

WILSON CENTER DIGEST

Summaries of recent papers, studies, and meetings at the Wilson Center

“Emerging Issues in Environmental Policy.”

A conference, Sept. 30, 1999, cosponsored by the Wilson Center’s Division of United States Studies and the Governance Institute.

Though the immediate environmental outlook for the rest of the world is far less rosy, in the United States and other developed Western nations, environmental conditions are almost certain to keep getting better, predicts Paul Portney, president of the Washington-based think tank Resources for the Future and a principal speaker at this conference.

Since Earth Day 1970, “air quality has improved phenomenally” in most metropolitan areas, and many major rivers, such as the Potomac and the Hudson, have been made safe for fishing and other activities. In the coming decades, Portney believes, natural gas increasingly will supplant coal and oil for the generation of electricity and other uses, and cars will be weaned off gasoline, eventually turning to hydrogen fuel cells.

But now the U.S. environmental agenda has begun to shift to more contentious issues, says Mary Graham, a Fellow at Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government. The use of toxins and common chemicals, and pollution from farms and gas stations, dry cleaners, and other small businesses, are among the emerging issues. In the absence of technological “fixes,” she suggests, the government will have to compel farmers, small business owners, motorists, homeowners, and private landowners to cease damaging the environment, even if that harms agricultural productivity, business profits, individual mobility, or property values. Graham anticipates clashes ahead “that will dwarf the battles of the last 30 years.”

Looking at land-use issues, George Frampton, chair of the White House’s Council on Environmental Quality, observes that environmentalists seeking to protect America’s forests have radically expanded their horizons in recent decades. Once focused on national and state forest lands, they are now concerned with private

forests, which have “tremendous public benefits, and how [they] are managed has become very important in the national interest. . . . We’re even interested in the species of trees that are on private forest [lands].”

Zoning, land-use policy, and city planning arose long ago from a recognition of the “public values inherent in how [private] property is used.” Frampton looks to “new kinds of voluntary agreements,” such as “Habitat Conservation Plans,” in which a private landowner agrees to protect a swath of habitat for a threatened species in return for an official guarantee of no regulatory “surprises” for the ensuing decade or more.

In the realm of environmental regulation, Portney expects to see more use of economic incentive approaches, such as taxes on pollution, along with detailed public reports on the pollutants released by individual firms. With the Internet, notes William Pease, a senior scientist at the Environmental Defense Fund, citizen groups such as his own can turn a powerful spotlight on private firms’ actions.

Environmental regulation will increasingly fall to regional, state, or even local governments, in Portney’s view. Setting uniform national standards for air and water quality makes sense, he contends, but lower levels of government may be better able to regulate such things as solid and hazardous wastes and drinking water. Still other problems, such as climate change, require international action.

In the developing countries, environmental quality probably “will get worse before it gets better,” Portney notes. The “principal challenge,” he concludes, “is to find ways to help” them foster economic growth, which eventually will let them make the sort of environmental progress the United States has made.

“Rogue States and U.S. Foreign Policy.”

Wilson Center Press. Distributed by Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, P.O. Box 50370, Baltimore, Md. 21211.

290 pp. \$49.95, hardcover; \$18.95 paper. Author: *Robert S. Litwak*

In Washington, many people speak of taming the post-Cold War world’s “rogue” or “outlaw” states: Iraq, Iran, Cuba, Libya, and North Korea. Litwak, director of the Wilson Center’s Division of International Studies, contends that creating this international rogues’ gallery, as it were, is a serious mistake.

“Demonizing” these states may be useful in building political support for a hard-line policy of containment and isolation, he says, but it leads to inflexibility. Under such an approach, it becomes politically difficult to shift the policy toward “engagement” as circumstances change. For example, when the Clinton administration opted for “limited engagement,” together with containment, to try to quell North Korea’s nuclear ambitions in 1994, congressional critics accused it of “appeasement.”

Rogue states have been defined as those that seek weapons of mass destruction, resort to terrorism, and threaten Western interests in such important regions as Northeast Asia and the

Persian Gulf. But the standards are applied selectively, Litwak points out. Cuba, on the one hand, “meets none of the criteria, but is included . . . for largely domestic political reasons.” Syria, on the other hand, is kept off the list, despite “its continued support for terrorism and pursuit of [weapons of mass destruction],” because the Clinton administration hopes President Hafiz al-Assad will aid the Middle East “peace process.”

The “rogue state” approach fits the traditional American tendency “to view international relations as a moral struggle between forces of good and evil,” Litwak says. But it results in pressure for “a one-size-fits-all strategy.” The hard-line policy may not be the best in the circumstances, may be hard to change, and may (as has happened in recent years with regard to Cuba, Iran, and Libya) put the United States at odds with some of its closest allies. Shut down the rogues’ gallery, Litwak urges, and deal with the states on a case-by-case basis.

“Congress and the People: Deliberative Democracy on Trial.”

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308 pp. \$34.95. Author: *Donald R. Wolfensberger*

Is the day of direct democracy about to dawn in America? Will electronically empowered cybercitizens supplant the elected representatives in Congress and write the nation’s laws? Some enthusiasts for “teledemocracy” and the like say so, but Wolfensberger, director of the Wilson Center’s Congress Project and a former House staffer, doubts it. For one thing, it would require a constitutional amendment—and hence, the approval not only of three-fourths of the states but of both houses of Congress, which “jealously guard their constitutional lawmaking prerogatives.” For another, the public probably wouldn’t find teledemocracy to its liking. As Oscar Wilde said of socialism: “It sounds like a good idea, but it takes too many evenings.”

Wolfensberger examines the history of Congress, from its origins through the impeachment trial of President Bill Clinton. He is particularly worried, however, about “‘virtual’ direct democracy—representatives simply serv-

ing as funnels for public whims and passions,” without engaging in the deliberation that James Madison envisioned would “‘refine and enlarge the public views.’” The “culture” of Congress has shifted in recent years to one of “perpetual campaigning through confrontation,” he says, and “very little deliberation currently takes place.” Representatives keep close tabs on their constituents’s desires, and “the public, at least through its agents in a multitude of interest groups,” keeps close tabs on *them*.

There is no going back to an age when members of Congress were more insulated, Wolfensberger says. But lawmakers today could try to regain public trust by engaging citizens early on, in various forums, in discussions of a few selected major policy issues. In the end, though, he says, there simply must be more deliberation in Congress itself—and particularly in its committees, “where the real work of Congress is done.”