



Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.'s speech at the Sierra Summit, September 10, 2005

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The following is a transcript of a speech by Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. at the Sierra Club's National Convention and Expo on September 10, 2005 in San Francisco. Kennedy received the Sierra Club's William O. Douglas Award on behalf of the Waterkeeper Alliance.

I want to tell you how proud I am to accept the William O. Douglas Award. Two of my most poignant memories as a child involved Justice Douglas.

One of them was when I was 11 years old. I did a 20-mile hike with my little brother David and with Justice Douglas and my father, which was a bird-watching hike on the C & O Canal, which he played a critical role in protecting. We started at four o'clock in the morning and walked all day. Then I did a 10-day pack trip with him. He took my whole family up to Olympic Range and the San Juan Peninsula and went camping for almost two weeks when I was eight years old.

Justice Douglas had a very strong relationship with my family. My grandfather brought Justice Douglas into public life and gave him his first job at the SEC as his deputy and then got Franklin Roosevelt to appoint him to run the SEC and played a critical role in getting him appointed as a justice of the Supreme Court. He said that his relationship to my grandfather was a father-son relationship. When my father was 18 years old Justice Douglas took him for a walking tour of Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, all the Asian Soviet Republics. They were the first Westerners to enter Soviet Asia after the 1917 revolution, and they had an extraordinary trip, and Justice Douglas wrote a book about it.

He was our greatest environmental jurist. He had a very, very close relationship with my family and as an attorney the case that was the most important case was Sierra Club vs. Morton, where he actually said that he believed the trees should have standing to sue [applause]. And there is nobody in American history that I more admire than him. What he understood, which is what I think more and more people are understanding, is that protecting the environment is not about protecting the fishes and the birds for their own sake. But it's about recognizing that nature is the infrastructure of our communities, and if we must meet our obligation as a generation, as a civilization, as a nation, to create communities for our children that provide them with the same opportunities for dignity and enrichment and good health.

As the communities that our parents gave us, we've got to start by protecting our environmental infrastructure, the air we breathe, the water we drink, the public lands, the fisheries, the wildlife, the public areas that connect us to our past, that connect us to our history, that provide context to our communities that are the source ultimately of our values and virtues and character as a people. Over the past 22 years as an environmental advocate, I've been disciplined about being nonpartisan and bipartisan in my approach to these issues. I don't think there are any such things as Republican children or Democratic children.

I think the worst thing that could happen to the environment is it becomes the province of a single political party. It was mentioned that I have a book out that is very critical of this President, and that's true, but it's not a partisan book. I didn't write that book because I'm a Democrat and he's a Republican. If he were a Democrat, I would have written the same book. I'm not objecting to him because of his political party, and I've worked for Republicans, if they're good on the environment, and Democrats on the same level. But you can't talk honestly about the environment in any context today without speaking critically of this President. [applause]

This is the worst environmental president we've had in American history. If you look at NRDC's website, you'll see over 400 major environmental rollbacks that are listed there that have been implemented or proposed by this administration over the past four years as part of a deliberate, concerted effort to eviscerate 30 years of environmental law. It's a stealth attack. The White House has used all kinds of ingenious machinations to try to conceal its radical agenda from the American people, including Orwellian rhetoric. When they want to destroy the forests, they call it the Healthy Forest Act. When they wanted to destroy the air, they called it the Clear Skies Bill.

But most insidiously, they have put polluters in charge of virtually all the agencies that are supposed to protect Americans from pollution. President Bush appointed as head of the Forest Service a timber-industry lobbyist, Mark Rey, probably the most rapacious in history. He put in charge of public lands a mining-industry lobbyist, Steven Griles, who believes that public lands are unconstitutional. He put in charge of the air division of the EPA, Jeffrey Holmstead, a utility lobbyist who has represented nothing but the worst air polluters in America. As head of Superfund, a woman whose last job was teaching corporate polluters how to evade Superfund. The second in command of EPA is a Monsanto lobbyist.

