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ATTACK ON THE ENVIRONMENT

REMARKS BY DR. ELVIS STAHR AT THE 103RD COMMENCEMENT, MAY 14, 1971

We have seen in the past two years a mushrooming of public concern about the quality of the environment. This would probably not have come about even yet if as many people of my generation had not begun to see for themselves along about 1969 unmistakable signs of waste and pollution. I suspect even that would not have brought the conservation movement to its current level of influence if a great many people of your generation had not, in 1970, taken note that a good many things were going wrong, seriously wrong, with the environment. Much good has come of the work of these two years, although in terms of what will be needed not much more than an impressive beginning has been made. Your celebration of Earth Day is an example of this beginning. In any case, foundations for a greater progress have been laid clearly and some landmarks, legislation, executive actions, and court decisions, most of which probably could not have been achieved even as recently as 1967. It is scarcely surprising then that the counterattack, which some of us have been anticipating seems now to have begun in earnest.

The most obvious technique of the "anti environmentalists" as the "New York Times" recently called them is to select some narrow and preferably extreme point as if it were the core of the environmental argument on a given issue and then proceed resoundingly and righteously to rebut it, sometimes directly and sometimes by inference holding up to ridicule environmentalism and environmentalists in general. I could give a dozen or more examples of that technique from personal observations of my own since I left the placid environment of academics in 1968 to go where the action is, namely, in the conservation movement.

Some proponents of the everglades jet port, for instance, (remember that fight by any chance?) tried to lead the public to believe that the main concern of conservationists was that the noise of the airplanes would bother the alligators--or maybe the birds.

Their sometimes impassioned rebuttle, uttered over and over, was the rhetorical "which are more important, alligators or people?" You see the technique--set up a straw man and then subject it to ridicule. Actually, of course, the opposition to the jet port was based on a whole complex of concern, the single most important of which was not just what the jet port itself would do to the everglades, but rather what the inevitable development would have spring up in the vicinity of the world's greatest super jet port would do to the whole ecology of the everglades and south Florida. Since no serious rebuttle of that concern was even possible, the jet port development was halted, in effect by the Federal Government as soon as a careful study by an able study group put the whole issue into perspective. Who learned what from that famous confrontation of two years ago? I'm not sure.

Consider the fact that a member of the Council of Economic Advisors only last month made a speech motivated apparently by a desire to take the whole conservation movement to task. I hope he is a better Economist than he is Ecologist. According to the press he first suggested that the reason ecologists and conservationists have been concerned about the proposed Alaska Pipeline is that it might melt the permafrost in Northern Alaska. He then rather indignantly announced that the pipeline would melt only a section of one per cent of the permafrost and therefore he urged full speed on the whole project. The fact overlooked by the speaker, at least in the press account which I saw, is that the particular concern, which the speaker used to show how silly we are, is itself no more than a fraction of one per cent of what really troubles those who are insistently urging caution and delay and further study. Why he overlooked this, one can only conjecture. I suspect that he just didn't do his homework. There are hundreds of pages he missed, in any case.

There has grown up lately a saying that there are four stages in the approach of an industry to an environmental problem in which it is involved: Stage one is to assert that there is no real problem; Stage two is to acknowledge that there may be some problem, but the seriousness is being grossly exaggerated; Stage three is to say that the problem has been pretty serious, sure enough, but the industry is doing things to

take care of it before anybody pointed it out; Stage four is to quit being defensive and to get a feel for the real nature and gravity of the problem, and to invest in its solution the necessary corporate priorities to command the necessary talent and resources to see it is solved.

At any given time one may find different industries and different companies within the same industry in each of any of the four stages I just described. So let's not knock industry and let's not knock anybody recklessly. Not only are more and more companies moving into Stage, four but don't forget one can find at any given time many professors, many politicians and large segments of the public, including many young people, in each and every one of those four stages on a wide spectrum depending upon the issues of a wide range of environmental issues.

We have another problem. Sometimes the attacks of extremists in our own movement are so wild that they not only virtually assure the success of verbal counterattack, but they practically force industry into defensiveness and even become counter productive in persuading the people at large. What we need above all are simple facts.

If we are to continue to increase our chances of saving our life support system and of enhancing the quality of our environment and thereby of the quality of life on this earth, I think it is vital that we make clear in every way we can what we are talking about, and what we are not talking about. We are not talking about cosmetics--making things look prettier, by covering them up--we are talking about protecting their natural cleanliness and life processes and thereby letting nature's own beauty shine forth.

We are not talking about doomsday; we are talking about much more than survival; we are talking about the health and strength of the eco-system of which all life, including human life, depends.

We are not hysterical or far-out or idealistic or impractical; we are down to earth, way down, completely down to earth. We are vitally concerned with soil, and water, and air and sunlight, and countless thousands of plant and animal organisms, the interactions

of all of which make life possible on this little planet. We are very conservative, we conservationists, and we oppose boondoggles; we oppose unnecessary waste, solid or otherwise; we oppose reckless change in our natural heritage; we particularly oppose man's making changes in processes or components of the eco-system before the effects, the consequences, are carefully studied--that is our posture not only on the Alaska Pipeline and SST but on most other issues.

We do not want to change in any basic way the political system of this country; in fact, we like, and we take advantage of the fact that we can write our president and congressman knowing that he is and he had better be sensitive to what his constituents think. We just need more people to understand our cause. Under any other system, that might not be enough or downright dangerous.

Most of us are not unconcerned with economics; we are neither callous about poverty and unemployment nor disdainful of the right of the entrepreneur to become wealthy by supplying things that people need or want. We are concerned--and determined --that ecology be considered along with economics so that we don't feel the doom of too many geese that lay the golden eggs on this planet.