

True Lies

Al Gore, Environmental Movements and the Earth

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I.

“Earth is in very bad shape.”

— Kim Stanley Robinson, *Green Mars*

Just to keep Al Gore’s award in perspective, it’s useful to remember that he will share the Nobel Peace Prize with Henry Kissinger.

For those of you not yet born in 1975, when the liberation of Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City) occurred, Kissinger was the U.S. Secretary of State who won a Peace Prize for brokering the Paris peace accords and getting U.S. troops out of Vietnam. Kissinger is also a war criminal who dares not travel to many European cities for fear of being arrested and tried as an accomplice of the late Chilean dictator Pinochet.

And, as well, the Nobel prizes have always been a highly politicized process. Rosalind Franklin, anyone? Decisions such as awarding a Peace Prize to the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. in 1964 may have seemed a controversial move within the United States, but to the Swedes who actually do the voting, it was a simple and intended poke in the eye. If they had chosen El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz (Malcolm X) — who arguably had as great an influence among African Americans at the time and certainly was as productive in his writings and fervent in his speeches — would *The New York Times* continue to report the selections on the front pages or confine them to A28, where they bury announcement of most international prizes?

But what about Al Gore’s Emmy, the Oscar, and the stolen presidency? What about the slide shows, books and movie that have alerted the inhabitants of this planet to its ‘pre-eminent crisis’: global warming? What about the organizing of millions of people into a new environmental movement that will reverse global warming?

Isn’t Gore one of the good guys? Doesn’t he want to save the planet?

The documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* and the accompanying book are powerful documents. There is no doubt that they have alerted many people to the threat of global warming and the concurrent environmental crises that are occurring.

One measure of their strength is the viciousness of the attacks by conservative critics. Gore has been attacked on every level. Right wing wackos from Rush Limbaugh to Anne Coulter challenge each specific point and then pile on to ridicule the notion that he is the one who has raised these points first or most effectively. There are ads in the *Wall Street Journal* offering money to anyone who can ‘prove’ global warming is occurring and critical editorials in *Forbes* magazine.

Quibbling with Al Gore’s mistakes is not what we should be concerned with. There are far better books on the environmental crises¹, of course, just as there are environmental activists who have done more and sacrificed more. But arguing with his critics on the Right is akin to

¹ *Just as everyone should be able to name a movie more deserving of the Oscar than Rocky I, all of us should have a list of environmental books and movies better than An Inconvenient Truth.* I am only going to include a few. Elizabeth Kolbert’s *Field Notes from a Catastrophe* covers much of the same subject matter as Gore, but reviews the Clinton administration’s political deal-making critically. Mark Hertsgaard’s *Earth Odyssey* also include pointed criticisms of Gore’s work in passing, as does Alexander Cockburn in numerous articles and books. Richard Leakey and Roger Lewin’s *The Sixth Extinction* appeared in 1995; a decade later it is just as moving, if not more so. *Forcing the Spring* by Robert Gottlieb is a useful book published in 1993 about the mainstreaming of environmental movements; Gore’s work is a continuation of this process. The *Mars* trilogy by Kim Stanley Robinson, though fiction, is a better wake-up call. For that matter, so is Ishmael.

tangling with those who would assert there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq — until they were smuggled to Iran by Al Qaeda. Logic and science are not useful weapons in dealing with the Coulters, Michael Savages and their local lampreys. These are the people who argue that the only problems with old growth forests are too many spotted owls. As long as their banquets have freshly cooked wild salmon they know that there can't be any problems with the rivers of the world. They would have us believe that there is no global warming. They would have us believe that there is no environmental crisis.