The *New York Times* reported a couple of weeks ago that as second-in-command of CEO, which is in the White House directly advising the president on environmental policy, he put a lobbyist of the American Petroleum Institute, whose only job was to read all of the science from all the different federal agencies to make sure they didn't say anything critical, to excise any critical statements about the oil industry.

He was there to lie to the American public, to protect one of the big corporate contributors to this White House. This is true throughout all of the agencies that are supposed to protect Americans from pollution, the Department of Energy, the

Department of Agriculture, the Department of Commerce which regulates fisheries, the Department of the Interior, EPA of course, and the relevant divisions of the Justice Department. [In] all these agencies and sub secretariats, it is the polluters who are now running these agencies.

There is nothing wrong with having businesspeople in government. It's a good thing, if your objective is to recruit competence and expertise. But in all of these cases, these individuals, as I show in my book, have entered government service not to benefit the public interest but rather to subvert the very laws they're now charged with enforcing in order to enrich the president's corporate pay masters.

They have imposed enormous diminution in quality of life in this country. The problem is most Americans don't know about it. They don't see the connection, and the reason for that is because we have a negligent and indolent media and press in this country which has absolutely let down American democracy. [applause] All this rightwing propaganda, which is planned and organized and [has] dominated this country, the political debate for so many years [is] talking about a liberal media. Well, you know and I know there is no such thing as a liberal media in the United States of America. There is a rightwing media, and if you look where most Americans are now getting their news, that's where they're getting it.

According to Pew, 30 percent of Americans now say that their primary news source is talk radio, which is 90 percent dominated by the Right. 22 percent say their primary news source is Fox News, MSNBC, or CNBC, all dominated by the Right, and another 10 percent, Sinclair Network, which is the most rightwing of all. That's the largest television network in our country. It's run by a former pornographer who requires all 75 of his affiliate television stations, and this is where midwesterners get their news, red state people get their news, all of them have to take a pledge to not report critically about this president or about the war in Iraq.

Then the rest of us are -- the majority of Americans -- are still getting their news from electronic media, and it's the corporate owned media and they have no ideology except for filling their pocketbooks, and many of them are run by big polluters. All of them are run by giant corporations that have all kinds of deals with the government and are not going to offend public officials. This all started in 1988 when Ronald Reagan abolished the Fairness Doctrine. The Fairness Doctrine said that the airwaves belong to the public. They were public-trust assets just like our air and water and that the broadcasters could be licensed to use them but only with the proviso that they use them to promote the public interest and to advance American democracy. They had to inform the public of issues of public import. They had to have the news hours. None of those networks wanted to show the news because it's expensive, they lose money on it. They had to avoid corporate consolidation. They had to have local control and diversity of control. That was the requirement of the law since 1928.

Today as a result of the abolishment of that doctrine, six giant multinational corporations now control all 14,000 radio stations in our country, almost all 6,000 TV stations, 80 percent of our newspapers, all of our billboards, and now most of the Internet information services. So you have six guys who are dictating what Americans have as information and what we see as news. The news departments have become corporate profit centers, they no longer have any obligation to benefit the public interest, their only obligation is to their shareholders, and they fulfill that obligation by increasing viewership. How do you do that? Not by reporting the news that we need to hear to make rational decisions in our democracy, but rather by entertaining us, by appealing to the prurient interests that all of us have in the reptilian core of our brain for sex and celebrity gossip. [applause]

So they give us Laci Peterson and Michael Jackson and Kobe Bryant, and we're today the best-entertained and the least-informed people on the face of the earth, and this is a real threat to American democracy. If you look at the PIPA report, and I've known this for many, many years because I do 40 speeches a year in red states -- Republican audiences -- there is no difference. When people hear this message and what this White House is doing, and the Gingrich Congress, there is no difference between the way Republicans react and Democrats react, except the Republicans come up afterward and say, "Why haven't we ever heard of this before?" I say to them, "It's because you're watching Fox News and listening to Rush." And 80 percent of Republicans are just Democrats who don't know what's going on. [applause]

