

Bush, Byrd and the Stink Over CO2

Political Gas

During the presidential campaign, George Bush said he would move quickly to reduce carbon dioxide emissions from US power plants. And, he added with his customary smirk, "unlike Al Gore, my reductions won't be voluntary. They'll be mandatory."

In early March, Bush's EPA director Christy Todd Whitman reiterated this message in Trieste, Italy, to a gathering of European environment ministers. Whitman's assurances were duly leaked to the press. Editorialists across the country swooned; conservatives, who hate Whitman for her pro-choice views, howled in protest. Then suddenly the plank was sawed off beneath her. Bush said there would be no caps and he instructed Whitman to stop referring to carbon dioxide as "a pollutant".

Whitman had been publicly humiliated, much as her predecessor Carol Browner had been in 1996 when the White House publicly undermined her efforts to impose tougher smog rules. Dick Cheney rolled out of his hospital bed in time to do damage control. Cheney, the former oil man and congressman from Wyoming (a major coal mining state), said the campaign pledge was "wrong from the beginning" and that Whitman was just "being a good soldier" for pushing forward with it.

A lobbyist with the Sierra Club quipped that Bush's flip-flop ended the "shortest political honeymoon in history". Close, but no cigar. That prize goes to Bill Clinton, who within a month of taking office had already caved in on a range of issues, from whale protection and forests, to subsidies for western ranchers and water-mongers. Back in 1993, the turnaround was so stunning that Jay Hair, then president of the National Wildlife Federation, described the experience as akin to "date rape." This time around, we have Carl Pope of the Sierra Club saying "environmental policy is being taken back to the nineteenth century. Trust Carl, shill for the Democratic Party. Clinton waits till the fifty-ninth second of the fifty-ninth minute of the eleventh hour of his term in power to sign some executive orders on work place safety, mining and water safety, knowing full well that they can be reversed under the terms of a 1996 law instigated by Newt Gingrich that he signed.

What was surprising about Bush's car-

bon dioxide fiasco is that he ever blundered into the issue in the first place. The credit for that can go to Al Gore. Gore, who Bush's father dubbed the Ozone Man, set himself up as the high priest of global warming. He claimed in his catastrophist tome, *Earth in the Balance*, that the threat was so dire that a political revolution was called for and that institutions needed to be redesigned to make environmental protection "the central organizing principle of civilization". As the most powerful vice-president in history (prior to Dick Cheney) Gore followed this up by doing next to nothing over the next eight years to address what he had stigmatized as the world's major problem. His inaction made Gore an irresistible target for Bush campaign attacks.

It must be easy for Bush to forgive him-

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self for breaking a promise that he never meant as more than a campaign joke in the first place. What's more: how can Bush be held to a higher standard than Clinton and Gore? And who's going to hold him to it?

Surprise: it might be Republicans. Senators Lincoln Chafee of Rhode Island and Maine's two senators, Olympia Snowe and Susan Collins, said the retreat was a mistake. Collins vows to press forward in the senate with legislation to place mandatory targets on sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxide, mercury, and carbon dioxide emissions.

Martha Marks, head of Republicans for Environmental Protection, said, "We're really disappointed in the president. But it seems like the wrong forces inside his administration are prevailing." It took four years to hear this kind of criticism of Clinton's numerous retreats from Democrats.

There was even grumbling inside the Bush cabinet, mainly from Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill. The former chieftain of Alcoa is a global warming convert. Some unkind souls point out that Alcoa, in which O'Neill has his \$100 million stake, stands to flourish the more that government regs strive to increase energy efficiency and lighten cars. But O'Neill's protests were drowned out by Cheney and Lawrence Lindsey, Bush's economic advisor, who, citing a Clinton-era study by the Department

of Energy, warned that sticking with the caps might cost billions of dollars.

Even some of Bush's oldest pals and political backers had urged him to move forward with action on carbon dioxide, most notably fellow Texan Ken Lay. Lay, a Republican loyalist with deep pockets, is the CEO of Enron, the natural gas giant. He had urged Bush to regulate carbon dioxide through a complex scheme of trading credits. Lay and his company had funneled \$1.7 million into Republican National Committee coffers during the 2000 campaign.

With Lay, a notorious conservative who has underwritten numerous anti-environmental outfits, we come to the real power play that's at work. The debate over the CO2 emissions caps turns out to be a struggle between big coal and natural gas. Limits on carbon dioxide will serve to entice utilities and other power users to move away from coal and oil toward cleaner-burning natural gas plants. Indeed one estimate by the Wall Street Journal suggests that the natural gas

companies could make more than \$25 billion in additional profits over the next 25 years if the carbon dioxide caps are imposed.

Ultimately, the big oil and coal companies prevailed in this civil war. But Bush was able to execute his political pirouette so easily because he enjoyed the discreet backing of three powerful Democrats: senators Robert Byrd of West Virginia and John Breaux of Louisiana and congressman John Dingell of Michigan.

