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Environment

Sacrificing the earth on the altar of politics

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Against a backdrop of mounting evidence of climate change, Chris Williams, author of Ecology and Socialism : Solutions to Capitalist Ecological Crisis, <http://www.haymarketbooks.org/pb/Ec...> examines why we need an environmental movement independent of both major parties in the United States.

"It may seem impossible to imagine that a technologically advanced society could choose, in essence, to destroy itself, but that is what we are now in the process of doing."

â€” Elizabeth Kolbert, *Field Notes from a Catastrophe: Man, Nature and Climate Change*, 2006

Marooned from the mainland United States, in June, the nuclear power plant at Fort Calhoun, Nebraska, became a small island. Sandbags were hurriedly deployed to prevent inundation from floodwaters as the Missouri river burst its banks, a consequence of the greatest flood in U.S. history.

Another nuclear facility, this time at Los Alamos in New Mexico, birthplace of atomic weapons, was threatened by an altogether different force of nature. Los Alamos was forced to evacuate <http://livewire.koat.com/Event/Live...> as flames overran fire defenses and firefighters struggled to contain the largest wildfire in New Mexico history.

As the Las Conchas wildfire blazed out of control at the end of June, it consumed over 130,000 acres of forest. Large areas of land at Los Alamos are contaminated with radioactive waste from decades of nuclear research and testing. Scorched land increases water run-off and the danger from flash flooding. Thus, a further alarming side effect of the wildfire and Los Alamos's legacy of radioactive contamination is the likelihood that radioisotopes will spread, as happened when wildfires threatened the Hanford nuclear weapons plant in Washington state.

Extended drought and persistent wildfires saw the U.S. Department of Agriculture declare the entire state of Texas as a natural disaster area <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/art...>, as more than 30 percent of crops have been lost due to severe water shortages. This follows a spring where the majority of counties in Texas were on fire <http://www.rollingstone.com/politic...> as Texas experienced its eighth year out of the last twelve for "exceptional" drought.

Globally, 2010 saw massive and unprecedented flooding in Pakistan that displaced 20 million people. Worsening air quality caused by wildfires in Russia killed 56,000 people and floodwaters in Australia covered an area larger than France and Germany combined; along with commodity speculation, these events contributed to record increases in grain prices, driving many millions more into extreme poverty and starvation. Nineteen countries around the world set new temperature records in 2010.

Outside of the statistics, a despairing op ed in the *New York Times* <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/28/o...> by Midwestern farmer Jack Hedin, a man who can trace his family's farming history back to before the Great Depression, commented on the desperate nature of his future, as well as identifying an aspect of the cause:

Climate change, I believe, may eventually pose an existential threat to my way of life. A family farm like ours may simply not be able to adjust quickly enough to such unendingly volatile weather. We can't charge enough for our crops in good years to cover losses in the ever-more-frequent bad ones. We can't continue to move to better, drier ground. No new field drainage scheme will help us as atmospheric carbon concentrations edge up to 400 parts per million; hardware and technology alone can't solve problems of this magnitude.

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To make things worse, I see fewer acres in our area now planted with erosion-preventing techniques, like perennial contour strips, than there were a decade ago. I believe that federal agriculture policy is largely responsible, because it rewards the quantity of acres planted rather than the quality of practices employed.

Another grim U.S. record was set in April as over 600 tornados swept across the country leaving a trail of devastation and death; Joplin, Missouri, saw 138 people lose their lives to one monster tornado alone. At the memorial service, President Obama echoed his comments of almost exactly a year ago at the time of the gargantuan BP oil spill. At that time, he invoked "the invisible hand" of God to help guide the country out of the crisis.

At the remembrance service in Joplin, President Obama rhetorically answered his own question of why this disaster had happened at this time to these people in the town of Joplin, and stated that it was a question that couldn't be answered <http://m.whitehouse.gov/the-press-o...>

On one level, he is of course correct. It is not possible to ascribe any individual weather event or local weather-related tragedy to global warming and one does not want to coldly remember those who lost their lives in the violence of a mile-wide tornado with reference to statistics on climate change.

However, on another level, the trend of odd and extreme weather patterns—what has been dubbed "global wierding" <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011...>—is hard to ignore and looks set to continue as once-in-a-lifetime extreme weather events become the "new normal." And there is something that connects the spill in the Gulf to the litany of extreme weather events around the globe: the corporate hunt for fossil fuels and their subsequent combustion that earns the corporations so much money at our and the planet's expense.

Observing the circus shenanigans of our elected representatives over the past few weeks, they seem to have found science, rationality and the extreme weather events of the outside world all too easy to ignore.

While the planet-gone-wild weather perturbations of the last year devastated the lives and livelihoods of countless millions of people, Congress spent its time this summer debating the repeal of a bill that promoted energy efficient light bulbs. As if that wasn't outlandish enough, the drive by the government to ban the more wasteful incandescent bulbs—bulbs which waste 90 percent of their energy as heat—was cast as an attack on "personal freedom" <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environme...> by Texas Republican Senator "Smokey" Joe Barton.