I don't know if any of you saw the PIPA Report which came out after the last election, but it confirmed everything and, this is kind of a digression, but this whole talk has turned into a digression. The PIPA Report was done by the University of Maryland and it showed that there is no difference. You know all these Saturday morning gas bags, the political pundits you see on TV talking about the moral difference and the ideological difference between red states and blue states. There is no difference. The only difference is there is a huge informational deficit in the red states, and I've known this for a long time by the reaction I get from people. The PIPA Report confirmed that by going and asking people who voted for Bush and who voted for Kerry about their knowledge of current events. They found that the people that voted for Bush had the same ideology, the same basic values; they were just misinformed. 70 percent said that they believed that Saddam Hussein bombed the World Trade Center, 70 percent believed that weapons of mass destruction had been found in Iraq, 64 percent believed that President Bush strongly supported the Kyoto Protocol and strong labor and environmental standards in our foreign treaties, and on and on.

When PIPA went back and asked them what they believed, there was almost no difference between what the Republicans and Democrats believed [about] where America should be headed. The problem was a huge information deficit, because the news media in this country is letting down American democracy and democracy cannot survive long without a vigorous news media.

I'll give you an example. As I said, a gigantic diminution in quality of life that has taken place in this country as a direct result of this president's environmental policy that Americans mainly don't know about. I'm just going to focus on one

industry, which is coal-burning power plants. I have three sons who have asthma. One out of every four black children in America's cities now has asthma. We know that asthma attacks are triggered primarily by bad air, by ozone, and particulates, and we know that the principle source of those materials in our atmosphere is 1,100 coal-burning power plants that are burning coal illegally. It's been illegal for 17 years. President Clinton's administration was prosecuting the worst 75 of those plants, but that's an industry that donated \$48 million to this president during the 2000 cycle and has given \$58 million since.

One of the first things that Bush did when he came into office was to order the Justice Department and EPA to drop all those lawsuits. The top three enforcers at EPA, Sylvia Lowrance, Bruce Buckheit, Eric Schaeffer, all resigned their jobs in protest. These weren't Democrats. These were people who had served through the Reagan and Bush administrations, the earlier Bush administration. A top Justice Department official said that this had never happened in American history before, where a presidential candidate accepts money, contributions from criminals under indictment or targeted for indictment and then orders those indictments and investigations dropped when he achieves office.

Immediately after dropping those lawsuits, the White House went and abolished the New Source Rule, which was the heart and soul, the central provision, of the Clean Air Act. That rule is the one that required those plants to clean up 17 years ago, and it's the fundamental compromise that allowed the passage of the Clean Air Act. If you go to EPA's website today, you will see that that decision alone, that single decision -- this is EPA's website -- kills 18,000 Americans every single year. Six times the number of people that were killed by the World Trade Center attack. This should be on the front page of every newspaper in this country every single day, and yet you're not reading about it in the American press.

A couple of months ago, EPA announced that in 19 states it is now unsafe to eat any freshwater fish in the state [because of] mercury contamination. We know where the mercury is coming from -- those same coal-burning power plants. In 48 states, at least some of the fish are unsafe to eat. In fact, the only two states where all of the fish are still safe to eat are Alaska and Wyoming, where Republican-controlled legislatures have refused to appropriate the money to test the fish. In all of the other states, at least some, most, or all of the fish are unsafe to eat.

We know a lot about mercury we didn't know a few years ago. We know for example, that one out of every six, now one out of every three, American women has so much mercury in her womb that her children are at risk for a grim inventory of diseases: autism, blindness, mental retardation, heart, liver, kidney disease.

I have so much mercury in my body, I had my levels tested recently, and Waterkeeper will test your levels, you can send them a hair sample. Mine are about double what the EPA considers safe. I was told by Dr. David Carpenter, who is the national authority on mercury contamination, that a woman with my levels of mercury in her blood would have children with impairment. I said to him, "You mean she might have" and he said, "No, the science is very certain today. Her children would have some kind of permanent brain damage." He estimated an IQ loss in those kids of about five to seven points.

