

THE ENVIRONMENT: A CLEANER, SAFER, HEALTHIER AMERICA

The core of the Democrat argument depends on the belief that "Washington regulations" represent the best way to preserve the environment. We don't agree.

- 1) First, assure your audience that you are committed to "preserving and protecting" the environment, but that "it can be done more wisely and effectively." (Absolutely do not raise economic arguments first.) Tell them a personal story from your life. Since many Americans believe Republicans do not care about the environment, *you will never convince people to accept your ideas until you confront this suspicion and put it to rest.*
- 2) Provide specific examples of federal bureaucrats failing to meet their responsibilities to protect the environment. Do not attack the principles behind existing legislation. Focus instead on the way it is enforced or carried out, and use rhetorical questions.
- 3) Your plan must be put in terms of the future, not the past or present. We are carrying forward a legacy, yes, but we are trying to make things *even better* for the future. *The environment is an area in which people expect progress*, and when they do not see progress being made, they get frustrated.
- 4) The three words Americans are looking for in an environmental policy, they are "safer," "cleaner," and "healthier." Two words that summarize what Americans are expecting from regulators and agencies are "accountability" and "responsibility."
- 5) Stay away from "risk assessment," "cost-benefit analysis," and the other traditional environmental terminology used by industry and corporations. Your constituents don't know what those terms mean, and they will then assume that you are pro-business.
- 6) If you must use the economic argument, stress that you are seeking "a fair balance" between the environment and the economy. Be prepared to specify and quantify the jobs lost because of needless, excessive or redundant regulations.
- 7) Describe the limited role for Washington. We must *thoroughly review* the environmental regulations already in place, decide which ones we still need, identify those which no longer make sense, and make sure we don't add any unnecessary rules. Washington should disclose the *expected cost* of current and all new environmental regulations. *The public has a right to know.*
- 8) Emphasize common sense. In making regulatory decisions, we should use best estimates and *realistic assumptions*, not the worst-case scenarios advanced by environmental extremists.

OVERVIEW

The environment is probably the single issue on which Republicans in general – and President Bush in particular – are most vulnerable. A caricature has taken hold in the public imagination: Republicans seemingly in the pockets of corporate fat cats who rub their hands together and chuckle manically as they plot to pollute America for fun and profit. And only the Democrats and their good-hearted friends from Washington can save America from these sinister companies drooling at the prospect of strip mining every picturesque mountain range, drilling for oil on every white sand beach, and clear cutting every green forest.

The fundamental problem for Republicans when it comes to the environment is that whatever you say is viewed through the prism of suspicion. As with education, Social Security and so many other issues, the Democrats have been expert at constructing a narrative in which Republicans and conservatives are the bad guys. And if Americans swallow that story, then whatever comes later is mere detail.

Indeed, it can be helpful to think of environmental (and other) issues in terms of “story.” A compelling story, even if factually inaccurate, can be more emotionally compelling than a dry recitation of the truth. The popular movie *Erin Brockovich* presented a courageous woman fighting against an impersonal corporation that poisoned the public with cancerous chemicals with impunity. *The Wall Street Journal* and investigative journalist Michael Fumento later conclusively demonstrated that the real-life Erin Brockovich’s legal case was full of holes and contradictions, but no matter: the public had its emotional story, and no number of exposes will ever come close to matching the power of that story.

As with those other issues, the first (and most important) step to neutralizing the problem and eventually bringing people around to your point of view on environmental issues is to convince them of your *sincerity* and *concern*. You may come up with the most subtle, nuanced, brilliant, ironclad and indisputable argument as to why President Bush’s approach to the “arsenic in the water” issue was responsible and correct, but it will fall on deaf ears unless the public is willing to give you the benefit of the doubt at the beginning.

I don’t have to remind you how often Republicans are depicted as cold, uncaring, ruthless, even downright anti-social. These attacks appeal to resentment and fear. Because they are primarily emotional in nature, they cannot be blunted with logic or statistics. Therefore, *any discussion of the environment has to be grounded in an effort to reassure a skeptical public that you care about the environment for its own sake* – that your intentions are strictly honorable. Otherwise, all the rational arguments in the world won’t be enough for you to prevail.

The good news, amidst all this doom and gloom, is that once you are able to establish your environmental *bona fides*, once you show people that your heart is in the right place and make them comfortable listening to what you have to say, then the conservative, free market approach to the environment actually has the potential to be quite popular.

ON THE MATTER OF ARSENIC IN THE WATER

I start here because this is where we almost snatched defeat from the jaws of victory. As you know, the incoming Bush administration's judicious, prudent approach to the numerous "midnight" regulations imposed by Bill Clinton on his way out the door ended up backfiring in a big way. The "*arsenic in the water*" imbroglio of spring 2001 was the biggest public relations misfire of President Bush's first year in office.

What was the chaos all about? The Bush Administration's suspension of Clinton's last-minute executive order toughening the federal standard for arsenic in drinking water from 50 parts per billion to 10 parts per billion.

The Democrats' message came through loud and clear: Bush and the Republicans put business interests above public health. The fact that the new administration was only delaying a change that hadn't been considered urgent enough for the Clinton administration to do anything about it for eight long years got lost in the hubbub.

Indeed, the story was not that Bush was delaying a hastily imposed regulation, but rather that he was actively *putting in more* arsenic in the water. Republicans pointing out that the Democrats were distorting the facts...and pointed this out...and pointed this out...and pointed this out again... but the facts didn't matter. The hit had been scored, the political damage done, and that was the first chink in President Bush's approval ratings.

Again, let me emphasize: The facts were beside the point. *Facts only become relevant when the public is receptive and willing to listen to them.* The decision to suspend the regulation wouldn't be troubling to someone educated on the issue, to someone who knew that there already was arsenic in the water and the only thing being debated was whether it was necessary to reduce it, and by how much. But Americans didn't know that. They heard "*arsenic in the water,*" and it was news to them. No wonder that they reacted in horror.

How do we avoid such debacles in the future?

It's all in how you frame your argument, and the order in which you present your facts. Don't allow yourself to become bogged down in minutiae when you should be presenting the big picture. You should have the details at hand to back you up, to be sure, but don't be afraid to begin by painting in broad strokes.

A more effective, step-by-step approach to *educating* the public about the arsenic issue would have been: