

# Rachel's Environment & Health News

## #503 - How They Lie, Part 1

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For the past 25 years, bad news has been reported again and again by the scientific community worldwide. Ozone depletion.[1] Global warming. [2] Certain cancers increasing.[3] Dioxin and PCBs from industrial sources now found everywhere, including remote Pacific islands.[4] Tuberculosis and other diseases re-emerging.[5] Birth defects rising. [6] Loss of species accelerating.[7] Youthful suicides increasing.[8] Common pesticides now thought to interfere with our sex hormones.[9] A large number of countries growing poorer instead of richer.[10] And on and on. You know the litany. It's depressing.

Now however, as you might expect from the most creative economy the world has ever known, a new industry has emerged to turn a profit from all this bad news. You could call it the Good News industry. Young writers are pumping out magazine articles and fat books claiming that these problems have all been dreamed up by hungry environmentalists who can't see beyond their next direct-mail funding appeal.

Indeed, the main message of the Good News industry is that none of these problems are very serious, if they exist at all. According to this industry's pundits, all these problems have been exaggerated, or even manufactured out of whole cloth, by out-of-work environmentalists desperate for a handout. The Competitive Enterprise Institute, the Cato Institute, the Hudson Institute, the Heritage Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute, the Reason Foundation, The American Freedom Coalition, and the Pacific Research Institute for Public Policy (among others) now have scholar-in-residence programs staffed mainly by former government officials. These former bureaucrats spend their days arguing that all is well with the world and that things could get even better -- indeed, a shining path of infinite progress would unfold before our very eyes --if we would only come to our senses and get government off the backs of corporations.

The unspoken belief that all government is harmful and that corporations are a boundless good --a kind of corporate libertarianism --is the thread that weaves all these groups and writers together. Naturally, this Good News industry is generously supported by donations from the likes of DuPont, Chevron, Mobil, Monsanto, the Chemical Manufacturers Association, General Electric, General Dynamics, Philip Morris, Chemical Bank, Texaco, Westinghouse, the Western Coal Council, and the Reverend Sun Myung Moon, among many others, because it serves their interests perfectly, creating just enough doubt to deflect discussion of the need for real reforms.

The Good News industry wasn't created by the NEW YORK TIMES. The TIMES merely made it respectable and lent it a certain cachet. The industry (at least its current surge) has its roots in the books of Dixie Lee Ray, former head of the Atomic Energy Commission, who wrote TRASHING THE PLANET in 1990 and ENVIRONMENTAL OVERKILL in 1993, the same year Elizabeth Whelan published TOXIC TERROR: THE TRUTH BEHIND THE CANCER SCARE and Michael Fumento published SCIENCE UNDER SIEGE. In those early days the industry had a definite crackpot tinge to it. The dust jackets of Dixie Lee Ray's books carried glowing endorsements from Rush Limbaugh, Edward Teller (inventor of the hoaxey "star wars" missile defense system), and Margaret Maxey, who seems to have coined the phrase, "environmental terrorism."

Parts of the industry have been unable to shake their crackpot roots entirely. Dennis Avery of the Hudson Institute in 1995 published SAVING THE PLANET WITH PESTICIDES AND PLASTIC. Despite such lapses, the Good News industry has matured considerably in recent years, chiefly because a stable of writers at the TIMES (and more recently the WASHINGTON POST and NEWSWEEK) have worked hard to legitimize it and gave it a tony air. So far as we can tell, at the TIMES the intellectual roots of the Good News industry go no deeper than Keith Schneider's 1991 attempt to rehabilitate dioxin. At that time, dioxin was known to be

one of the 2 or 3 most toxic chemicals ever discovered, but Schneider wrote in 1991 that "some experts" (unnamed) "now consider exposure to dioxin no more dangerous than spending a week in the sun." This declaration made Schneider famous within the environmental community, but, more importantly, within the anti-environmental community as well. In 1993, in the TIMES'S news columns, Schneider boldly attacked many of the nation's environmental programs as an unnecessary and shameful waste. Shortly after that, Schneider began appearing as a speaker at industry-organized panels and symposia around the country, lecturing on the need for journalists to give credence to arguments that a damaged ozone layer and global warming weren't real problems. Suddenly it was apparent that Good News anti-environment writing was a rewarding business. Now that Schneider has retired to a more honest, earthy life in Michigan, TIMES writers Jane Brody, Gina Kolata and John Tierney are working overtime to fill his tiny shoes.

In 1995, NEWSWEEK writer Gregg Easterbrook published A MOMENT ON THE EARTH, a 900 page book that contains nearly as many factual and conceptual errors as it has pages, but which appears convincing to naive readers because it is jammed with statistics. Easterbrook's star has now fully risen in the firmament of the petrochemical and nuclear industries, which quote him regularly.

The grandfather of the modern Good News industry is economist Julian Simon. Simon is best known for his creative arguments showing that material resources such as copper and oil are infinite, and that running out of them is nothing to worry about. In his 1981 book, THE ULTIMATE RESOURCE, Simon wrote, "The length of a one-inch line is finite in the sense that it is bounded at both ends. But the line within the endpoints contains an infinite number of points; these points cannot be counted because they have no defined size. Therefore, the number of points in that one-inch segment is not finite. Similarly, the quantity of copper that will ever be available to us is not finite, because there is no method (even in principle) of making an appropriate count of it." (pg. 47) In an interview with William F. Buckley, Jr., in 1982 Simon said, "You see, in the end copper and oil come out of our minds. That's really where they are," he said.[11] In 1995, Simon expanded his vision to include all of the world's problems, which he declared essentially solved when he edited the encyclopedic STATE OF HUMANITY.