Well, we have 630,000 children who are born in America every year who have been exposed to dangerous levels of mercury in their mother's wombs. President Clinton, recognizing the gravity of this national health epidemic, reclassified mercury as a hazardous pollutant under the Clean Air Act. That triggered the requirement that all of those companies remove 90 percent of the mercury within three and a half years. It would have cost less than one percent of plant revenue, a great deal for the American people. We have the technology, it exists, we already require it in states like Massachusetts.

But it still meant billions of dollars for that industry, and that's the industry that gave \$100 million to this president, and about 12 weeks ago the White House announced that it was abolishing the Clinton-era rules and substituting instead rules that were written by utility industry lobbyists that will allow those companies to never have to clean up the mercury. The rules say on their face that they have to clean up 70 percent within 15 years, which by itself is outrageous, but in fact, the utility lawyers who wrote those rules wrote so many loopholes into them that the utilities will be able to challenge them probably successfully and certainly forever and they will never have to clean up any additional mercury.

We're living in a science fiction nightmare today in the United States of America, where my children and the children of millions of Americans who have asthmatic kids are bringing children into a world where the air is too poisonous for them to breathe. Where my children and the children of most Americans can now no longer safely engage in the seminal primal activity of American youth, which is to go fishing with their father and mother and to come home and eat the fish -- because some body gave money to a politician.

I live three hours south of the Adirondack Mountains, the oldest protected wilderness on the face of the earth. It's been protected since 1888. We had a right, the American people, to believe that we would be able to enjoy those pristine landscapes, the forests, the beautiful lakes for generations unspoiled. But today, one fifth of the lakes in the Adirondacks are now sterilized from acid rain, which has also destroyed the forest cover on the high peaks of the Appalachians from Georgia all the way up into Northern Quebec, and this president has put the brakes on the statutory requirements that those companies, those coal-burning power plants clean up the acid rain. As a direct result of that decision, this year for the first time since the passage of the Clean Air Act, sulfur dioxide levels went up in our country an astronomical four percent in a single year.

The person who gave me this t-shirt talked about mountaintop mining a few minutes ago. A year ago in May, I flew over the coal fields of Kentucky and West Virginia, and I saw where the coal is coming from. If the American people could see

what I saw, there would be a revolution in this country, because we are cutting down the Appalachian mountains. These historic landscapes where Daniel Boone and Davey Crockett roamed are the source of our values and our culture, and we're cutting them down with these giant machines called drag lines. They're 22 stories high, they cost half a billion dollars, and they practically dispense with the need for human labor and that, of course, is the point.

I remember when my father was fighting strip mining back in the 60s, a conversation I had with him at the dinner table where he said they are not only destroying the environment, but they are permanently impoverishing these communities because there is no way that you can generate an economy from the moonscapes that they leave behind, and they're doing it so that they can break the unions, and he was right. In 1968 when he told me that, there were 114,000 unionized mine workers taking coal out of tunnels in West Virginia.

Today there are only 11,000 miners left in the state, and almost none of them are unionized because the strip industry isn't. Using these giant machines and 25 tons of dynamite that they explode in West Virginia every day, a Hiroshima bomb every week. They are blowing the tops off the mountains, and then they take these giant machines and they scrape the rubble and debris into the adjacent river valley. Well, it's all illegal. You cannot dump rock and debris and rubble into a waterway in the United States of America without a Clean Water Act permit. So Joe Lovitz sued them, and he won in front of a great crusty old West Virginia judge, Judge Charles Hayden, who recently died. Charles Hayden said the same thing I said, he said, "It's all illegal, all of it," and he enjoined all mountaintop mining.

Two days from when we got that decision, Peabody Coal and Massey Coal, who had given millions of dollars to this White House, met in the White House, and the White House rewrote one word of the Clean Water Act. The definition of the word fill that changed 30 years of statutory interpretation to make it legal today as it is in every state in the United States to dump rock, debris, rubble, construction debris, garbage, any kind of solid waste into any waterway in this country without a Clean Water Act permit. All you need is a rubber stamp permit from the Corps of Engineers that, in many cases, you can get through the mail. It has none of the safeguards that the Clean Water Act provides. And this is what we're fighting today. This is not just a battle to save the environment. This is the subversion of our democracy.