In a sign of how disconnected Congress is from reality, the vote to repeal the bill—which was in fact signed into law in 2007 under that renowned environmentalist George W. Bush—received over 200 votes in the House of Representatives; though it failed to garner a sufficient majority to win enactment. Undaunted, House Republicans brought to a voice vote another measure cast as a defense of personal liberty that would remove all federal funding for energy efficiency measures.

In support of the bill, Texas Republican Michael Burgess <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environme...> claimed that "the federal government has no right to tell me or any other citizen what type of lightbulb to use at home. It is our right to choose."

So, not being able to use ragingly inefficient lightbulbs that cost people more money in their electricity bills—bulbs that, farcically, as of last year are no longer manufactured—is an affront to personal liberty and yet another example of government overreach.

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However, in the topsy-turvy, Orwellian world inhabited by members of Congress, President Obama's failure to close Guantánamo, the continuation of unlimited detention without trial, the use of extra-judicial assassination squads, the continuation of warrantless wiretaps, his administration's refusal to disavow the use of torture or investigate those in the Bush administration who championed its use, or a host of other incursions and curtailments of civil liberties, are not in any way examples of government overreach worthy of congressional discussion.

As if the lightbulb debate wasn't a ludicrous enough example of just how detached Congress is from the concerns of the people they are supposed to represent or the planet that they presume to live on, another bill, passed by 239 votes to 184 with the help of 16 Democrats, sought to bar the Environmental Protection Agency overruling states' decisions <http://www.epa.gov/archives/2011/au...> on water quality. If the bill became law, it would hamstring the federal government's ability to protect rivers, lakes and coastal waters from pollution and move the country decades backwards to a time prior to the Clean Water Act.

Meanwhile, in a little noted aspect of the energetic competition over which party can claim to be cutting the most from social programs to funnel additional cash to corporations and banks, *Energy and Environment Daily* reported that in both Republican and Democrat bills, following on from large cuts to the EPA from the budget showdown in April, billions more dollars are being lopped off the budgets of the EPA, the Department of Energy (DOE) and the Department of the Interior for programs that deal with energy conservation and promotion of alternative energy systems:

Those long-term cuts refer to the panoply of domestic agency spending, from EPA air-pollution monitoring to DOE efficiency grants to many other non-energy or environmental programs. But on a more granular level, the 16 percent slice taken from EPA's budget in the April shutdown deal [brokered by Democrats] could well be the shape of things to come for most non-defense federal programs, unless the final debt pact takes a turn toward the left.

Furthermore, because it was a Democratic proposal in the Senate that stipulated no new revenue in any deal on raising the debt ceiling, thereby removing from debate the question of ending tax breaks for the oil industry—an extremely popular measure with the general public—liberal lawmakers and their environmental backers cannot publicly criticize the deal that hands yet another major victory to the oil industry.

All of this is of course a far cry from what we were told to expect from a President Obama when he gave his victory speech <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kbbl...> in St. Paul, Minnesota after winning the Democratic primary in 2008. There he promised a new time; a time where policies would no longer be beholden to past political limitations and ugly compromises:

[It is] our time to turn the page on the policies of the past. Our time to bring new energy and new ideas to the challenges we face...I am absolutely certain that generations from now, we will be able to look back and tell our children that this was the moment when we began to provide care for the sick and good jobs to the jobless; this was the moment when the rise of the oceans began to slow and our planet began to heal; this was the moment when we ended a war and secured our nation and restored our image as the last, best hope on Earth.

Given the realities of the last two and a half years, especially the period prior to last November's "shellacking" when the Democrats held a large amount of political capital with majorities in both Houses, and reflecting on the actual environmental, economic, health and war policies enacted by Barack Obama's administration, his speech comes from an alternate universe; one where the Democrats aren't in thrall to the corporate interests who fund them and the practical reality of running an imperial empire based on ruthless economic competition, inter-imperial conflict and military might.

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If republicans have run out of policy ideas and moved to the insane end of the legislative spectrum, there's a simple reason: Barack Obama stole all their original policies and then enacted them into law.

Even with a set of lunatics more or less running the congressional asylum, the yawning gulf between rhetoric and reality that defines the Obama White House, alongside the visibly decaying nature of our world, is causing some previously unquestioning liberal beneficiaries of the two party system and stalwart backers of Obama to become more forthright in their criticism.

Former Vice President and presidential candidate Al Gore, in a long article for *Rolling Stone* <http://www.rollingstone.com/politic...> decried the entire U.S. two-party political system as fundamentally corrupt, "Politicians have been racing to the bottom for some time, and are presently tunnelling to new depths...Largely as a result, the concerns of the wealthiest individuals and corporations routinely trump the concerns of average Americans and small businesses."