For our purposes, what Gore has done has greater importance than alerting people to the environmental crisis. He has, in the last two years, seized the political leadership of a movement that already existed in the United States. If we agree that there are many 'three-way fights' occurring on the political and moral level in the world today, then we should also acknowledge that the international movements around environmental issues will become stronger and more important in the coming years and are a crucial arena where political blocs are being organized. Gore has managed to further the displacement of those radicals, troublemakers and grassroots activists who created and nurtured the environmental movement in the U.S. and internationally. The dream of any politician is to run to the head of a massive march that was already in motion, where Albert Gore is now successfully determining the debate, direction and tasks of that movement.

II.

There is a planetary emergency, just as Gore says. We should call it global environmental crises, to be fair to its nature.

The situation, if anything, is worse than he lays out in his PowerPoint presentation (though the person who wrote the cover copy for the DVD doesn't mince words: "...we must act now to save the earth") that became the basis for the movie and the book.

How can this be? How could the situation be any worse?

Well, let's do something that Gore doesn't do. Look at the crisis from the standpoint of a great white shark or a golden toad or a coral reef or a polar bear.

Here are species — or in the case of the frogs and toads and other amphibians, an entire class of animals — that are facing extinction. And, while the particular zoologists, biologists and herpetologists who study these species all acknowledge that global warming is playing a role in their extinction, few of them are willing to isolate the drive towards extinction to one factor.

In the case of most current species extinction there is a multi-factorial threat. Loss of habitat, introduction by human activity of new species into the habitat, new pollutants (including insecticides and herbicides), harvesting beyond recovery rates by humans; these are some of the threats that are killing off the manatee and great apes, for example. Human activity is at the root of the species extinction, but global warming is merely a part of it.

This threat is so great that many biologists refer to the current situation as the Sixth Great Extinction.

Gore points this out briefly. In his book there is a simple but effective graph on page 163 showing the rate of extinctions of species.

It would have been far more accurate, from a scientific standpoint, to use the chart that most scientists use, which shows six periods of rapid extinction. But only the last, current period is undeniably caused by human activity.²

There are no reputable scientists who study amphibians who deny that a global extermination is occurring. At least, there are none who publish in the major journals or attend the conferences. Again, none of those who are warning about the extinction of amphibians denies the role of global warming. Yet, almost all of them would also mention the introduction of 360 million pounds of plastics a year into the global environment and the possibility of hormone-disrupting components of those plastics being introduced into the ecosystem. These components are found in the bodies of amphibians across the globe. As well, just as DDT was found in the bodies of fish and birds in the Arctic and Antarctic shortly after its introduction into the world, other human-produced chemicals are being found in the cells of species that are scattered across the planet.

Because scientists are scientists, few of them are prone to making statements that are alarmist. However, those who study amphibians are coming close. They are looking at the fundamental alteration of a biosphere and the elimination of their entire field of study. They are being forced to ask the questions that Gore backs away from: Who is responsible for this? By what mechanism did one species destroy entire sectors of the biosphere? Where is the paragraph, sentence or page in his book that says: We are going to have to stop using plastics if they are destroying the corals and amphibians?

The entire point of Gore's activities, just as those of any skillful politician, are to lay out a framework of understanding and a course of action for the current crisis that allow the system to transform itself without destroying itself.

III.

“It is difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends on his not understanding it.”

— Upton Sinclair, quoted in *An Inconvenient Truth* (pp 266–267, the book)

An Inconvenient Truth is an infomercial.

Americans understand infomercials. They're unavoidable, at least to the 99% of the population who watches television. They work. People buy stuff because of them. Pills, potato peelers, exercise systems, diet plans and stock schemes.

If Gore had said, “Let's save the world and make money doing it,” would he be traveling to Stockholm?

If Gore's movie had been advertised as an infomercial for Shell Oil, well, there are no Oscar categories for commercials. Cannes doesn't hold special showings for them.

