



# The Air-Conditioned Nightmare

by Tom Bethell

Scientific ideas have been shaped by culturally dominant ideas in the past, and in that sense science has always been partly “political.” Today, however, for the first time in democracies, we are seeing a policy-driven activity that superficially resembles science but scorns its underlying methods. The environmentalists have been principally responsible for this—although more recently AIDS research has been similarly debased. But the environmentalists are the main interest group to have figured out that science can be hijacked for ideological purposes. Seemingly scientific public statements can frighten politicians into changing laws, and government agencies that will profit from the scare have increasingly collaborated.

The Soviet Union may seem an obvious precedent, but the analogy, while enticing, is misleading. For a couple of decades, biology was admittedly politicized. The Communists hoped to create New Soviet Man, and agronomists such as Trofim Lysenko obligingly claimed to have bred New Soviet Wheat (which could grow in the tundra). But with Stalin as the all-powerful tyrant, Soviet scientists rationally kowtowed to him. There was no pretense of a free press, which was purposefully (and logically) suppressed.

The situation in the U.S. is quite different. There is no coercive tyranny, merely a tyranny of opinion. If anything, the flow of authority has been reversed. Our modern-day Lysenkos more nearly tell our hapless politicians what to say and think. When George Bush became president he was from the outset eager to do the enviros’ bidding. And no Lubyanka Prison is needed to whip our supine press corps into line. The *New York Times* and *Newsweek*, Peter Jennings and Dan Rather

*Tom Bethell is The American Spectator’s Washington correspondent.*

know that digging beneath the surface is not expected where the environment is concerned. The “lesson of Watergate” may have been “Do not accept government statements uncritically,” but that’s all water under the bridge. On the environmental and medical beats today, journalists are under the thumbs of government and private pressure groups and mechanically transmit their press releases.

One of the best examples of the hijacking of science has been the alarmism about a chemical threat to the ozone layer. In 1974, F. Sherwood Rowland, a political chemist from the University of California—Irvine, propounded the theory that chlorofluorocarbons (a DuPont trade name)—chemicals used in refrigeration and air conditioning—make their way into the stratosphere, where they supposedly gobble up ozone. It’s suggestive that the ozone scare began decades ago, long before anyone was worrying about CFCs. In the 1960s, for example, ozone worries (having nothing to do with CFCs) helped block development of the supersonic transport plane. Other ozone-threatening candidates have included atomic testing and chemical fertilizers.

Ozone (an oxygen compound) is valuable because it intercepts ultraviolet rays. If we are exposed to excessive doses of ultraviolet, there is an increased danger of skin cancer. In a nutshell, that is the scare. The idea, then, is that ozone is a valuable natural shield, which human beings endanger with their foolhardy and reckless tinkering with nature. Did the noble Native Americans have air-conditioned wigwams? Come now! Let us return to simpler ways . . . Simpler and safer! Exhibit A in the environmentalists’ case has been the so-called ozone hole above the Antarctic, which is not a hole but a thinning.

The great problem with Rowland’s the-

ory is that its truth has been demonstrated only in computer models, not in reality. The complex chemical reactions that he describes work out on paper but have not been shown to occur in the stratosphere. It has never actually been demonstrated as a fact that CFCs significantly impair the ozone layer. Furthermore, no *global* (as opposed to Antarctic) depletion of the ozone has yet been demonstrated. According to Fred Singer, director of the Washington-based Science and Environmental Project, such reductions as have been measured are well within the normal (and wide) ozone fluctuations. Not enough time has elapsed to show an abnormal trend. Hoover Institution Wesson fellow Sally Baliunis makes the same point.

In addition, there has been no demonstrated increase in ultraviolet rays striking the Earth, as the *Washington Post* has conceded. So the theory fails on both counts. Neither ozone loss nor ultraviolet increase has been demonstrated. Last April 15, Boyce Rensberger, the *Post’s* chief science writer, concluded a lengthy, mostly reasonable review of the topic with the following escape clause: “So well are the corrective measures proceeding that scientists who have been looking for effects of ozone depletion say it may not be possible to document any before the massive injection of CFCs into the atmosphere fades away.” He might have said: “CFC depletion of the ozone has not been measured, and after CFCs are banned it still won’t be measured.”

