The ultimate judgment has been rendered on Bill Clinton's environmental programs. In July, the leaders of 15 major environmental groups sent a joint letter to all their members saying, "You have never received a letter like this before. This is the FIRST TIME the combined leadership of the nation's leading environmental groups have sent a single call to action to our combined memberships."

"Even during the Reagan/Watt/Gorsuch years, we have never faced such a serious threat to our environmental laws in Congress. Polluters have blocked virtually all of our efforts to strengthen environmental laws, but still they are not satisfied. Now, they are mounting an all-out effort to WEAKEN our most important environmental laws."

The letter was signed by the leaders of the nation's 15 largest environmental organizations, ranging from National Wildlife Federation to Greenpeace. (Mysteriously missing is Environmental Defense Fund [EDF] in Washington.)

A serious threat inside Congress? How can this be? With a Democrat in the White House, a Democratically-controlled Congress, and a dedicated environmentalist for Vice-President, where are the corporations finding support for an all-out war on the laws that supposedly protect us from industrial poisons and the naked despoliation of our dwindling natural resources?

In truth, Mr. Clinton and the big environmental organizations bear equal measures of blame. The only consistent thread running through all of Mr. Clinton's appointments and policies is his desire to nourish global corporations (which are the major source of the re-election funds that he so desperately needs). Now corporate America is feeling emboldened by Mr. Clinton's obvious preference for all things corporate, such as his appointment of Stephen Breyer to the Supreme Court, and his gift of NAFTA. Global corporations coveted NAFTA and Mr. Clinton worked hard to get it for them, with active help from most of the big environmental organizations (excepting Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth and Sierra Club).

Mr. Clinton's 1993 "tax reform" law permitted global corporations to continue to evade their fair share of taxes --a principal reason why the middle class and the working poor are hurting today.[1]

Mr. Clinton gave corporations something else they had been lusting after since 1958: scrapping the Delaney Clause in the nation's food safety law. Right now the Delaney clause prohibits cancer-causing chemicals in processed foods. Instead of extending this prohibition to raw foods, Bill Clinton has promised to kill it entirely. After Mr. Clinton has his way with us, cancer-causing chemicals will be added legally to ALL our food.

The chemical corporations are drooling over this proposed change. Delaney has been a major thorn for them. Delaney doesn't allow tiny amounts of poisons, or negligible amounts or any other weasel words. Delaney says zero and it means zero. Industry wants Mr. Clinton to scrap Delaney and substitute a standard called "negligible risk" which EPA [U.S. Environmental Protection Agency] defines as "just enough cancer-causing chemicals to kill one in every million citizens during a lifetime (70 years)." The citizens who will be killed by Mr. Clinton's revised wording are "negligible," meaning they don't count for anything. For the most part, the big environmental organizations have gone along with Mr. Clinton's plan to substitute "negligible risk" for the zero-carcinogens standard now embedded in the Delaney clause. (Again, Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth are exceptions.)

In sum, Mr. Clinton has shown himself willing to sell out the American public on essentially every important environmental issue, whenever corporate executives tell him to. And the big environmental organizations have been trotting along at the end of Mr. Clinton's leash, hoping to be thrown a bone next time they're invited to dine at the White House.

Now it seems the big environmental groups have suddenly discovered that the baby sitter has set the baby on fire. Thus their July letter asking ordinary Americans to weigh in with a letter to Congress--a tactic unlikely to work. In the TV age, Congress can buy all the votes it needs if it has sufficient money, and corporate America pours the money through a giant funnel.

Where does this leave environmental protection?

In the hands of the rest of us.

All is not lost because the grass-roots movement has some shrewd strategists at work. For example, Wally Burnstein and Michael Colby at Food & Water in Vermont. Wally and Michael are conducting a "negligible risk" campaign. They have sent out several hundred thousand "declarations" asking people to sign up, pledging,

"I oppose the government's 'negligible risk' policy which allows the death of an 'acceptable' number of American children by condoning the presence of pesticide residues in our nation's food supply....."

"I oppose allowing the sale of fresh vegetables, fruits, herbs, spices, grains or foods of any origin which contain pesticide residues of any type for any reason whatsoever...."

