The Environment at Valley Forge

National Wildlife Federation "Legislator of the Year" award acceptance, c. 1974

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John Gardner once noted that the trouble with America was its uncritical lovers and unloving critics. What we needed were more critical lovers.

I come before you tonight both as a lover and a critic of the conservation movement, as one who is at once proud of our past accomplishments and disappointed by them, troubled about the future of the movement and hopeful for it. I stand here to receive this award with great pride, and yet my pride is tempered by my concern for the future of this fine movement. I catch myself wondering if future historians will say that our time was the beginning or the beginning of the end of the environmental cause.

And where could it be more appropriate to consider this question than in the great cathedral of nature known as Colorado? For this is a cathedral under seige. Before the 1930's there was another Colorado known as Appalachia with wooded mountaintops, wildlife, clean and plentiful streams -- the kind of outdoor paradise that this Federation fights for. In Appalachia today there are muted mountains, gutted valleys, and nearly 10,000 miles of fishing streams deadened by industrial poison. Once a natural playground, it is now a natural graveyard. And there are people in industry today who would take Colorado down this same miserable road.

And so tonight in this period of transition, in this magnificent state, and in this gathering of conservation leaders, I will not mince words. I want to talk frankly about the problems of the conservation movement, for they are substantial. I want to be critical, for I believe a dose of loving criticism and analysis is badly needed.

As we meet here to celebrate the environmental achievements of the year, we find if we are truthful that the pickings were pretty slim. 1974 has not been a good year for the environment; nor was 1973. Yes, we can take solace in the addition of a few thousand more acres of wilderness, parks and refuges, in a few court decisions that went in our favor, in the election of a new crop of city councilmen and mayors across the country who believe in the conservation ethic and who are trying to implement the ethic on a local basis.

But on the big national issues that will decide the shape of life in the decades ahead, we are not making headway -- on energy, clean air and water, land planning. Four years ago in the Congress when the word "environment" was attached to legislation it virtually assured passage; four weeks ago I went before the Rules Committee with my land planning bill and found that the same word stirred resentment and contributed to defeat. Three years ago Congress would have voted 2 to 1 to resist any attempt to override the basic provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act; when the vote came last year on the Alaska Pipeline, a majority stampeded not merely to override NEPA but to gut it. And apparently the judges are reading election returns and thermostats, and are waiting in lines at gas stations. Gone are the heady days when environmental lawyers could storm the courts with NEPA lawsuits in the knowledge they had a fighting chance to change major national policies. If you haven't noticed, the batting average for environmental lawsuits is slumping with judicial tolerance for NEPA injunctions having apparently worn thin. Worse, all of this is a reflection of waning public interest in the environmental movement; not by any means the public abandonment of the issue, but a general feeling that the movement must take a back seat to pressing natural resource shortages.

And this environmental slippage comes at a bad time. The nation faces now as never before an agenda of environmental decisions whose historic importance will rank with the American Revolution itself. I suppose you could say we are hunkering down at the environmental Valley Forge.

What do I mean?

Call it the energy crisis, or Mr. Nixon's politically comfortable term, the energy problem, it is the first in a series of stark realizations that will shock this country in the months and years immediately ahead. And life will never be the same. For despite the admistration's false optimism, America is running out of oil and a whole list of other crucial non-renewable natural resources as well. Historians of the future will, I suspect, write that the last thirty years were the golden age of American growth and luxury, but increasingly they will write about it as a time when Americans of one generation unwittingly skimmed the cream of this country's most precious resources. For the age of abundant natural resources is over, I assert. And in the years ahead we will have to dramatically restructure our economy and resource policies. It does not mean the end to prosperity or happiness, but it will necessarily require fundamental changes in what many of our countrymen now view as "the good life."

Historian C. V. Wedgewood wrote: "History is lived forwards but it is written in retrospect. We know the end before we consider the beginning and we can never wholly recapture what it was to know the beginning only." I want to suggest that fate has cast us as witnesses and participants in one of history's briefest, most traumatic

transitions -- from the last whimpers of an age of abundance to the first painful groans of a new age of scarcity. But, as Wedgewood suggests, the perspective is distorted by our habitual allegiance to the policies of the past.

Faced with the scarity crises of 1973 and 1974, the country is not moving steadily toward enlightened new policies, but rather to a re-assertion -- a disastrous one -- of the old, discredited natural resource policies of a different age based on a different set of imperatives and a different list of assumptions. And if those policies are not turned around -- and turned around during the next 36 months -- it may be too late.