The industry and the great big polluters and their indentured servants and our political process have done a great job, and their PR firms and their faulty [biostitutes] and all these think tanks on Capitol Hill, have done a great job over the past couple of decades of marginalizing the environmental movement, of marginalizing us as radicals, as tree huggers, as I heard the other day, pagans who worship trees and sacrifice people. But there is nothing radical about the idea of clean air and clean water for our children. As I said before, we're not protecting the environment for the sake of the fishes and the birds and the trees. We're protecting it for our own sake, because it's the infrastructure of our communities and because it enriches us.

If you talk to these people on Capitol Hill who are promoting these kind of changes and ask them, "Why are you doing this?" What they invariably say is, "Well, the time has come in our nation's history where we have to choose now between economic prosperity on the one hand and environmental protection on the other." And that is a false choice. In 100 percent of the situations, good environmental policy is identical to good economic policy. [applause] If we want to measure our economy, and this is how we ought to be measuring it, based upon its jobs and the dignity of jobs over the generations, over the long term and how it preserves the value of the assets of our communities.

If on the other hand, we want to do what they've been urging us to do on Capitol Hill, which is to treat the planet as if were a business in liquidation, convert our natural resource to cash as quickly as possible, have a few years of pollution-based prosperity, we can generate an instantaneous cash flow and the illusion of a prosperous economy, but our children are going to pay for our joyride. They're going to pay for it with the muted landscapes, poor health, huge cleanup costs that are going to amplify over time and that they will never, ever be able to pay. Environmental injury is deficit spending. It's a way of loading the cost of our generation's prosperity onto the backs of our children. [applause]

One of the things I've done over the past seven, eight years, since 1994, since this whole movement, the anti-environmental movement got a foothold, a beachhead in Congress, is to constantly go around and confront this argument that an investment in our environment is a diminishment of our nation's wealth. It doesn't diminish our wealth. It's an investment in infrastructure, the same as investing in telecommunications and road construction. It's an investment we have to make if we're going to ensure the economic vitality of our generation and the next generation. I want to say this: There is no stronger advocate for free-market capitalism than myself.

I believe that the free market is the most efficient and democratic way to distribute the goods of the land, and that the best thing that could happen to the environment is if we had true free market-capitalism in this country, because the free market promotes efficiency, and efficiency means the elimination of waste, and pollution of course is waste. The free market also would encourage us to properly value our natural resources, and it's the undervaluation of those resources that causes us to use them wastefully. But in a true free-market economy, you can't make yourself rich without making your neighbors rich and without enriching your community.

But what polluters do is they make themselves rich by making everybody else poor. They raise standards of living for themselves by lowering quality of life for everybody else, and they do that by evading the discipline of the free market. You show me a polluter; I'll show you a subsidy. I'll show you a fat cat using political clout to escape the discipline of the free market and force the public to pay his production costs. That's what all pollution is. It's always a subsidy. It's always a guy trying to cheat the free market.

Corporations are externalizing machines. They're constantly figuring out ways to get somebody else to pay their costs of production. That's their nature. One of the best ways to do that, and the most common way for a polluter, is through pollution. When those coal-burning power plants put mercury into the atmosphere that comes down from the Ohio Valley and it comes down on my state New York, I buy a fishing license for \$30 every year, but I can't go fishing and eat the fish anymore because they stole the fish from me. They liquidated a public asset, my asset, they liquidated a public asset, my asset. The rule is the commons are owned by all of us. They're not owned by the governor or the legislator or the coal companies and the utility. Everybody has a right to use them.