As for the Antarctic hole, it appears to be nothing more than a seasonal variation, generated by the long Antarctic night. It was first measured in the 1950s, long before CFCs could have been responsible. The possibility that an active, chlorine-spouting volcano, Mt. Erebus, has all along been a factor in Antarctic ozone seems not to have been taken seriously by Government Science until a year or so ago.

It is ten miles upwind from the measuring station in McMurdo Sound and its peak is only a thousand meters below the Antarctic stratosphere. I gather French scientists are now investigating the volcano.

Who is Sherwood Rowland? Al Gore says in *Earth in the Balance* that after he "announced his disturbing discovery," he "suffered a form of scientific persecution. Suddenly he was no longer invited to address as many scientific meetings." This "persecuted" scientist, incidentally, became president of the American Academy for the Advancement of Science in February 1992. A few months earlier, while acting president, Rowland had been a prominent signer of the Morelia Declaration, published as a one-third-page ad in the *New York Times* in 1991. One excerpt: "If the latter half of the 20th century has been marked by human liberation movements, the final decade of the second millenium [sic] will be characterized by liberation movements among species, so that one day we can attain genuine equality among all living things."

Despite this kookiness, the anti-CFC mission has succeeded beyond the environmentalists' dreams. The U.S. was among fifty-nine nations to sign, at Montreal in 1987, a treaty agreeing to phase out the chemicals. Richard Benedick, the chief U.S. negotiator, wrote in *Ozone Diplomacy* that "perhaps the most extraordinary aspect of the treaty was its imposition of short-term economic costs to protect human health and the environment against unproved human dangers . . . dangers that rested on scientific theories, rather than on firm data. At the time of the negotiations and signing, no measurable evidence of damage existed." No such evidence exists today.

There was a follow-up scare in 1992, with a NASA press conference warning of a dangerous new ozone hole opening up above the United States. *Time* magazine duly echoed that "danger is shining through the sky," and Senator Al Gore, whose apocalyptic book had been published only a few days earlier, said that parents must teach their children "to think of the sky as a threatening part of their environment." The Senate resolved, by a vote of 96-0, that CFCs should be phased out even more rapidly. President Bush signed on the dotted line, ordering a production ban by the end of 1995.

"The NASA revelations were exquis-

itely timed to bolster the agency's budget request for its global climate change program, whose funding is slated to double by fiscal 1993," Ronald Bailey wrote in *Eco-Scam*. Melvyn Shapiro, chief of meteorological research at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration told *Insight*: "What you have to understand is that this is about money." Then he was silenced. By then, though, pseudo-science supported by budget conscious agencies had produced far-reaching political and technological change *without any political debate at all*—an astounding achievement by the environmentalists.

"It matters a great deal," the late Dixy Lee Ray, the former Atomic Energy Commission chairman, wrote in *Environmental Overkill*, "because our entire food transportation and marketing system depends on refrigeration, which in turn depends on CFCs. The integrity of many medicines, vaccines, inoculations, and the entire supply of blood for surgery and transfusions also depends upon refrigeration." The Third World will be particularly hard-hit.

The first effects will be felt this summer. Air conditioning in general is going to become more expensive; many large apartment and office buildings cooled by central chillers will find themselves saddled with EPA regulations, but most important, drivers are going to find that repairing or recharging their automobile air-conditioners has suddenly become much more expensive. Estimates for "retrofitting" units range up to \$800. In some cases this will be more than the car is worth. About 20 million cars need air-conditioning services every year, and 43 percent of them are in Southern states.