And so we're at the moment of decision -- decisions whose consequences will pervade life for the last third of this century and beyond -- and we find the environmental movement with less clout in national policy councils than it's had in a decade.

I want to suggest three reasons why this is the case, leaving aside for a moment the current concern over energy supplies.

1. The first reason is that the environmental issue has on the vital questions been substantially abandoned by the White House. And in our presidential system, that is to say it has been altogether abandoned by government. Congress and the courts can obstruct, they can delay, they can snipe and fight and sometimes have an impact, but the fact is if the weight of the presidency is thrown against you foursquare, you lose in this democracy.

I don't want to add to the travail of a wounded President, but someone ought to say that Richard Nixon is doing this nation a disservice by caving in on environmental issues for the sake of his impeachment politics. Someone ought to call him on his backtracking and, yes, double-crossing on basic policies such as land use reform. There is simply no decent rationale for such behavior, and we ought to let him know it.

There are good and noble men in this administration -- men like Rogers Morton, Russell Train and Russell Peterson -- but these men are finding when the crunch comes, they are left frequently, to borrow a notorious phrase, "twisting slowly, slowly in the wind." Those who have watched Richard Nixon turn his back on the conservation ethic ought to take this as a lesson. The President abandoned the conservationists because he never counted on them in the first place.

Your movement is essentially non-partisan, non-political, and there is much to be said for this approach. But in this system, policies are not pursued unless there is political pressure behind them. The conservation community really played no substantial role in the 1972 presidential campaign on either side. Crucial natural resource issues were

never discussed. Never again should that be allowed to happen. As we go down the road to 1976, conservationists of all political stripes should be united in their insistence that candidates address these issues, and that the next American to occupy the White House -- whether Republican or Democrat -- be a responsible conservationist.

2. A second crucial weakness of the environmental movement is that it hasn't yet made the transition from a negative effort to a positive one. This is because, during the great membership growth period of the Sixties, the effort took form basically as an insurgency. It was geared to "halt outrages" -- and there were many -- and "to defeat anti-environmentalists." This is a logical way to begin any effort; it provokes needed publicity and stirs the adrenalin of an outraged public. But the problem is that once the monsters were slain -- and mostly they were -- we did not know quite what to do with ourselves. You can defeat a hostile politician, impose an environmental review process on the agencies of government, even stop the SST, but if that is all you have achieved, it is far from enough.

After the insurgency succeeds you must govern. You must have positive, compelling programs, and we have offered far too few of them. There are still millions of Americans who view the conservation movement as a group of anti-everything fanatics who care more about bird life than human life. And to borrow a phrase from John Ehrlichman, that won't sell in Peoria, or for that matter in Brooklyn, Pittsburgh or Seattle either.

A measure of this criticism is unfair. Enlightened conservation leaders have for the last few years fought for good, positive programs like land planning, but the hard fact is that the engine for such an effort is still lacking. And part of the solution lies in my third reason for the weakness of the movement.

3. That reason is that the movement is still infected with a subtle form of elitism. The conservation effort is not perceived, as it must be, as a humanitarian effort keyed to sound stewardship of the long term future. The truth is it is the most basic of humanitarian causes: the cause of physical and spiritual health, decent communities, clean air and water, sufficient food and natural resources. And with the shortages crisis upon us, the environmental cause is inexorably tied to economic stability, jobs, housing -- the gut issue of American life. This critical relationship -- the direct tie between the three "E's" -- energy, environment and economy -- must be spelled out to the policymakers and the public with a massive new re-education effort which advances abroad and humanitarian themes.

The elitism to which I refer is a subtle and not at all the vicious kind. It was born of a time when environmentalists found it both possible and comfortable to avoid delving

into the gut, controversial issues -- racial harmony, jobs, etc. I say that day is gone. For if this society fails to face up to the problems of the cities, then it cannot begin to solve the energy problem. And if urban sprawl is to continue, no economic group, no section of the country will escape the consequences. An equally frightful price will be paid on the beaches of the Atlantic and Pacific coasts and on this great western plateau that houses the coal and shale oil of the future.

I remember one of those old patriotic movies when Bing Crosby defends the American flag against a cynic by asking others "to say what Old Glory stands for." A Southerner talks of red clay and pine trees. A Westerner describes sunset in the Rocky Mountains. But it's an old Brooklynite who gets the biggest cheer when he says: "Hey, Mac, ever seen steam comin' out a sewer in Flatbush?"

