

## A Moment on the Earth: The Coming Age of Environmental Optimism

by Gregg Easterbrook

Viking • 1995 • 745 pages • \$27.95

Reviewed by Doug Bandow

**E**nvironmentalists have long enjoyed the political high ground. After all, who could be against clean water? As a result, over the last two decades the environmental movement has swept most everything before it. The result has been draconian legislative enactments, massive regulatory bureaucracies, and inexplicably complex rules.

But as compliance costs have risen, so has political resistance. Common people have grown less willing to see their interests sacrificed willy-nilly for measures with only marginal environmental benefits. Thus, many environmental activists have moved beyond shrill denunciations of opponents to apocalyptic threats. Their refrain has increasingly become: if you don't do as we say, the world is doomed.

Not so fast, argues Gregg Easterbrook. In his mammoth *A Moment on the Earth*, he contends that "the Western world today is on the verge of the greatest ecological renewal that humankind has known; perhaps the greatest that the Earth has known." The book has it all, or almost. It is comprehensive, well researched, and well written. Equally important, its author is credible to those sympathetic to the environmental movement, a liberal who has written for such publications as *Newsweek* and the *New Republic*.

His liberal credentials account for the book's main flaw: a failure to fully appreciate the value of freedom and the way free markets operate. This occasionally leads to nonsensical asides, like when Easterbrook blames capitalism for homelessness and drug shootouts.

Easterbrook begins by describing a predatory falcon swooping down upon a hapless pigeon. There is nothing unusual about the eternal struggle between prey and predator, which he terms "the dance of ages"—except that this particular skirmish is occurring in Manhattan. Although man may view himself as omnipotent, Easterbrook shows man's impact to be, in fact, quite limited.

Easterbrook backs up his argument with facts. Only two percent of America and eight percent of the world are "built-up." Forests are expanding in the United States and Europe. Farmland, no longer needed for agricultural production, is returning to forest or prairie. And most of what man

has done could be undone by nature which, Easterbrook notes, "rearranges entire continents, a task people cannot imagine, even in the abstract."

*A Moment on the Earth* goes on to debunk romantic rhapsodies about nature and defend mankind. "Humanity's vogue for culpability regarding its own existence must be exceptionally difficult for nature to fathom," writes Easterbrook, since man's activities are "in strict accord with the behavior patterns of other species, most of which attempt to expand to fill the maximum area available to them." Nor is there anything wrong in transforming nature.

Easterbrook even includes a wonderful chapter titled "The Case Against Nature." Nature, he writes, is dangerous, generates pollution, kills humans and animals alike, fosters disease, and is self-destructive. And this is never going to change, absent human intervention, since "nature lacks morals, which are artificial systems requiring forethought."

These philosophical musings behind him, Easterbrook moves to the specific issues that dominate environmental debates today. He proceeds issue by issue, largely dismissing warnings of imminent ecological disaster. For instance, he concludes that the problem of acid rain is "genuine but exaggerated, subject to correction surprisingly quickly at reasonable cost." Similarly positive are his assessments of a variety of other problems: air pollution (overall air quality has been rising), the spotted owl (it is neither endangered nor a separate species), chemicals (they are far less dangerous than charged), global warming (warnings about the planet heating up appear to be as overstated as those about the imminence of a new Ice Age), energy (supplies are plentiful), and many, many more.

In the main, Easterbrook draws sensible policy conclusions from these facts. But his liberal soul occasionally reasserts itself, to bizarre effect. For instance, he acknowledges that the costs of recent regulatory initiatives, like the 1990 Clean Air Act, exceed their benefits. No matter. Opines Easterbrook: "in the main environmental initiatives ought to be considered worth the price unless proven otherwise, with the burden of disproof upon opponents."

Nevertheless, the book is truly a work that deserves wide attention. Its importance comes not only from the fact that it makes a powerful case for environmental optimism, but that it specifically addresses those people who have been most concerned about the future.

Calls for ecorealism are not new, but Easterbrook has issued a particularly compelling one.

Paradise may not beckon, but, as he concludes: "The arrow of the human prospect points upward." □

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## **The Good Life and Its Discontents: The American Dream in the Age of Entitlement**

by Robert J. Samuelson

Times Books • 1995 • 293 pages • \$25.00

Reviewed by Thomas J. DiLorenzo

**T**he *Good Life and Its Discontents*, by journalist Robert J. Samuelson (no relation to the economist Paul Samuelson), is a well-written exposition of some of the failures of interventionist economic policy over the past 50 years. He roundly condemns this "age of entitlement," defined not just in terms of the taxpayers' incomes that special interest groups believe they are "entitled" to, but as "the conviction that we could completely control our economic, social, and political surroundings" with interventionist economic policies.

His thesis, in other words, is similar to F.A. Hayek's "fatal conceit," the idea that "planners" could somehow plan an economy better than the free market. As interesting as Samuelson's book is, it does not come close to matching the depth of Hayek or of many other writers familiar to *Freeman* readers who have analyzed these same topics for the past several decades. Samuelson's book is important not so much for its content, but for the fact that the author is a respected "mainstream" journalist (who writes for the *Washington Post*!) who has concluded that the welfare state has indeed been a monstrous debacle.

Samuelson asserts that Americans are an extremely unhappy lot not because their lives haven't materially improved over the past several decades — he shows that they have — but because they have been misled, mostly by government propagandists and their intellectual supporters, into believing that they can achieve a more or less "perfect" world — if only government is given sufficient power. We supposedly suffer from what economists call the "Nirvana Fallacy" — comparing the real world with a utopian ideal will always make the world appear to have "failed."

Samuelson smashes the "huge conceit" of the

Keynesian economists of the 1960s (especially James Tobin and Paul Samuelson), who arrogantly believed that under their expert guidance "the economy could be manipulated for the larger social good." The biggest disappointment of the book, however, is that Samuelson then endorses the misguided Keynesian view that the sole cause of the Great Depression was the desire by governments to stay on the gold standard. He ignores the Fed's 30 percent drop in the money supply from 1929 to 1932; the fact that President Hoover increased government spending by 65 percent in just four years and raised the top marginal tax rate from 24 percent to 63 percent; Roosevelt's massive 1933 tax increase and his economic planning program known as the "New Deal"; and the Smoot-Hawley tariff, which precipitated a worldwide trade war that reduced the volume of world trade by a third in just three years (1929-32). Samuelson is also unaware of the Austrian School's "boom and bust" theory of the business cycle, which provides the best explanation of the Great Depression as an inevitable consequence of the Fed's monetary expansion during the 1920s.

Samuelson makes a strong case that Americans need to return to an ethic of individual responsibility. "People ought to do more for themselves and expect government to do less." Amen. But then he soft pedals on this, his strongest point, by noting the shortcomings of individual responsibility (i.e., some people can't or won't be more responsible). This is an odd feature of Samuelson's writing: He seems to believe that economic truth can be gleaned by consensus. The free market has its virtues, but so does government intervention, so that "the truth" must lie somewhere in between. This might be a good strategy for selling books — appealing to virtually everyone's biases — but is an annoying distraction in an otherwise useful and welcomed critique of the failures of social engineering schemes over the past half century. □

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