Nobody has a right to abuse them. Nobody has a right to use them in a way that will diminish or injure their use and enjoyment by others. But they've stolen that entire resource from the people of New York State. When they put the acid rain in the air, it destroys our forest, and it destroys the lakes that we use for recreation or outfitting or tourism or wealth generation. When they put the mercury in the air, the mercury poisons our children's brains, and that imposes a cost on us. The ozone in particular has caused a million asthma attacks a year, kills 18,000 people, hundreds of thousands of lost work days. All of those impacts impose costs on the rest of us that should in a true free-market economy be reflected in the price of that company's product when it makes it to the marketplace.

What those companies and all polluters do is use political clout to escape the discipline in the free market and force the public to pay their costs. All of the federal environmental laws, every one of the 28 major environmental laws, all of them were designed to restore free-market capitalism in America by forcing actors in the marketplace to pay the true cost of bringing their product to market. What we do with the Riverkeepers -- we have 147 licensed Riverkeepers now and each one has a patrol boat, each one is a full-time, paid Riverkeeper -- each one agrees to sue polluters.

That's what we do, and we don't even consider ourselves environmentalists anymore. We're free marketers. We go out into the marketplace, we catch the cheaters, the polluters, and we say to them, "We're going to force you to internalize your costs the same way that you internalize your profits, because as long as somebody is cheating the free market, none of us get the advantages of the efficiency and the democracy and the prosperity that the free market otherwise promises our country. What we have to understand as a nation is that there is a huge difference between free-market capitalism, which democratizes a country, which makes us more prosperous and efficient, and the kind of corporate-crony capitalism which has been embraced by this White House, which is as antithetical to democracy, to prosperity, and efficiency in America as it is in Nigeria. [applause]

There is nothing wrong with corporations. Corporations are a good thing. They encourage us to take risks. They maximize wealth. They create jobs. I own a corporation. They're a great thing, but they should not be running our government. The reason for that is they don't have the same aspirations for America that you and I do. A corporation does not want democracy. It does not want free markets, it wants profits, and the best way for it to get profits is to use our campaign-finance system -- which is just a system of legalized bribery -- to get their stakes, their hooks into a public official and then use that public official to dismantle the marketplace to give them a competitive advantage and then to privatize the commons, to steal the commonwealth, to liquidate public assets for cash, to plunder, to steal from the rest of us.

And that doesn't mean corporations are a bad thing. It just means they're amoral, and we have to recognize that and not let them into the political process. Let them do their thing, but they should not be participating in our political process, because a corporation cannot do something genuinely philanthropic. It's against the law in this country, because their shareholders can sue them for wasting corporate resources. They cannot legally do anything that will not increase their profit margins and that's the way the law works, and we have to recognize that and understand that they are toxic for the political process, and they have to be fenced off and kept out of the political process. This is why throughout our history our most visionary political leaders -- Republican and Democrat -- have been warning the American public against domination by corporate power.

This White House has done a great job of persuading a gullible press and the American public that the big threat to American democracy is big government. Well, yeah, big government is a threat ultimately, but it is dwarfed by the threat of excessive corporate power and the corrosive impact that has on our democracy. And you know, as I said, you look at all the great political leaders in this country and the central theme is that we have to be cautious about, we have to avoid, the domination of our government by corporate power.

Teddy Roosevelt, a Republican, said that America would never be destroyed by a foreign power but he warned that our political institutions, our democratic institutions would be subverted by malefactors of great wealth who would erode them from within. Dwight Eisenhower, another Republican, in his most famous speech warned America against domination by the military industrial complex.

Abraham Lincoln, the greatest Republican in our history, said during the height of the Civil War "I have the South in front of me and I have the bankers behind me. And for my country, I fear the bankers more." Franklin Roosevelt said during World War II that the domination of government by corporate power is "the essence of fascism" and Benito Mussolini -- who had an insider's view of that process -- said the same thing. Essentially, he complained that fascism should not be called fascism. It should be called corporatism because it was the merger of state and corporate power. And what we have to understand as Americans is that the domination of business by government is called communism. The domination of government by business is called fascism. And our job is to walk that narrow trail in between, which is free-market capitalism and democracy. And keep big government at bay with our right hand and corporate power at bay with our left.