The self-righteous Byrd is the coal's industry's one-man praetorian guard. Congressional staffers say he offered to vote for a version of the Bush tax cut in exchange for pull back on CO2 caps. Breaux is the petroleum industry's dark knight, having served his apprenticeship with former Louisiana Senator Bennett Johnston, now a top oil industry flack. The cranky Dingell, long a virulent foe of clean air rules, carries the load in the House for the Detroit auto manufacturers. The combined might of these three Democrats acts as a kind of political Kevlar jacket protecting Bush from serious damage.

And here's the political moral for the future: the Bush crowd has learned some key survival lessons from the tenure of Bill Clinton. Namely the art of triangulation politics: co-opt centrist Democrats and denounce the others as extremists. The new fusion politics looks a lot like the old variety. CP

(Sontag continued from page 1)

consequences. Throw a rock at a border fence and if you are a Palestinian called Edward Said you'll be the object of sharply hostile articles about the infamous stone toss in the New York Times, face a campaign to be fired from your tenured job at Columbia and — this is the latest at time of writing — be disinvited by the Freud Institute and Museum in Vienna from a long-standing engagement to deliver the annual Freud lecture there in May 2001.

As with the efforts to prove Said was somehow not a Palestinian, these assaults have a humorous absurdity to them. For decades the Israelis wreak mayhem on Southern Lebanon, without no commotion in a US press indifferent to UN resolutions telling Israel to abandon its illegal occupation. Both the Israelis and their Lebanese puppet force harass, torture and kill the inhabitants and demolish their houses. Here in the US there's complicity by the government and either similar complicity or indifference among most public intellectuals. Then Said throws an innocuous stone at the border in understandable exultation at the flight of the occupiers and all hell breaks loose. To its credit, Columbia University stands by him and says the calls for his removal are preposterous and offensive.

What, aside from being an articulate Palestinian, is Said's crime? As he himself has written: while "I have always advocated resistance to Zionist occupation, I have never argued for anything but peaceful coexistence between us and the Jews of Israel once Israel's military repression and dispossession of Palestinians has stopped". Perhaps that's the problem. Said makes a reasoned and persuasive case for justice for Palestinians. He doesn't say that the Jews should be driven into the sea. These, not the fanatics, are the dangerous folks.

Now, as a public intellectual, Said lends his name to a wide variety of causes. He speaks out against injustice as a matter of universal principle, not just for his own people. Bearing this in mind, let us now contemplate the role of Susan Sontag, another public intellectual of great reputation, known for a variety of works down the years including the early books of the Sixties, *Against Interpretation* and *Trip to Hanoi*, later works on photography and disease, plus the early 1990s novel *The Volcano Lover*, and, in 1999, another novel, *In America*, given the National Book Award last year.

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and it is not unfair to say that the literary and indeed grant-distributing establishment certainly deems Sontag safe. Aside from the recent National Book Award, she got a National Book Critics Circle Award in 1977, was appointed in 1979 member of the American Academy and in 1990 received the liberal imprimatur of a five-year (and richly endowed) "genius" fellowship from the MacArthur Foundation, which once contemplated giving a fellowship to Said but on one account retreated after furious protests from an influential Jewish board member, Saul Bellow.

Sontag has now been named the Jerusalem Prize laureate for 2001, twentieth recipient of the award since its inauguration in 1963, and the second woman to be so honored, the first being Simone de Beauvoir. The award, worth a rather measly \$5,000, along with a scroll issued by the mayor of Jerusalem, is proclaimedly given to writers whose works reflect the freedom of the individual in society. It is presented biennially at the Jerusalem International Book Fair. Past recipients of the Jerusalem prize include Bertrand Russell, Jorge Semprun, Isaiah Berlin, Mario Vargas Llosa, Jorge Luis Borges, J.M. Coetzee, and rather bizarrely, Don DeLillo.

Sontag was selected by a three-member panel of judges, comprised of the Labor Party's Shimon Peres and Hebrew University professors Lena Shiloni and Shimon Sandbank. Peres has been quoted as admiring Sontag's definition of herself: "First she's Jewish, then she's a writer, then she's American. She lives Israel with emotion and the world with obligation." When notified of her latest accolade, Sontag's response was, "I trust you have some idea of how honored and moved, deeply moved, I am to have been awarded this year's Jerusalem Prize".

Sontag is now scheduled to go to Jerusalem for the May 9 awards ceremony, which will be held within the framework of the 20th Jerusalem International Book Fair. One news report remarked that "According to book fair director Zev Birger, events which have blighted tourism in recent months have not adversely affected the publishing world. 'It's business as usual,' he said, noting that checks and hotel reservations were coming in."