² The physical construction of a book or of a movie is also political. With the scores or hundreds of people involved in Gore's book and documentary, don't you think that he could have found one intern to produce an index? This is the little device at the end of a book where you turn, as the thinker Cynthia Enloe reminds us, to find whether there are any listings under the word “Women”. Or in the case of Gore, “Plastics”, “Estrogen disruptors”, “Atomic energy”, “Nuclear waste”, “Environmental justice” or “Books that I've stolen from”. Gore's book does not even have complete pagination, so that if you want to cite whoopers such as his paean to market capitalism, you have to infer the page number.

Merely because Gore is not hawking a particular product doesn't mean that it's not an infomercial.³

The plugs for Google and Apple are almost as obvious as product placement in a Hollywood movie. The extended paean for 'Green capitalism' and 'clean tech' can easily be read as 'Invest in bio-fuel and nuclear power.' And, of course, while it never mentions these phrases, it is a long promotional vehicle for neo-liberalism and the wing of the Democratic party that Al Gore has been attempting to re-constitute for decades.

In his book and in his movie, he likens the tasks of the new century to those of the past, including the the Civil War, the struggle against fascism in WWII, the civil rights movement and obtaining the vote for women. He asks: "Are we, as Americans, capable of doing great things, even though they might be difficult?"

Those struggles had real opposition. When he is standing up against corporate America and the Republican Party, doesn't he have the backing of most Americans? Does he have real opposition?

Tellingly, the heads of the major oil companies, while they still make huge contributions to the Republican party, are not fools. In their transformation into 'energy' companies, they have read and accepted the reports of their own scientists and advisers. So here is what they say:

"We take the position that the debate is over...we have to deal with greenhouse gases." — John Hofmeister, president, Shell Oil

"We think green means green. This is a time period when environmental improvement is going to lead towards profitability." — Jeffrey R. Immelt, chairman and CEO, GE (pp 274–275, Gore's book)

And, if further evidence is needed for this process, you only have to read the writing on the walls. Specifically the bookstore walls of Stacey's, the leading bookstore in the financial district of San Francisco, which had the Shell quote along with these:

"Many new Googles and Yahoos and eBays will be created [by 'green capitalism'] — Vinod Khosla, Bay Area venture capitalist

"Clean tech will be bigger than the Internet, by an order of 10." — Ray Lane

In other words, Gore doesn't have to convince those who are investing millions and billions that we can save the world and make money at the same time. Infomercials are aimed at small investors, those who spend or invest hundreds or thousands of dollars, not millions. In a sidebar in his book titled "Using Market Capitalism as an Ally," he makes the point in a straightforward manner: "You can make a contribution to stopping climate change, support global sustainability, and do well financially if you choose your investments wisely." (p. 270)

Of course, for the 98% of the global population who doesn't have to worry about choosing our investments, this won't be a problem.

³ I don't have a TV, so I've never watched an infomercial all the way through. But I have been fed one of the most expensive meals in my life by pharmaceutical corporation representatives, who then showed the audience of MDs and RNs a compelling video about the illness that their product was designed to attack, backed by a personal appearance by a physician of impeccable credentials. Recently designed ethical rules prohibited him from using the trade name. But he did review all of the research done with that med and preceding generations of similar meds.

When I left the restaurant that night, I carried away enough valuable healthcare swag (flashlights, good pens, expensive manuals) to outfit my co-workers for the next week. It was all labelled with the name of the particular med that the company was introducing throughout the U.S.

Billions of dollars were at stake. If you need convincing, ask yourself which you remember: Viagra or Cialis? Then look at the profit margins for Pfizer for the last ten years.

Venture capitalists in the Bay Area have already harkened to this call. Over a quarter of new venture capital investments in this hotbed of biotech and software have gone to ‘green capitalism’ or ‘clean tech’ (SF Chronicle, 10/07).