"I hereby hold the local, state and federal governments, food industry, grocery stores, and their executives personally, individually and collectively responsible for any disease or affliction, including cancer, birth defects, allergies or other which might result, now or in the future, from being forced to consume pesticide residues without my knowledge and/or consent," the pledge says.

Food & Water has received TENS OF THOUSANDS of these pledges, many of them with angry hand-written notes attached, like this one from Patricia Nowicki in Connecticut:

"I categorically reject anyone deciding that one of us could legally contract a disease or die so that some corporate entity's bottom line ends up black."

And this one from Traci Davis in Florida:

"My family and I live in South Dade and we are continually exposed to pesticides sprayed by planes on the crops. The 'mist' of chemicals does not only land on the crops but on us and our property and homes. Is the government trying to ensure the death of all Americans??"

These people are mad as hell, and Food & Water is forming them into Neighborhood Networks. Neighborhood Networks are composed of people whom Wally Burnstein calls Number Ones--people who get it and want to DO something. (Number Twos are seeking information, weighing the alternatives, basically paralyzed. Number Threes are simply hopeless.) These Neighborhood Networks of Number Ones are linked together by telephone trees, and they carry out coordinated phone and letter-writing campaigns. Their targets are always carefully selected corporations --NEVER GOVERNMENT. They scare the hell out of selected corporate targets. When one caves in, they start on the next. This is how Food & Water killed the plan to irradiate food. When corporations and government ganged up to treat our food with radioactivity (to kill germs and extend shelf-life), Food & Water focused on grocery chains, and on food producers like chicken man Frank Perdue. They used a simple tactic: they rang the phone off the hook saying, "There are a lot of us and we're ready to take action. If you irradiate chicken, or if you sell irradiated chicken, we'll boycott you." The grocery chains caved in right away. Even tough-talking Frank Perdue caved in, and so did all the other chicken producers.
The WALL STREET JOURNAL paid a tribute to the successful tactics of Food & Water last April with a slashing editorial attack (April 27, pg. A12):

"...[N]o major supermarket chain is willing to stock irradiated food, and no major poultry producer is willing to treat its birds.

"The industry seems to be cowed by the hardball tactics of an outfit calling itself Food & Water. The tiny group (membership: 3,500 [sic]) produces a steady stream of T-shirts and leaflets..." The JOURNAL went on to accuse Food & Water of being antinuclear, unscientific, and paranoid. In the JOURNAL'S lexicon these words mean "successful environmental protectors."

In truth, there are half a dozen good reasons why irradiating food is a dumb, dangerous idea, which we will discuss in a future issue. For today, the point is that Food & Water has developed successful tactics that the rest of us should be using to protect our homes, our neighborhoods, our children, and our future. These are tactics that corporations cannot use against us the way they have learned to use grass-roots-organizing-with-money against us. And they are tactics that WORK.

The main idea it to pick a vulnerable corporate target, one that fears consumer opinion. Use that target as a battering ram to attack the corporation that created the problem in the first place. Greenpeace is doing this with its stunning campaign against TIME magazine, aimed at forcing TIME to abandon chlorine-bleached paper. If a high visibility target like TIME caves in (which it will, sooner or later), other major paper-users will follow. The corporations that supply TIME's paper will get the message, and chlorine-bleached paper will begin to disappear. (If history is any guide, EDF will then hold a press conference to announce that THEY persuaded the paper industry to abandon chlorine.) Soon a major customer for chlorine will be gone and the campaign's ultimate goal --to end chlorine production --will have been served. Then on to the next target. And the next.

[For information on Greenpeace's TIME campaign (including a startling poster about breast cancer), phone: (202) 319-2444.]

Notice that this strategy doesn't rely on government at all. Government at present is pretty much hopeless --it has been captured by unpatriotic, tax-evading corporations.[1] Until we can break the hold of corporations ($$) on the political process, there's not much to be gained working in that arena. As more and more people see that corporate campaigns can get us what we want, they'll join in, building the movement. It's already happening. When the movement is larger --and current trends in jobs, justice, environment, health and wealth all promise to make it grow non-stop --then we can confront the corporations directly and take back our democracy.

Until then, movement-building is what we must do.

First step: Sign up for Food & Water's ONE AMERICAN VOICE CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE campaign and help put an end to pesticides. Phone 1-800-EAT-SAFE to find out what you can do. Only Number Ones need apply.

--Peter Montague