In order to do that, we need an informed public and an activist public. And we need a vigorous and an independent press that is willing to speak truth to power. And we no longer have that in the United States of America. And that's something

that puts all the values we care about in jeopardy, because you cannot have a clean environment if you do not have a functioning democracy. They are intertwined, they go together. There is a direct correlation around the planet between the level of tyranny and the level of environmental destruction. I could talk about that all day, but you cannot-- the only way you can protect the environment is through a true, locally based democracy.

You can protect it for a short term under a tyranny, where there is some kind of beneficent dictator but, over the long term, the only way we can protect the environment is by ensuring our democracy. That has got to be the number-one issue for all of us: to try to restore American democracy, because without that we lose all of the other things that we value.

I'll say one last thing, which is the issue I started off with, which is that we're not protecting the environment. What Justice Douglas understood. We're not protecting the environment for the sake of the fishes and the birds. We're protecting it for our own sake, because we recognize that nature enriches us. It enriches us economically, yes, the base of our economy. And we ignore that at our peril -- the economy is a wholly owned subsidiary of the environment. But it also enriches us aesthetically and recreationally and culturally and historically and spiritually. Human beings have other appetites besides money, and if we don't feed them we're not going to grow up. We're not going to become the kind of beings our Creator intended us to become.

When we destroy nature, we diminish ourselves. We impoverish our children. We're not protecting those ancient forests in the Pacific Northwest, as Rush Limbaugh loves to say, for the sake of a spotted owl. We're preserving those forests because we believe that the trees have more value to humanity standing than they would have if we cut them down. I'm not fighting for the Hudson River for the sake of the shad or the sturgeon or the striped bass, but because I believe my life will be richer, and my children and my community will be richer, if we live in a world where there are shad and sturgeon and striped bass in the Hudson. And where my children can see the traditional gear, commercial fishermen on the Hudson, that I have spent 22 years fighting for their livelihoods, their rights, their culture, and their values. I want my kids to be able to see them out in their tiny boats using the same fishing methods that they learned, that their great-grandparents learned, from the Algonquin Indians, who taught them to the original settlers of New Amsterdam. I want them to be able to see them with their ash poles and gill nets and be able to touch them when they come to shore to shore out the tides, to repair their nets. And in doing that, connect themselves to 350 years of New York State history. And understand that they're part of something larger than themselves. They're part of a continuum. They're part of a community.

I don't want my children to grow up in a world where there are no commercial fishermen on the Hudson, where it's all Gorton's Seafood and Unilever and 400-ton factory trawlers 100 miles offshore strip-mining the ocean with no interface with humanity. And where there are no family farmers left in America. Where it's all Smithfield and Cargill and Premium Standard farms raising animals in factories and treating their stock and their neighbors and their workers with unspeakable cruelty. And where we've lost touch with the seasons and the tides and the things that connect us to the 10,000 generations of human beings that were here before there were laptops. And that connect us ultimately to God.

I don't believe that nature is God or that we ought to be worshipping it as God, but I do believe that it's the way that God communicates to us most forcefully. God talks to human beings through many vectors. Through each other, through organized religions, through wise people, and through the great books of those religions. Through art and literature and music and poetry. But nowhere with such force and clarity and detail and texture and grace and joy as through creation.

We don't know Michelangelo by reading his biography. We know him by looking at the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. And we know our creator best by immersing ourselves in creation. And particularly wilderness, which is the undiluted work of the Creator. [applause] And you know if you look at every one of the great religious traditions throughout the history of mankind, the central epiphany always occurs in the wilderness. Buddha had to go to the wilderness to experience self realization and nirvana. Mohammad had to go to the wilderness. Moses had to go to the wilderness of Mt. Sinai for 40 days alone to get the Commandments. The Jews had to spend 40 years wandering the wilderness to purge themselves of 400 years of slavery in Egypt. Christ had to go into the wilderness for 40 days to discover his divinity for the first time.

