

tally neglects the real-time convergence of the medical professions that will hopefully lead to better care of each individual patient—sans elitism.

MARTIN C. BURKE

Department of Medicine
University of Chicago
mburke@medicine.bsd.uchicago.edu

**Strategic Ignorance: Why the Bush Administration Is Recklessly
Destroying a Century of Environmental Progress.**

By Carl Pope and Paul Rauber. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2004.
Pp. 288. \$24.95.

In the name of full disclosure, let me confess right from the outset that I am an avid, devout follower of Carl Pope. I have not missed a single one of his wise, lucidly written, cogently argued, and well-informed *Sierra* magazine columns in years. This book, however, proved less of a love at first sight, and induced a more ambivalent and nuanced response in me.

This book is monumentally important, and by writing it the authors have performed a huge public service that is but the latest installment in Pope's long and distinguished career at the interface of politics and the environment. The book is also, for the most part, a serious—almost scholarly—work, a well-documented, horrifying, and infuriating indictment of the current Bush Administration. At the same time, the book suffers from some nontrivial flaws that are disappointing, given Pope's public stature and distinguished written record.

The book's singularly most important contribution is the gathering and presentation, in a mostly logically organized and coherent fashion, of all the disparate pieces in the enormous tapestry of embarrassment and folly that is collectively confused by some with the "environmental policy" of George Bush. A crucially important related issue is the book's factual robustness. At least the subset of the book's purported facts I checked, using both the book's own extensive references and footnotes, as well as independent sources, are all correct and fully substantiated by the cited and other sources.

Given the book's uncompromising, unabridged scope and factual reliability, it is, in my view, the definitive source for anybody who may still harbor any lingering doubt that Bush II is the uncontested worst U.S. President ever, (at least) from an environmental standpoint. The Bush II environmental record is all there in front of you, in sometimes mind-numbing but invariably solid and reliable details, and you are invited to draw your own conclusions. Those will likely span the full spectrum from mild bewilderment as to how such crude, unsophisti-

cated, and readily falsifiable lies can be expected to amount to a serious argument, to white-knuckle outrage at being deceived and actively, corporally harmed by the very government that is supposed to be your chief defender.

The book has several limitations. First, I did not find it an easy read. While it is very well written, it is not well edited. The authors clearly had an inkling that the book is too voluminous, not in overall scope but in the level of details of each and every story, and were mindful of the weakening effect this excess has on the book (p. 12). Yet they fell—wide-eyed and fully aware but apparently unable to mercilessly edit their own work—into the trap, thereby achieving exactly what they predicted, making the story seem less shocking than it actually is. Given that this is not an academic scholarly work but rather book-length timely journalism, what would have made a lot more sense is to restrict the scope to several, well-chosen, most egregious examples of the Administration's thoughtless, corrupt indulgence. In doing so, the authors would have been able to cover those case studies in full, without numbing the reader's mind with the book's actual information volume, which is sufficiently excessive to sometimes drown the vitally important message.

The few technical paragraphs in the book fall short at times. A good example is the discussion of global warming (p. 160). First, the science of global warming is not settled: the basic facts may be mostly there, but the details are complex and important and are still emerging. Stating otherwise, as the book does, unnecessarily weakens the demonstrably correct argument, whose validity is largely independent of whether or not the science is fully settled. Basic commonsense and prudence dictate unequivocally that, when faced with a possible calamity, one will take at least some preemptive measures. The probability of events for which we all buy car or home insurance actually materializing is far lower than the remaining doubts about human-induced climate change. At least according to Bush II, this idea generalizes readily to nations: after all, preemptive aversion of a putative catastrophe is the only argument in favor of the Iraq adventure that has not been fully discredited yet. Second, the description of the greenhouse effect in the book is erroneous. This is unfortunate, because these errors can be used by so-called global warming skeptics to discredit Pope or the Sierra Club, neither of which is even remotely warranted, because the reasons we should plan ahead for possible climate change are totally independent of the physics of the greenhouse effect. In fact, nowhere in the book do the minor "technical difficulties" undermine the point, which is always made persuasively and independently of the minor glitches.