There are going to be a lot of disgruntled Sunbelt motorists this summer. They will be looking for someone to blame, and Vice President Gore, who has referred to CFCs as "the most dangerous substance known to man," comes to mind. This irresponsible comment—what about plutonium?—shows how careless and arrogant environmentalists have become. They have been emboldened, of course, by the total absence of Republican opposition on environmental issues, ever since the Environmental Protection Agency was founded by President Nixon.

Recently, however, the Clinton admin-

istration has shown signs of recognizing the political danger of unchecked green fanaticism. In mid-December the EPA contacted DuPont (which manufactures half the CFCs in the country), and was "pretty insistent" that the company should continue making Freon through 1995. In what looked like a display of conspicuous green virtue, DuPont had earlier agreed to phase out production ahead of schedule. Now it was being urged to cook up another 76 million pounds of life-threatening substance. A letter from Rep. John Dingell, chairman of the House Committee on Energy and Commerce, told why. There's a danger of "a possible consumer backlash," he told the EPA administrator. When *he* says jump, the EPA says how high, because bureaucrats' jobs are at stake. In no time they were on the phone to Wilmington, Delaware, and DuPont (with some reluctance, apparently) said it would comply.

The greens were maddened by this outbreak of politics. But the justification offered by the director of EPA's office of atmospheric programs was more revealing. The additional production was okay, he said, in view of "the relatively small change in the ozone layer." Oh. Now they tell us.

For all its doom-mongering, Gore's book has nothing but good news about the prospects for replacing CFCs with more benign substitutes. "They are being developed much faster than the naysayers predicted," he wrote. But the *New York Times* reported last December 26: "The industry does not think these [recycling] initiatives can entirely head off a shortage unless a replacement is developed that can be easily substituted for CFC-12 in older cars." Companies "have been working on such a product, but they have not produced a breakthrough."

Fred Hallett, a vice-president of White Consolidated Industries, makers of refrigeration equipment, told me that "CFCs, and in particular CFC-11 and CFC-12, were ideal for their purposes. The alternatives we have had to turn to are all less suitable. Some are less efficient, and all are more expensive."

As Fred Smith of the Competitive Enterprise Institute said, the last thing in the world the environmentalists want is any public suspicion that their freewheeling regulatory activities cost us money. This summer we are going to find out that they do, and at last we may see a political backlash. □



# The MIA Cover-Up

*Seeking to normalize relations with Vietnam, President Clinton, along with supine politicians and a feckless press, would like the public to forget the MIA issue. But evidence continues to emerge that far more men were left behind than has been reported—and that some may be alive today.*

by John Corry

*As shown by the enclosed Casualty Data Summary, a total of 1,303 American personnel remain officially unaccounted for after the completion of Operation Homecoming. . . . Of the 1,303 personnel, the debriefs of the returnees contain information that approximately 100 of them are probably dead.*

—Defense Intelligence Agency memorandum to Deputy Secretary of Defense William Clements, May 22, 1973

*The intelligence indicates that American prisoners of war have been held continuously after Operation Homecoming and remain[ed] in captivity in Vietnam and Laos as late as 1989.*

—unpublished report by Senate investigators, April 9, 1992

*HANOI, Vietnam (Reuter)—U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Winston Lord said Tuesday as conclusively as anyone can, that there are no U.S. prisoners of war (POWs) being held in Vietnam. . . . “There has never been evidence uncovered of someone being held alive,” he told a news conference after talks with Vietnamese officials.*

—December 14, 1993



**A** terrible truth is now emerging: Recently declassified documents and other sources show that America's MIA-POW policy has been disfigured by denials, half-truths, and evasions. More important, they also suggest that American prisoners are still crying out in Vietnam. For two decades, a cover-up has been in progress, sustained not so much by conspiracy as by gov-

ernment ineptitude, a bureaucratic unwillingness to draw obvious conclusions

*John Corry is The American Spectator's regular Presswatch columnist and author of the new book, My Times: Adventures in the News Trade (Grosset/G.P. Putnam's Sons).*