

DEB CALLAHAN

President, League of Conservation Voters

Take Back America Conference

Campaign for America's Future / Institute for America's Future

Plenary Session: Shrubbed: The Radical Project of George Bush

Thursday, June 5, 2003

Washington, DC

Good morning, everybody! I am thrilled to be here. I want to join Ralph Neas and so many other people who have congratulated Bob Borosage and Roger Hickey on bringing us together. This is a wonderful and important gathering and I am thrilled to be under the same roof with all of you. I don't know if it's been said yet but I think I might see the seeds of a coalition of the willing coming together here. It has a familiar ring, but talk about taking things back. I kind of like that idea.

Each of us here today has a unique perspective about what we want to take back here in America. First I want to talk about what the League of Conservation Voters, what environmentalists across this country believe that we have to take back. The League of Conservation Voters is the political voice of the national environment and conservation community. We're a non-partisan organization that supports environmental and conservation candidates and, frankly, tries to hold accountable and perhaps un-elect those folks who are not sympathetic to the environmental agenda. We're a national organization. There are 31 state leagues around the country that operate independently, collegially with us, also working at the state level.

We hope this year to command a green army of environmentalists and conservationists across this country, mobilized in a way that you've never seen, this environmental force come together. We intend to take back the environment from the corporate interests and give the environment back to the people, back to the planet where it belongs, because we know that the environment is a precious, precious thing that we need to – protect for future generations that we need to protect for the health of communities and people around this world. I want to give you a better sense of just why this imperative is so important, what we've seen in this Bush administration.

First of all, I want to tell you that later this month the League of Conservation Voters is going to release our annual Presidential report card on the environment. Now, report cards are important things. You remember when you came home from school showing people what your report card was; it's an important time to reflect. And I can't exactly blow the lead here and tell you what the grades the President is going to get, but I can tell you that last year President Bush and his administration got a D- on the report card. And they haven't gotten any better, let me tell you! And when my staff gave them a D- I said, "there's no such thing as a D-!" But I can tell you one thing, without telling you any

letter grade. This is undeniably the worst administration that we have seen in the history of this nation on these issues and it's time to tell the truth!

There's another thing I want to tell you, about what's going on with the leadership in this country around the environmental issues. Any one of these Democratic candidates would do a better job, a much better job, a more leadership-like job on the environment than this current administration, and we need to tell that record. As a matter of fact, we're going to provide these Democratic candidates a wonderful opportunity to tell their stories, to provide their vision. We're going to be sponsoring, on June 26 on the UCLA campus, a forum for these Democratic presidential candidates to come and share their visions with America about what they see for the future of the environment.

So I want to tell you a little bit, I want to share with you some of the information that we see about what's happened to environmental laws, to environmental protection regulations under this administration, information that we know will compel the American public. That will simply outrage people. That will bring people to their feet and say, "that's not right! We can't live this way any longer." I can tell you in the elections business, from the environmental perspective, there are three issues that draw people, whether or not they feel that they've come under that label, "environmentalist", whether or not they come under the label, "Republican, Independent, Democratic, Green" or anything else. The health and safety of people in this country is too precious to squander. People care about the quality of our air. People care about the cleanliness of our water. People care if they live in communities that are contaminated by toxic waste that's just lying there by a kid's playground.

So let me tell you what this administration has done on these three issues. They have a Clear Skies initiative. The Clear Skies initiative. They say it would achieve limited reductions in sulfur oxides, nitrogen oxides, and mercury in the air. Their plan actually would repeal and weaken public health protections of the current clean air act. That's the Clear Skies initiative. The new Source Review, also another Clean Air law. The Bush administration would weaken this provision of the Clean Air Act that says, when you build a new power plant, you have to make sure you build a cleaner power plant. You need to make sure you continue not to put more pollution in the air. So basically we're looking at a roll back of the Clean Air Act. Do we think that's why America elected this President? No.

Clean water. Who doesn't care about clean water. People who live in places where they have beautiful rivers and streams where they recreate, well, the President has not only reneged on his pledge of No Net Loss of Wetlands, he's bowed to the real estate development interests to limit the scope of the Clean Water Act. In effect, about 60% of rivers, lakes and streams would not be protected under this administration's idea of what a Clean Water Act should look like. I don't think that's why America elected this President, do you?

Finally, on toxics. President Bush has failed to support the Polluter Pays Tax. He doesn't think that polluters should clean up their pollution, he doesn't think that people

who cared so little as to dump toxic waste into their communities are the people who should clean up the toxic waste. No, no. He thinks the taxpayers should pay for this, rather than the corporations who put those toxics into the ground. These are things the public responds to, these are things that we're going to talk about.

A common and disturbing theme pervades these rollbacks and repeals: each was supported by powerful industries that had much to gain. Greenberg, Quinlan in a poll tells us the corporate message has caused an 11-point net shift away from Bush's performance on the environment. And you should know the environment is consistently this administration's weakest area when it comes to the public looking at Republicans and Democrats and seeing who they think is really going to protect their best interests.

There's power out there around this issue. There's something you may not know. There are about 10 million members of environmental groups around this country, 10 to 11 million members who wrote a check and joined an environmental organization. Over 70% of the public self-identifies as environmentalist. There are about 12 million members of labor unions in this country today. Do you begin to think of the environmental community as being nearly as politically powerful as labor in this country? You probably don't. And why is that? It's because environmentalists don't think of ourselves as being politically organized that way. And we aren't organized that way. That's the challenge.

There's a sleeping giant out there that's called the national environmental and conservation community, and our job over the next 17 months is to awaken that sleeping giant. Over the next election, the League of Conservation Voters, the Sierra Club, and environmentalists around this country are going to make sure that we rally our troops in a way that you have never seen before. These are tough times.

A couple of days ago, I was talking to a wonderful woman named Maggie Fox, who works for the Sierra Club, and also happens to be married to Congressman Mark Udall, one of the most outstanding environmentalists in the Congress. And Maggie and I were reflecting about our years in political organizing and environmental politics. We've both been doing this work for well over 20 years—it's our life's work. And Maggie said, "you know, I've been working in elections for years," and she said, "I'm finally coming to see that maybe what I've been doing for the last 20 years has prepared me for the battles of the next year and a half." And I think Maggie is right. I think for those of us in this room who have been doing this a long time, I think for those of us in this room who have just come to this work, we live in a moment in time. We live in a moment in time where we're at the fork in a road. Where we're going to choose the direction and the destiny of our country. That is a clarion call that is worth working for. That is worth reaching out to your neighbors and your colleagues and saying, "it's time."

One last thought I want to leave you with. One of the most amazing experiences of my life was a dinner where I sat next to Stuart Udall, former Secretary of Interior back in the '60's, who was a spectacular man. And I said, "what was it like? What was it like when you were running the Interior Department and you all created the Endangered Species

Act? You protected amazing lands, you did these new and insightful and far reaching things to protect our natural environment? What was it like to be working in government in those days?" And he said, "well, you know, basically if you could think it up, you could do it." I couldn't even imagine! I've come to realize that's my guiding principle here. I want to return to a time in this country when if we can think it up, we can do it.

And so with that, dream, work, win together! Thank you so much.