My point is, where is that environmental constituency in Flatbush? Can we long exist without it? The fact is most Americans will never see a wilderness area, park or wildlife refuge, and unless they are brought into the fold when the crunch comes they can be expected to opt for power, light and heat at any cost -- even if the price be wall-to-wall power plants and refineries in Montana, Colorado, New Mexico and Arizona.

Emerson said that "the only way to have a friend is to be one." Part of the reason the environmental movement finds itself in trouble today is that we failed during the heady years of the Sixties to make friends and forge alliances with groups that might be largely with us now: blue collar America, enlightened industry, the minorities who inhabit our rundown cities. But in those days, environmentalists were not in a mood to compromise or to play a role in "their" issues, and we predictably find few friends around to sustain us during the dark days of the energy crisis.

And so we have labor joining the oil industry to cut the throat of NEPA during the Alaska Pipeline debate, and they should not.

We have civil rights groups in Jacksonville, Florida, joining with development-oriented industries in a coalition against wildlife groups who didn't want important spawning waters destroyed by a facility producing "floating nuclear power plants" -- a concept not even approved by the AEC. And the blacks shouldn't have been there, siding against NEPA.

So my criticisms are that we have been too negative, too elitist, too self-centered. Well, what's my prescription? It comes in about three doses.

The first has to do with common sense, that elusive concept called reasonableness, and facing, as Casey Stengel said, "the conditions what prevail." The principal

condition that prevails is an energy shortage that can cause high unemployment in blue collar America and in the neighborhoods of the poor. Our most immediate task as a nation will be to keep these millions of families on their feet through the worst moments of the economic downturn. The first line of attack will be on the energy supply front (energy conservation is meaningless to people without money or jobs) and here are some facts you and I will soon be facing.

The nation is going to insist on substantially increased coal production. While I and others wish it were not so, I believe we had better accept this fact and help the nation make the right decisions. I believe we can have an expanded coal program and one that is not destructive to the environment, but we'd better get cracking. The support of the National Wildlife Federation has been the key to our efforts in the Congress to get a balanced coal program underway this year with a responsible strip mining bill.

The American public is going to insist on drilling off the Atlantic coast and stepped up efforts elsewhere. I believe we should say we are not opposed to a careful program which is well conceived and is not a crash effort to ransack what's left of our oil reserves. Instead, we should insist that drilling procedures, environmental impact statements, and government oversight give every protection to the environment.

A MacKenzie Valley gas line, in addition to the Alaska oil line, is going to be built. The MacKenzie route might house that oil line as well if we had gotten behind the idea earlier, and fought for it instead of against the Alaska line. We ought now to say we will support a second line, but we will insist on the best environmental route and every practicable safeguard.

And then there is the matter of shale oil. Should we put our foot down on early efforts to explore the development of this new resource? The temptation will be there, but I say we can't. But we must insist that these initial efforts are truly prototype programs, not camouflaged commercial developments; that the environmental costs be carefully weighed and that the water supply, which is life and death to the West, be protected and fairly apportioned among competing users.

While I'm suggesting hardheaded compromise, I am also recommending that where basic values involving irreparable damage are involved, we will not yield. And let me give some examples:

Increased coal production does not mean stripping every last acre of the West. The new emphasis has to be on deep mining, because while cheap extraction is on the top, the massive reserves the country needs and can have with the least environmental damage are underground.

The mysteries of nuclear power may yet be solved to the benefit of this nation and the world, and we will not inhibit responsible development. But we ought to draw the line on this liquid metal fast breeder reactor program until its many designs and safety problems have been brought into the open, discussed and solved. We must insist further that there be a much more satisfactory solution to the problem of radioactive waste disposal before any reactor construction program is speeded up.

Recognizing the controversies brewing over the technology of auto emission controls, we will nevertheless keep the heat on Detroit to build the smaller cars and better engines which are the real solution to the auto exhaust problem, and part of the answer to the gasoline shortage. The Wyman amendment and other attempts to simply relieve the auto industry of this responsibility will be fought.

We will bow our backs if this or any administration attempts, as the Nixon administration is hinting, to turn over to its energy office the duties and responsibilities of the Environmental Protection Agency. We will not allow the political panic of this administration to bring on the dismantling of the nation's fledgling environmental program.

George Bernanos said, "The worst, the most corrupting lies are problems poorly stated." It is a misstatement of the problem and a misunderstanding of its causes to hold that the energy crisis the direct offspring of the environmental revolution of the Sixties. And yet, to an incredible extent, that is the belief in the White House and in the boardrooms of some of the country's largest corporations. It is indeed a corrupting lie, for on the issue of natural resources the conservationists have been largely right and their message of husbanding resources has been timely. But the lie is in circulation, and it must be fought by the conservation community with a reasoned, enlightened, cooperative approach in the months and years ahead.