Like Jack LaLanne or the president of Hair Club for Men, Gore practices what he preaches. He “also serves as chairman of Generation Investment Management...Gore is a member of the Board of Directors of Apple Computer, Inc. and a senior advisor to Google,Inc.” (from the back cover of his book). And, shortly after the announcement of his Nobel Prize, Gore joined “Silicon Valley’s most prestigious venture capital firm,” Kleiner Perkins Caufield & Byers. Since most people don’t know how corporations work, this is not the same as serving on the local church board. Al Gore is receiving hundreds of thousands of dollars annually from these three corporations — to direct investors towards ‘green capitalism’ and to promote sales of PowerBooks, iPods, iPhones and other forms of high technology. And announcing, as he did, that he would donate his latest source of income to the environmental organization he works for is no hardship, since at his level of income it’s merely one way of getting an income tax write-off.

Gore’s message, like all infomercials, is simple: Capitalism is necessary. You can save the world and make money at the same time. We will have to make some changes, but you can keep your cars and your computers and your way of life — as long as you’re willing to shift funds from oil to other forms of energy.

In a single hour he appeals to the CEOs, the stockholders and the consumers of the U.S. economy with a message has been popular for centuries: You can have your cake and eat it, too.

How difficult is that? Where is the sacrifice?

The truest words in his book are not even written by him. He cannot fully understand the depth of the environmental crisis or find a way of confronting it: his salary depends on his not understanding it.

IV.

We have pointed out that Gore makes a straightforward appeal to corporate heads and small investors. There are several groups that Gore also has to win over in his work, since he is organizing a political bloc, not merely catching up with the Google boys. Again, it is like an infomercial that shows various individuals and couples to reassure viewers at home that people like them are really going to buy that diet plan.

Scientists as a social group, by their very nature, are not prone to political action. But even they can be moved when threatened. The editorial board of Nature, one of the two main scientific journals in the world, recently published an editorial attacking the use of ‘eco-terrorism’ by the Bush administration to sentence environmental activists in Oregon. Editorials, articles and letters that are openly ‘environmentalist’ regularly appear in Science and other lesser magazines, particularly those concerned with the biological sciences. This can only be understood in the context of repeated assaults on science itself.

The work of the Reagan, Bush and GW Bush administrations in ignoring and tampering with scientific research and efforts has been documented at length and in a number of articles and books. Two decades after the fact, scientists still mention that Reagan used an astrologer to determine his political schedule and had a Secretary of the Interior who claimed there was no real danger of species extinction, because the Apocalypse would come first. The most recent episode

of insults to science by the Republicans saw the head of the Centers for Disease Control, Dr. Julie Gerberding, forced to cut her testimony from 14 pages to four pages before a Senate committee, because her speech would have drawn on specific scientific references to global warming. (“CDC chief says agency needs to deal with warming,” Jeff Nesmith, Cox News Service, San Francisco Chronicle, October 24, 2007. Page A9).

Incidents such as this are commonplace, given the overriding political necessity of ignoring or countering scientific work that refutes the Republican political stances on subjects ranging from salmon runs to antibiotic effectiveness, AIDS research or global warming. The simple results of this are laid out in the movie Michael Clayton: people and species die when corporations and governments fudge or hide the evidence.

Gore offers a simple alternative. He poses (dead) scientists as heroes. He accepts scientists’ work as being valid. He incorporates their work (at least portions of it) to construct his political alternative throughout the documentary and the book.

Gore extols a number of individual women — Tipper Gore, his sister, his daughters — and the importance of his family in his book. Gore knows, as does most of North America, that Melissa Etheridge is a lesbian, a famous lesbian who has campaigned for gay marriage, yet he chose her to star in the music video to accompany his documentary. Many opinion polls have shown that women consistently side with and join environmental groups more than men. Gore was both looking to the foot soldiers in his new organization and to the voters in the coming formation.

The appeal to youth is not as obvious in the book/documentary, but the direct marketing of the documentary to middle schools and high schools and the recent global concerts made it clear that Gore knows who does the gruntwork of most environmental organizations.