Why dwell on the familiar currency of

international literary backslapping? We do so to make some points concerning double standards. American intellectuals can be brave as lions concerning the travails of East Timoreans, Rwandans, Central American peasants, Chechens and other beleaguered groups. But for almost all of them the Palestinians and their troubles have always been invisible. The intellectuals know well enough that to raise a stink about Israeli's appalling treatment of Palestinians down the years is to invite drastic sanctions.

It can scarcely be said that Sontag is a notably political writer. But there was an issue of the 1990s on which she did raise her voice. Along with her son David Rieff, Sontag became a passionate advocate for NATO intervention against Yugoslavia or, if you prefer, Serbia. (To put in a good or even a balancing word for the Serbs was of course another rare event in American intellectual life, where almost all liberals became, like Sontag, laptop bombardiers and enthusiastic advocates of NATO's war on Yugoslavia.)

On May 2 1999 Sontag wrote an essay in the New York Times, "Why Are We In Kosovo?", urgently justifying NATO's intervention. "Of course, it is easy to turn your eyes from what is happening if it is not hap-

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pening to you” she wrote. “Or if you have not put yourself where it is happening. Imagine that Nazi”, Germany had had no expansionist ambitions but had simply made it a policy in the late 1930s and early 1940s to slaughter all the German Jews. Do we think a government has the right to do whatever it wants on its own territory? Maybe the governments of Europe would have said that 60 years ago. But would we approve now of their decision? Push the supposition into the present. What if the French Government began slaughtering large numbers of Corsicans and driving the rest out of Corsica . . . or the Italian Government began emptying out Sicily or Sardinia, creating a million refugees . . . or Spain decided to apply a final solution to its rebellious Basque population... Is it acceptable that such slaughters be dismissed as civil wars, also known as “age-old ethnic hatreds.”

Sontag cannot be entirely unaware that there is a country at the other end of the Mediterranean from Spain from which a very large number of refugees have been expelled. In 1973 she actually made a movie in Israel, “Promised Lands”, filmed in October and November of 1973 after the Egyptians crossed the Suez canal in the Yom Kippur war. Back then, Nora Sayre gave it a politely damning review in the New York Times: “Throughout the ideas and the people and the machines of war are examined from a distance, as though everything had been observed through some kind of mental gauze. The Israelis — particularly those in robes — are filmed as if they were extremely foreign or exotic. Also, Israel seems like a nearly all-male country, since few women appear and none have been interviewed.

There are a few sympathetic words for the Arabs, but their existence seems shadowy and abstract — almost as bloodless as the statues in a wax museum devoted to Israeli history.”

But surely now Sontag has had time to reflect more deeply on real Israeli Jews, and on real Palestinians. Through the 1990s it became a lot harder than in earlier years for American intellectuals to claim that they did not know what was happening, or were in ignorance of how Palestinians have been treated. The subject became legal tender, even if the currency remained severely limited in fungibility.

Sontag has always been appreciative of irony. Does she see no irony in the fact that

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she, harsh critic of Slobodan Milosevic, (upon whose extradition to face trial in its Hague Court as a war criminal the US is now conditioning all aid to Yugoslavia,) is now planning to travel to get a prize in Israel, currently led by a man, Ariel Sharon, whose credentials as a war criminal are robust and indeed undisputed by all people of balanced and independent judgement who have bothered to address his conduct in atrocities ranging from Qibya to the refugee camp massacres at Sabra and Shatilla.

Does Sontag sense no irony in getting a prize premised on the recipient’s sensitivity to issues of human freedom, in a society

where the freedom of Palestinians is violently repressed? To dramatize her support for multi-ethnic Sarajevo, she actually produced a play, *Waiting for Godot*, in the beleaguered city a few years ago. Imagine what bitter words she would have been ready to hurl at a writer voyaging to the Serb portion of Bosnia to receive money and a fulsome scroll from Radovan Karadzic or Milosevic, praising her commitment to freedom of the individual, and poo-pooing “events that have blighted tourism”.

Yet here she is, soon to pack her bags to travel to a city over which Sharon declares Israel’s absolute and eternal control, and whose latest turmoils he deliberately instigated by insisting on traveling under the protection of a thousand soldiers to provoke Palestinians in their holy places. Can there be a more searing commentary on all those invocations to toleration and diversity Sontag and the others put forth, accompanied by their strident demands for NATO to drop its bombs on the Serbs?

Does Sontag plan to raise the issue of Palestinians in her acceptance speech? We would like to think so, but somehow we doubt it. She’ll scurry in and scurry out, probably hoping not to attract too much attention. When the South African writer Nadine Gordimer was offered the Jerusalem prize a number of years ago, she declined, saying she did not care to travel from one apartheid society to another. But to take that kind of position in the United States would be a risky course for a careful (and by a less obliging token) a timorous intellectual. Said knows he lives in a glasshouse, yet he had the admirable effrontery to throw his stone. CP

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