The second big dose of medicine I recommend for the conservation movement is in the organizational area. Conservationists are notorious individualists who get their intellectual heritage from great iconoclasts like Muir, Twain and Thoreau. Will Rogers said, "I belong to no organized political party. I'm a Democrat." Many in this room could say, "We belong to no organized social movement. We are conservationists." But there is one compelling fact that the conservation movement had better come to terms with: in this democracy the key to political success is organization.

Common Cause does it. So do the doctors, organized labor, the homebuilders, the women's movement, and every political party. What do they do? They meet; they have annual conventions; they elect officers; and for five or six days fight each other for the centerpiece of a platform which their entire movement will support. "In

politics," John Kennedy counseled, "there are no friends, only allies." People walk away from these annual internecine wars knowing that if they haven't won any friends, they have at least trapped reluctant allies into a common effort.

This is the uncomfortable part of democracy, but it is the most important part. And in the conservation field it is desperately lacking. Conservationists have no central policy institutions, no annual convention where they are packed into a room and forced to work out their differences, no place where they produce unified policy and emerge knowing they share priority goals in the year ahead. In my opinion, this the conservation movement must do or perish as an effective agent of political change in this country. For the truth is the conservation groups are right now involved in self-destructive competition for headlines and a limited pool of members and dollars.

The price of membership expansion for many groups during the Sixties was chaos. Larger membership gave them the budget for expanded Washington staffs, to put out beautiful magazines, and so on -- each of these developments wholesome -- but too often they felt the price of membership drives was to adopt every policy and fight every fight dictated from the armies in the field. For a while it worked but, as I say, we are now at Valley Forge.

Conservationists have to get organized, limit their legislative targets, and consolidate their limited resources of money and manpower. And all of this has to do with the final dose of medicine I am suggesting.

It has to do with getting back to the basics. In a real sense the conservationist has been the fireman of this cruise ship we call earth, but as the lessons of the energy crisis begin to come home it looks like we have been putting out fires on a sinking ship. For the questions are really much larger than those with which we have traditionally dealt. The issue is not merely whether we will have human life. It is not whether we will pass on to our descendants isolated plots of wilderness or parks or a few clean fishing streams, but whether they will inherit anything like what we knew as civilization.

Some years ago my brother was thought radical when he wrote the following lines: ". . . at this moment in history we need to realize that: bigger is not better; slower may be faster; less may well mean more." Those lines look pretty good today. And it seems to me that this is the central message of the environmental movement -- that there are indeed limits to growth, to speed, to luxury.

But those limits are not an indictment against all growth, against all science; it is not a call for a return to the rigid and uninteresting lifestyle of the Spartans or to the negative historicism of Malthus.

It is a balanced approach.

And it is a call -- a national appeal -- for a more sensible lifestyle, one free as much as possible of waste and despoilment, so that our children and their children can live to experience the magnificence of life. For the conservationist believes above all else that life is worth living, and the possibilities of man living in harmony wth nature are endless.

Conservaton is not a piece of wilderness here, a wildlife refuge there. It is a celebration of life in its totality. It can be found at Yellowstone and in Jacksonville, at the Grand Canyon and in Brooklyn. It is, as Russell Train recently said, the kind of diversity where people are given choices. The more we exploit nature, the more those options are reduced until we have only one, like the conservation groups at this Valley Forge, to fight for survival.

And so I've engaged tonight in some loving criticism. Lest there are those who would twist my words or misread my intention, let me reconfirm my belief that this conservation movement, of which the Federation is an important part, is itself a symbol of national health and hope. I treasure the award I have received tonight as I treasure few honors I have received in public life.

And I believe that the conservation community will rise to the challenges I have outlined. I believe that like the wise sea captain the conservation movement can use this new current known as the energy crisis to refill its sails and to redirect the course of this society. For the end to cheap energy may bring on hardship, but it will also end abuses like this wild explosion of rural land development and put the speculators out of business. It may cause us temporary economic pain, but it will force an end to urban sprawl and maybe give the races more incentive to learn to live together. It may force us to redefine leisure and luxury, but it will teach us to better conserve the riches of the earth and thus to enjoy life more. And so we have a mission, you and I and the entire conservation community, to carry on and to work harder for the things in which we believe. In the words of Robert Frost:

> "The woods are lovely dark and deep, But I have promises to keep, And miles to go before I sleep, And miles to go before I sleep."