And finally, Gore is appealing to “Americans.” Not Canadians, though they speak English and share the continent, not the huge English-speaking population of India, and not the hundreds of millions of Chinese who are flocking to the Internet and attempting to connect with the rest of the world (even though Google won’t let them. Type in “environmental disaster” or “Tibet” in a search engine inside China and see how far you get).

The opening of both the book and the documentary make it clear that this is a global crisis and the problems of the environmental crises will not be solved in any one country. But no one viewing his documentary or reading his book can come away without thinking that the ‘Americans’ within the current borders of the United States are the chosen people who will solve this problem.

There is a simple and logical reason beyond voting appeal that Gore limits his message. We’ll get to it in a moment.

V.

It is a crude division to say that there will be three groupings of political activity (a three-way fight) around the environment, but let’s take that point.

The Republican Party has tied itself to a position in stark opposition to reality. A few leaders, notably Arnold Schwarzenegger, governor of California, have tried to pull the party away from the legacy of Reagan and James Watt, the aforementioned former head of the Department of the Interior under Reagan, who believed the Apocalypse would come before the environment would be destroyed. The bulk of the Republican leadership are the people who would mine everywhere,

remove almost all pollution controls and damn scientific research as anti-business. It is difficult for many of us to understand them, just as we have difficulty understanding outright racists or religious bigots.

In 1860 they would have been the party of slave-holders. In 1915 they would have been investing in locomotives. The weight of history is against them — though their legacy may kill us all.

Gore — along with the wing of the Democratic Party and social democratic groups in Europe that have coalesced around him and scientific opinion — represents the forces that wish to usher in a new era of ‘green capitalism.’ Apple rather than IBM. Google rather than Yahoo. Biofuels rather than oil. And, since polls have consistently shown that anywhere from 75–80% of Americans (I use the term for inhabitants of the United States who answer polls) consider themselves ‘environmentalists’ and both want to contribute financially to environmental movements and want to do something to help the environment, Gore represents the ascendancy. In apparent acknowledgment of this, both Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, the front-runners in the Democratic presidential race, have incorporated major aspects of Gore’s ‘green capitalism/clean tech’ approach in their almost simultaneous calls for a \$50 billion outlay on environmental issues.

The logical and political problem that Gore faces is simple: The environment cannot be saved if capitalism is preserved.⁴

Even a major aspect of the environmental crisis, the carbon/climate problem, will demand more than Gore is willing to own up to. For instance, the temperature reversal measures that he favors are predicated on the stabilization wedges of Socolow that he mentions approvingly on pp. 280–281. “Humanity already possesses the fundamental scientific, technical and industrial know-how to solve the carbon and climate problem for the next half-century,” is the quote that he borrows from Socolow and Pacala’s study.

He doesn’t add the rest of Socolow’s statement: “There is no easy wedge.”

A colleague of Socolow, Hoffert asserts that it is true that we possess the know-how, just as it was true in 1939 that the expertise to build nuclear weapons existed. “But it took the Manhattan Project to make it so.”

In other words, massive social changes will be necessary if the reversal of the carbon and climate problem is to occur. A political and social equivalent of the mobilization for World War II. And, if that reversal is to be successful, it would require the cooperation of most of the nations in the world. If the U.S. reversed course but China continues to industrialize, then the measures would be largely meaningless. It would be the equivalent of a U.S. ban on whale hunting while Japan and Norway decide to quadruple their harvest.

On December 8, 1941, one day after the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor and the entrance of the U.S. into World War II, the Walt Disney Studios were taken over by the U.S. government. Just imagine if Gore had ended his documentary by suggesting that Apple, Dell, IBM, HP and every U.S. hardware and software company had to be nationalized in order to deal with pollution.

That is the level of change that will have to occur. As a start.

⁴ This article is about Gore and the re-alignment of a movement. It is not my intention to develop the full discussion of how the new society would reverse the current effects of environmental destruction or to lay out all alternatives. That will take several books. Some of the discussion within eco-socialism and eco-anarchism, as well as the actual organizing of environmental justice movements, gives us hope. Further articles in these pages will develop this theme.