The most important weakness of the book is related to its stated objective, which is not simply to document the disastrous environmental record of Bush II, but rather to unearth the Administration's deepest motivations for acting as recklessly as it has been (p. 31). The book's principal thesis in this respect is that it is always money; therefore, the authors' approach is to simply uncover the money trail, or to document how major Bush and GOP campaign donors have

benefited from relaxed or eliminated regulations, Executive Orders, and other forms of environmental lawlessness favored by the Bush Administration. This approach is both relatively easy, and, in my view, unpersuasive. While the authors' documentation of the money trail is thorough and revealing, I found the basic premise—that it is all about money, and once the financial ties are revealed, the Administration's true motivations have been unearthed—thoroughly unconvincing. It is certainly hard to overstate the importance of money in politics, and it is also a fact that political contributions by large corporations that are also major polluters are heavily skewed toward the GOP. This is both easily verifiable and well known to any casual follower of American politics. In fact, in some important senses this is where the real story *begins*, and my interpretation of the Bush Administration's unprecedented hostility toward the environment differs from that of the authors.

McCain-Feingold notwithstanding, given the structure of the American political system, there is no doubt that any administration, Republican or Democratic, will exhibit some bias in favor of its principal contributors. The questions are (1) how brazenly an administration feels it can do so with political impunity, and (2) how consistent the objectives met by this payback system are with the administration's core ideology, or, in case they are not, how ideologically "flexible" the administration is. The answers to both questions are intimately related to how broadly the administration interprets its mandate.

Despite having lost the popular vote in 2000 and being essentially appointed by a bitterly divided Supreme Court, the Bush Administration interprets its mandate extremely broadly. Examples include judicial appointments of questionable ideologues such as Priscilla Owen and Charles Pickering; the continuing refusal, at times in apparent contempt of court, of Vice President Cheney to release the records of his energy task force; aggressive disregard of privacy rights and due process by Ashcroft's Justice Department in cases unrelated to suspected terrorism (such as the intimidation attempts of black voters in Florida under the thin veil of an unspecified "election fraud" investigation, or the preemptive questioning of would-be demonstrators protesting the Republican convention in New York); among many others. In fact, Vice President Cheney stated in a January 2002 interview on ABC's *This Week*, that "I have repeatedly seen an erosion of the powers . . . of the President . . . to do his job. We are weaker today . . . because of the unwise compromises that have been made over the last 30 or 35 years." From this and similar statements by its senior officials, and, more importantly, from its actions, it is evident that this Administration views its role in the broadest of terms and sees a frontal attack on constraints on the executive branch as not only acceptable, but indeed a central part of their perceived mission.

While claiming unusually broad governing latitude may not be inherently objectionable, and may in fact be at times crucial to effective governing, it is hard to escape the conclusion that for some key members of this Administration, including Mr. Bush himself, these claims stem from, and amount to, a sense of mis-

sion that is nothing short of religious fervor. For example, Richard Land of the Southern Baptist Convention quoted President Bush as saying “I believe God wants me to be President,” and Michael Duffy of *Time* magazine described the President after 9/11 as feeling “chosen by the grace of God to lead at that moment.” Similarly, consider Secretary Rumsfeld’s response to Lt. Gen. William Boykin’s casting the war on terror, of which he is a key element, in crude theological terms bordering on witchcraft, which betrayed either complete ignorance of other cultures’ sensitivities or unconscionable arrogance. Secretary Rumsfeld neither reprimanded nor expressed reservations, instead expressing full confidence in Gen. Boykin. It is hard to explain such self-injurious response on the part of the Secretary without invoking similarly simplistic but profoundly deeply held religious sentiments on the part of key Administration officials.