By now, a pattern has become apparent in the work of the Good News industry. Consistent themes and techniques have emerged. Simon's STATE OF HUMANITY demonstrates them all.

\*\* Technique 1. Argue in great detail about three or four points where data and reasoning allow you to make a good case, meanwhile don't mention the really big point that undermines your entire thesis.

Example: In Simon's STATE OF HUMANITY (pgs. 576-587), Bernard Cohen argues that nuclear power is an ideal way to generate electricity. He insists that routine radiation releases are nothing to worry about, nuclear power plant accidents are a trivial concern, and radioactive waste is a non-problem. Even if one conceded all these points, Cohen's argument for nuclear power would still not be persuasive because he fails to discuss the Achilles heel of nuclear technology: weapons proliferation. Spreading nuclear power plants around the globe puts nuclear weaponry within reach of countries and groups (and, conceivably, even individuals) who will certainly be tempted to use it for nefarious purposes.[12] Terrorism is with us. Nuclear terrorism cannot be too far over the horizon if we continue to spread civilian nuclear technology across the planet. Therefore, nuclear power is inherently dangerous and anti-social because it creates a whole new class of problems beyond anyone's control. Given that corporations are working aggressively, and successfully, to weaken both national governments AND international controls (NAFTA and GATT are good examples), it is impossible to even CONCEIVE of a global

social system that could control the problem of weapons proliferation from nuclear power plants. The only solution is prevention: stop making nuclear power plants. But Bernard Cohen (and Julian Simon) ignore the proliferation problem entirely because it is fatal to their thesis.

\*\* Technique 2. If the truth is inconvenient, make up new facts to support your argument. In Simon's 1995 tome (pgs. 595-596), Elizabeth Whelan retells the story of Alar, simply re-writing history and making up details to suit her purposes. Alar was a chemical sprayed on apples starting in 1968 to make them stay on the tree longer and ripen, rather than fall off. In use, Alar breaks down to a byproduct called UDMH. The first study showing that UDMH can cause cancer was published in 1973. Further studies published in 1977, 1978, and 1984 confirmed that Alar or UDMH caused tumors in laboratory animals. EPA opened an investigation of Alar's hazards in 1980, but shelved the investigation after a closed meeting with Alar's manufacturer, Uniroyal. In 1984, EPA re-opened its investigation of Alar. In 1985, EPA concluded that both Alar and UDMH were "probable human carcinogens." However, buckling to pressure from Uniroyal, EPA allowed Alar to stay on the market. In 1989, Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) conducted a media campaign against Alar. As a result, apple growers voluntarily stopped using Alar and have continued to grow apples profitably without Alar ever since. Some apple growers lost considerable sums in 1989 because many people stopped buying apples. Failure to consult with growers before launching the media campaign represented a major political blunder by NRDC, but the science behind their campaign was sound.

Whelan: "The EPA's [U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's] experts did not think Alar posed a threat to human health."

Actual fact: Not only did EPA's Carcinogen Assessment Group label Alar a "probable human carcinogen" but the U.S. National Toxicology Program (NTP), representing 10 federal agencies, and the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) concurred in EPA's judgment.[13] Several weeks before NRDC began its media campaign, EPA sent a letter to Alar- using apple growers, saying, "risk estimates based on the best available information at this time raise serious concern about the safety of continued, long-term exposure." EPA's letter estimated that 50 out of every million adults exposed to Alar long-term would get cancer from it, and that the danger to children was even greater. Whelan (and Simon) simply ignore all these facts.

[To be continued.]

--Peter Montague (National Writers Union, UAW Local 1981/AFL-CIO)

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[1] See REHW #258.

[2] See REHW #467.

[3] See REHW #462.

[4] Les Line, "Old Nemesis, DDT, Reaches Remote Midway Albatrosses," NEW YORK TIMES March 12, 1996, pgs. C1, C8.

[5] See REHW #402.

[6] See REHW #410, #411.

[7] See REHW #441.

[8] Jean-Claude Chesnais, "Worldwide Historical Trends in Murder and Suicide," in Julian Simon THE STATE OF HUMANITY

(Oxford, England: Blackwell, 1995), pgs. 91-97.

[9] For example, see REHW #490.

[10] Barbara Crosette, "U.N. Survey Finds World Rich-Poor Gap Widening," NEW YORK TIMES July 15, 1996, reports that in 89 countries, per-capita incomes in 1995 were lower than they had been a decade or more ago, citing THE HUMAN DEVELOPMENT REPORT 1996, Oxford University Press.

[11] Quoted in Herman E. Daly and John B. Cobb, FOR THE COMMON GOOD. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), pg. 190, citing POPULATION AND DEVELOPMENT REVIEW (March, 1982), pgs. 205-218.

[12] See REHW #473.

[13] See Janet S. Hathaway, "Alar: The EPA's Mismanagement of an Agricultural Chemical," in David Pimentel and Hugh Lehman, editors, THE PESTICIDE QUESTION; ENVIRONMENT, ECONOMICS, AND ETHICS (New York: Chapman & Hall, 1993), pgs. 337-343. In 1993, Hathaway was with the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) in Washington, D.C.

Descriptor terms: libertarianism; corporations; new york times; julian simon; elizabeth whelan; bernard cohen; keith schneider; jane brody; john tierney; gina kolata; nrdc; alar; uniroyal; epa; nuclear power; nuclear weapons; nuclear proliferation; terrorism; udmh; carcinogens; pesticides; growth regulators; apples; journalism; inequality; good news industry; dixie lee ray; michael fumento; rush limbaugh; edward teller; margaret maxey; dennis avery; dioxin; gregg easterbrook;