But Gore went further and assaulted Obama himself in strong (if ultimately equivocal) terms:

President Obama has thus far failed to use the bully pulpit to make the case for bold action on climate change. After successfully passing his green stimulus package, he did nothing to defend it when Congress decimated its funding. After the House passed cap and trade, he did little to make passage in the Senate a priority. Senate advocates—including one Republican—felt abandoned when the president made concessions to oil and coal companies without asking for anything in return. He has also called for a massive expansion of oil drilling in the United States...He has simply not made the case for action. He has not defended the science against the ongoing, withering and dishonest attacks. Nor has he provided a presidential venue for the scientific community—including our own National Academy—to bring the reality of the science before the public.

In a recent forum at Yale's Environment 360 site assessing Obama's overall record on energy and the environment [http://e360.yale.edu/feature/forum ...](http://e360.yale.edu/feature/forum...), climate blogger and former Acting Assistant Secretary of Energy Joseph Romm gave Obama an "F" on energy and climate issues: "Obama deserves an 'F.' Fundamentally he let die our best chance to preserve a livable climate and restore U.S. leadership in clean energy—without a serious fight."

Elizabeth Kolbert, the author quoted at the beginning of this piece, recently had this to say: <http://www.newyorker.com/talk/comme...>

When Obama took office, he appointed some of the country's most knowledgeable climate scientists to his administration, and it seemed for a time as if he might take his responsibility to lead on this issue seriously. That hope has faded. The president sat on the sidelines in 2009 and 2010 while congressional leaders tried to put together majorities in favor of climate legislation. Since the midterm elections, Obama has barely mentioned climate change, and just about every decision that his administration has made on energy and the environment has been wrong.

The *Los Angeles Times* <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/ma...> joined in with a cutting editorial entitled "In the 2012 campaign, environmentalists don't matter: That's the message President Obama is sending as the administration caters to smokestack and other industries." In other words, compromise with the Democrats leaves people genuinely concerned with creating real change sidelined and taken for granted as the Democrats pander not to their voting base but to the corporate trough that sustains them.

As Obama now runs the imperial empire, Democratic denigration of their own liberal base of supporters is no longer something that has to be quietly voiced behind closed doors. As Obama lurched even further to the right in the impasse over the budget ceiling, Democratic pollster Mark Mellman, felt emboldened to publicly disparage any concerns left-leaning Democrats may have to *The New York Times* <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/31/u...> as their concerns really don't matter: "Whatever qualms or questions they may have about this policy or that policy, at the end of the day the one thing they're absolutely certain ofâ€”they're going to hate these Republican candidates...So I'm not honestly all that worried about a solid or enthusiastic base."

In a further cynical example of how the administration operates, even as President Obama is saying that his administration has yet to decide on the proposed Keystone XL tar sands pipeline from Canada to Texas and government environmental studies are ongoing, documents indicate <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/ju...> that his administration is in fact gearing up to support it, even before those studies are complete.

Given all of this, anyone who wants to see the reigning in of corporate power in the interests of ordinary people and environmental sanity cannot campaign or vote for Barack Obama again. There is no time to fall once more into the trap of lesser-evilism. It's not a question of worrying about whether the Republicans will win in 2012; their policies already have.

Whoever does win in 2012â€”and, judging by recent campaign contributions, the corporations and ruling class are backing an Obama second termâ€”people and the planet will lose. The only way to bring real change, the only hope for environmental and social activists in the United States, is to work completely outside the Democratic Party and within the new social movements against nuclear power, against hydrofracking for natural gas and against mountain top removal for coal, to name only a few.

The challenge of our age is to build links between the movements, with the rank and file of the labor unions and internationally with other groups to create a mass movement in the United States that campaigns for a redirection of government funds toward renewable-energy jobs, energy conservation, public transportation and the new infrastructure that is so obviously and desperately needed. We must reject the false "choice" that we are presented with by both mainstream parties: Do you want us to cut flesh from your arm or your leg?

The money for such social and ecological projects cannot once again be sought from the mass of the people, but must come from the coffers of the corporations and the fabulously wealthy by raising their taxes and pulling out of the wars. Most U.S. corporations pay no income tax <http://www.reuters.com/article/2008...>, neither do a large percentage of foreign companies doing business in the U.S.

If politicians were really serious about closing the budget gap it could very easily be done just by closing those tax loopholes, let alone by raising their taxes back to historical levels. In itself, this would raise trillions of dollars.

The fact that the richest 400 people in the United States have more wealth <http://www.politifact.com/wisconsin...> than 50 percent of U.S. householdsâ€”150 million Americansâ€”is truly obscene.

Likewise, that the money spent by the U.S. military just on air-conditioning in Iraq and Afghanistan was \$20.2 billion <http://www.npr.org/2011/06/25/13741...> in 2010 is a monument to the insanity of capitalist priorities in a world that is crying out for food, clothing, shelter and environmental redress.

The only way we are going to achieve real ecological and social progress in the U.S. is to cut all ties to the Democrats and fashion our own independent movement that is organized, autonomous and out on the streets, not lobbying in the corridors of power.

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The evidence is so compelling, and the time for action so short, that all equivocation must end, all ties to the Democrats must be severed, and a new, stronger, more effective movement will rise from the ashes of Obama's false promises, one that can truly combat the inequities of the world and forge policies that will begin to heal the planet.

This really is the last, best hope for the Earth.