



Women's International League for Peace and Freedom United States Section

The Founding of Earth Day

Over the 1960s, environmental and anti-war activists began thinking they'd had enough of corporate environmental disasters -Love Canal (1953), the consequence of indiscriminate spraying of DDT revealed by Rachel Carson in *Silent Spring* (1962), assassinations (President Kennedy, Malcom X, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy), the violence of the Chicago convention and escalation of the Vietnam war with carpet-bombing, Agent Orange, the My Lai atrocity, and expansion into Cambodia.

In 1969, two iconic disasters galvanized the public and legislators into action: in Ohio, the alarming fire on the Cuyahoga River in downtown Cleveland, and in California, the huge Santa Barbara Channel oil spill, at that time the largest oil "blowout" in U.S. waters that covered 30 miles of sandy beaches and significantly affected marine life.

It was no surprise, then, that when Wisconsin Sen. Gaylord Nelson proposed Earth Day for April 22, 1970, 20 million people turned out to peacefully demonstrate.

In quick succession, Congress under Pres. Nixon created the Environmental Protection Agency (1970) and passed the Clean Air (1970), Clean Water (1972) and Endangered Species (1973) Acts. These all had precursors in 1960s when municipal and state governments, as well as Congress, alarmed by increasing illegal dumping of toxic waste and air, land and water pollution had passed laws to limit corporate harm to public health and ecosystems.

Martin Luther King's "A Revolution of Values"

On this first 1970 Earth Day, Sen. Nelson expressed his hope to "build bridges between man and nature's systems, instead of more highways and dams and new weapon systems that escalate the arms race."

Indeed, Nelson seemed to echo Martin Luther King, Jr's revolutionary 1967 speech "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence" when King moved dramatically from civil rights to a critique of capitalism and war, calling for a "revolution of values" – a shift from a "thing-oriented society to a "person-oriented" society.

He expanded on his "dream" to describe his vision of "a worldwide fellowship that lifts neighborly concern beyond one's tribe, race, class, and nation," saying: "when machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered."

Nelson remarked that the "change" he and King before him envisioned called for "new standards for progress, emphasizing human dignity and well-being rather than an endless parade of technology that produces more gadgets, more waste and more pollution."

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King knew this change “would require new national policies that quite frankly will interfere with what many have considered their right to use and abuse the air, the water, and the land, just because that is what we have always done.”

Both Martin Luther King and Nelson understood that the change they envisioned and knew was necessary for people and the planet threatened those in power. They were right. Quickly, the business establishment launched a counter offensive that has lasted for almost 50-years.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the Lewis Powell Memo

Eugene Syndor, Chair of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Education Committee, asked his friend Lewis Powell, corporate lawyer and member of 11 corporate boards, for a discussion memo. Powell’s “Confidential Memorandum - Attack on American Free Enterprise System,” dated August 23, 1971, wrote: “no thoughtful person can question that the American economic system is under broad attack... There always have been some who opposed the American system, and preferred socialism or some form of statism (communism or fascism).”

Powell was alarmed not about the “sporadic or isolated attacks” from a few “extremists on the left,” but attacks from “perfectly respectable elements of society, including leading intellectuals, the media and politicians” that were “gaining momentum and converts.” He singled out Yale Professor Charles Reich’s book “*The Greening of America*” as an example of the “frontal assault on...our government, our system of justice, the free enterprise system” and “individual freedom.”

Powell blamed the “apathy” of business to realize that the “ultimate issue was survival of the free enterprise system,” and described how the Chamber could regain influence on “the Campus” and in Secondary education, and control politics, elections, public opinion, the media and the courts. He concluded, “There should not be the slightest hesitation to press vigorously in all political arenas for support of the enterprise system. Nor should there be reluctance to penalize politically those who oppose it.”

The Chamber’s Board of Directors adopted Powell’s program on Nov. 8, 1973; immediately a “passive” business group turned into a powerful political force. In short order, the business elite founded the Business Roundtable (1972) and American Legislative Council (ALEC 1973), foundations and think-tanks such as the Heritage Foundation (1973), the Cato Institute (1977), Citizens for a Sound Economy (1984 - now Americans for Prosperity), and more.

Soon the Chamber and allies saw their court strategy succeed. In *Buckley v. Valeo* (1974), the Supreme Court, to which Nixon had nominated Powell in 1971, overturned the Federal Election Campaign Act (1971, 1974), ruling that spending money in political campaigns was protected as free speech under the First Amendment. In 1978, Justice Powell wrote for the majority when the Court expanded corporate free speech (*Bank of Boston v. Bellotti* 1978). And with *Citizens United* (2010) and *McCutcheon v. FEC* (2014), the Supreme Court has further lifted restrictions on donations to political campaigns and candidates to the benefit of the Chamber and their wealthy allies.

Are We moving toward realizing the promise of Earth Day and King’s Revolution of Values?

**Now’s the time to “Ask the Candidate” to support policies
to bring us full circle toward realizing Sen. Nelson’s and Martin Luther King’s vision.**