks, releases, discharges, mishaps, misadventures, accidents or catastrophes (including "energetic disassemblies,") the nuclear industry's own term for explosions), placing most of the liability for such human foibles on the taxpayer. Excusing the nuclear corporations from liability for their own behavior would "dramatically improve security at our Nation's nuclear power plants in response to the widespread concerns over terrorist threats," said Congressman Joe Barton (R-Tex), a key Republican strategist in the House. And so it passed.[11]

** The President won a major "free trade" victory over labor and environmentalist opposition Dec. 6, using anti-terrorist arguments. By a vote of 215 to 214 the House of Representatives gave the President the right to negotiate "free trade" agreements around the globe without amendment or debate from Congress. It's called "fast track authority" and President Clinton twice failed to win it. President Bush won it "for several reasons," the NEW YORK TIMES reported: "The first is that his argument about trade as a weapon against terrorism, while a stretch, actually worked."[12]
misguided, deceitful, destructive, unpatriotic, and a danger to the civilized world.

The Washington Legal Foundation -- a mainstream extremist think tank -- let this snarling little cat out of the bag Nov. 26 in an ad on the Op-Ed page of the NEW YORK TIMES, titled, "Wanted: Public Interest Reality."[13] In it, they said that, prior to September 11, "ideological lawyers" have "wasted decades" "treating our military and America's business community with contempt as if they were the enemy." And, "We are now paying the price for those years of frivolous activism," as if citizen activism had somehow led to the atrocities of Sept. 11. The ad contains a simple agenda for the post-9/11 world:

1. Get rid of "right to know" laws because they provide "a road map for terrorists." Strategic message: Limit citizens' access to information to curb citizen activism.

2. The reason we don't have vaccines against smallpox is not because smallpox was eradicated[14] world-wide in 1971 but because "inefficient FDA bureaucrats" have brought the production of life-saving vaccines to a standstill, the ad says. Strategic message: Get government off our backs, end citizen lawsuits, end citizen activism.

3. Why are we dependent upon Middle Eastern oil? Not because the vast majority of the world's oil resides there and we've neglected alternatives, but because "wave after wave of laws, regulations, and novel lawsuits" have enabled "radicals" to prevent oil drilling in "a remote area of frozen Alaskan wasteland," the ad says. Strategic message: Get government off our backs, end citizen lawsuits, end citizen activism.

4. The "Naderite food police" slowed the licensing of food irradiation, which is now "nearly unavailable" to kill anthrax being sent through the mail. Strategic message: End citizen activism, get government off our backs, unleash corporations.

5. The Endangered Species Act has allowed "uncompromising elites" to "obsess" over "plant and insect subspecies" and thus block housing construction and economic development, thereby endangering "jobs, prosperity, investments, and consumer welfare." Strategic message: End citizen lawsuits, get government off our backs.

6. "Self-indulgent activists spent the frivolous 90's [sic] squandering our resources and opportunities chasing phantom risks, ridiculous 'public interest' causes, and bogus consumer scares" like electromagnetic radiation and genetically engineered foods. Strategic message: End citizen activism.

7. "In the post-September 11 world, we can no longer afford to put the narrow agendas of a 'public interest' elite ahead of our own national interests," Strategic message: End citizen activism because it's now unpatriotic.

So there you have it: Active citizens who want their government to protect the natural assets of their communities against corporate plunder are unpatriotic elitists squandering valuable resources for silly purposes, endangering our entire civilization by keeping us enslaved to Middle Eastern oil, slowing the introduction of civilization-saving technologies like food irradiation, placing the needs of endangered species like the San Diego fairy shrimp ahead of the needs of prosperous investors and important men of means.

"As a united America labors to rebuild our wounded economy, the silly muddle of 'public interest' advocacy now seems irrelevant.... Can the professional activists understand that free enterprise is the very heart and soul of America?" the ad asks.

No, actually, they probably can't. If there's any one thing that September 11 taught us, it is that the heart and soul of America is not mean-spirited, small-minded opportunists who twist the truth for private gain. The heart and soul of America is ordinary people sacrificing for the public interest, rolling up their sleeves and pitching in to help.

Happy New Year!

--Peter Montague (National Writers Union, UAW Local 1981/AFL-CIO)