Religiosity does not have to be antithetical to good democratic governance, but its fundamentalist variety prevalent in the Bush II White House very often is. The combustible combination of the two intimately intertwined sentiments—a sense of mission that supersedes any realistic and objective gauging of both the relevant facts to, and the level of public support for, policies or actions, and the bestowing on those political moves theological, divinely-ordained meanings—is the principal characteristic of the Bush II regime, and it is also the root cause of many of its most spectacular failures. This combination leads Bush II to a sense of superiority over, and obliviousness to, the salient facts and the Administration’s hierarchical superiors, the U.S. citizens. For astute Bush observers carefully attuned to the President’s most revealing slips, Bush’s feeling of superiority over, and therefore unaccountability to, the U.S. citizens is hard to miss, despite the assumed down-home, folksy persona behind which he has been trying so hard, with considerable success, to hide his Greenwich, CT, patrician, entitled upbringing. (Recall the response—“Who is this chicken shit?”—of the President’s father, Bush I, to urging by the late Senator Wellstone at a White House reception in 1991 to focus more on education and less on Iraq. Growing up steeped in such a deeply rooted sense of superiority is probably extremely difficult to shake off.) In Bush II, this sense is perhaps best epitomized by his response to a reporter’s statement that “we’re headed to war in Iraq” in Crawford, TX, on December 31, 2002. The President, who must have been aware of the inevitability of the war at that point, wondered out loud why the reporter should hold this view, adding, “I’m the person who gets to decide, not you.” This theologically and psychologically controlled malignant sense of being above Congress, above the law, and, most importantly, above the wishes of an overwhelming majority of American voters, is, in my view, among the real root causes of Bush’s attack on the environment, with money being merely a means—albeit a very important, necessary means.

Unencumbered by self-examination plaguing lesser beings not underwritten by God, and outfitted with a sense of unimpeded global control, the Administration is ready to captain the national ship in the direction of its choosing. For

environmental policy, the choice of direction is guided by the final building block in the animosity of Bush II to the environment, the axiomatic belief held by the President and his inner circle in the supremacy of the private sector, and an aversion for regulating that sector. Intellectually, like the theological element, this belief is based on mainstream ideas, interpreted so over-simplistically and dogmatically as to become completely divorced from their original meaning. In this case, the sound kernel is free-market efficiency and the Smithian “invisible hand.” While straightforward and simple, and thus intuitively appealing to some, these ideas are extremely narrowly applicable, and best thought of as abstract metaphors, decidedly not predictive models” “the vision thing,” definitively not detailed “stratery.” As such, they amount to no more than a fanciful nebulous loathing of government intervention, leaving the naive adherent with little specific guidance. As expected, with an intellectual house of cards at its core, the Bush Administration’s free-market motivated use of environmental regulations, Executive Orders, and legislation (employing the GOP control of both Chambers) has been dishonest and rife with internal inconsistencies meticulously reported in the book and in the accompanying Web site, strategicignorance.org.

The Bush Administration has put forth and advanced a worldview in which the well-being of corporations is the single overarching operative principle. A world governed by such views is not only morally and intellectually corrupt, but also a very dreary one indeed. In such a sad world, the Porcupine caribou herd, the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, or indeed any natural national treasure, is casually sacrificed for a strip mine or the potential, unproven prospect of several months oil supplies, and such sacrifices are always preferable to far larger benefits guaranteed by measures promoting fuel efficiency or sustainable alternative energy sources. It is against this backdrop that the Bush II attack on the environment has materialized.

Strategic Ignorance is an excellent reference to the Bush II environmental failings. It does not fulfill its stated promise to expose the root cause of those failings, but it contributes enormously to such exposure by documenting in great details the money links between polluters and Bush II, and the inconsistencies and injustices of selective application of free-market based ideas under Bush II.

GIDON ESHEL

Department of the Geophysical Sciences
University of Chicago
geshel@uchicago.edu