The truth that Gore does not want to name is that the world cannot live at the current level of North America. Imagine a world where everyone has a cell phone, an iPod, a car and a laptop. This is the intent and drive of capitalist production, this is the goal of Apple (Dell, Toshiba, Nokia, Panasonic, Sony, HP, Gateway, Acer, Lenovo/IBM) which is endorsed by Gore when he urges people to buy a laptop rather than a desktop and writes “Make your next vehicle purchase a more efficient one.” [my emphasis-MT]⁵ Not only will it be impossible for the world to live at that level, but North America cannot continue to live at the level we currently do. If the trade-off is not merely global warming (which has steadily worsened at the current levels of production and consumption), but also the continued extermination of tens or hundreds of thousands of species, then far more drastic measures than Gore poses will be necessary.

This is why the balancing act in international politics have been impossible. This is why the call for pollution controls will be used as a mobilizer of public opinion in the U.S. and an excuse for political intervention in the U.S. and abroad. What will be the stance of Californians when most of the air pollution on the West Coast comes from China?

VI.

“This just sucks. The birds are dying, and no one can surf, either.”

— Meghan McNertney, 23-year-old California surfer and bird rescuer, on the polluted San Francisco Ocean Beach after the worst Bay Area oil spill in a decade. Quoted in the 11/9/07 San Francisco Chronicle

So what do we do?

Since Gore repeats the mantra of ‘Reduce, reuse and recycle’, I think that we have to offer a new one.

Refuse, recycle and revolt.

As always, there are examples right before our eyes. *An Inconvenient Truth* deliberately does not cite any existing environmental organizing, but that doesn’t mean that we can’t point to some examples of righteous work and bold attempts.

Here’s a simple one: Jacques Cousteau. Not just the portrayal of the ocean and the chronicling of the devastating effect of pollution on the ocean, but the anti-nuke Cousteau and the anti-capitalist Cousteau. Bet you didn’t know those, did you?

Carrie Dann and other Native activists across North America have been resisting the nuclear waste cycle from uranium mining to nuclear waste storage. Gore, who has supported nuclear production since his first years in the U.S. House, probably isn’t going to mention those environmental activists.

The small farmers and tribal peoples of the Brazilian rain forest resistance have been fighting a battle for decades now to preserve both the trees, the species and the Amazon itself. Every study of the climate acknowledges the role of the Amazon in controlling temperature fluctuation. Somehow they don’t get a mention in Gore’s work.

Earth First! and direct action activists have fought across North America to preserve wild lands. The politics of direct action, which have saved more than a few trees, don’t show up in the movie.

⁵ The fraud of biofuels has been dealt with by Monbiot.

Environmental justice groups, mainly led by people of color, which have been clashing with corporations across the United States are never cited as examples of what organizing will be needed.

Laying out the alternatives to Gore's political organizing is both simple and complex.

On the one hand, if we descend to the level of triviality that he does at the end of his book, we will be telling people what kind of toilet paper they should be buying. (Non-bleached, of course.) But pointing out that Gore and his political allies are quite willing to devote many photos and film minutes to Hurricane Katrina, yet have no footage of how he/they showed up to assist afterwards is a simple political act. "Ye shall know them by their fruits" is an old way of saying that millions of people in the U.S. and the world are waiting to see who will emerge as true leadership in the future struggles against the effects of global warming and global pollution.

As individuals and a society, we are going to be forced to choose between a society based on use-value or an on-going catastrophe based on exchange-value. We are all going to change more than we ever thought possible, not because we choose to do so, but because it will be necessary.

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M. Treloar is a member of Bring the Ruckus who grew up playing on a Superfund site in Iowa.

He, in echoing the enthusiasm of several of the Republican presidential candidates, would gladly help execute the heads of the board of directors of tobacco and oil corporations. He does not own any stock in anything.

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