His mentor was John the Baptist, a man who lived in the Jordan valley dressed in the skins of wild beasts and ate locust and the honey of wild bees, and all of Christ's parables are taken from nature. I am the vine; you are the branches. The mustard seed, the little swallows, the scattering of seeds on the fallow ground, the lilies of the field. He called himself a fisherman, a farmer, a vineyard keeper, a shepherd. The reason he did that was that's how he stayed in touch with the people. It's the same reason all the Talmudic prophets, the Koranic prophets, the Old Testament prophets, the New Testament prophets. Even the pagan prophets like Aesop, they did the same thing. They used parables and allegories and fables drawn from nature to teach us the wisdom of God.

And all of the Old Testament prophets, all the Talmudic prophets, all the New Testament prophets came out of the wilderness. Every one of them, and they were all shepherds. That daily connection to nature gave them a special access to the wisdom of the Almighty. They used these parables, and the reason Christ did that was that's how he stayed in touch with the people. He was saying things that were revolutionary like all the prophets. He was contradicting everything that the common people had heard from the literate sophisticated people of their day, and they would have dismissed him as a quack, but they were able to confirm the wisdom of his parables through their own observations of the fishes and the birds. And they were able to say, he's not telling us something new; he's simply illuminating something very, very old. Messages that were written into creation at the beginning of time by the Creator. We haven't been able to discern or decipher them until the prophets came along and immersed themselves in wilderness and learned its language and then come back into the cities to tell us about the wisdom of God.

You know, all of our values in this country are the same thing. This is where our values come from, from wilderness and from nature and from the beginning of our national history. People from Sierra Club have to understand this and articulate it. Our greatest spiritual leaders, moral leaders, and philosophers were telling the American people "You don't have to be ashamed because you don't have the 1,500 years of culture that they have in Europe, because you have this relationship with the land and particularly the wilderness. That's going to be the source of your values and virtues and character. If you look at every valid piece of classic American literature the central unifying theme is that nature is the critical defining element of American culture, whether it's Emerson, Thoreau, Melville and Hawthorne, Mark Twain, Jack London, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Hemmingway. All of them.

Let me just finish this thought. The first great writer we produced in this country, an international bestseller, was James Fenimore Cooper. He wrote *The Leather Stocking Tales*, *The Last of the Mohicans*, *The Pathfinder*, *The Deerslayer* about this character Natie Bumppo, who was a creature of the American wilderness. He had all the virtues that the European romantics associated with the American woodland; he was a crack shot, he was self reliant, he had fortitude and integrity, and he was a gentleman and honest.

The reason they made him a bestseller in Europe was not because it was great writing; it wasn't. It was atrocious. But because they believed that there really was a new being being created out of the American forest. We made him a bestseller in our country because we believe that about ourselves.

A generation after that, you had Emerson and Thoreau come along, who have kicked off the traces of the European heritage, and they embrace nature as a spiritual parable of all Americans. They say if you're an American and you want to hear the voice of God, you have to go into the forest and listen to the songs of the birds and the rustle of the leaves. And if you want to see the American soul you have to look at the mirror of Walden Pond. Our poets Whitman, Frost, Emily Dickinson, Robert Service. Our artists, we have two schools, defining schools of art in this country: the western school -- Remington and Russell -- and the Hudson River School -- Bierstadt, Thomas Cole, Frederic Church, Samuel F. B. Morse, etc. And all of them painted these stark, indomitable portraits. Storm King Mountain, El Capitan, the Sierra Nevada, Yosemite, the Grand Canyon. Any evidence of humanity is in ruins.

And there are other national schools of art that painted nature. The British have their still lifes, and the French and Italians and their garden scenes, etc. But that's nature tamed. The American artists chose to paint nature in its wildest state because they saw that as the way to capture the American soul.

As I said this is where our values come from. These people on Capitol Hill look out at our green landscapes, and they see nothing but cash for their corporate contributors, quick cash. I saw a couple of days ago Donald Rumsfeld on TV, and I saw him and I saw how articulate and eloquent he was. I know Donald Rumsfeld, he lives next to my house in Washington. When I got out of prison in Puerto Rico a couple of years ago, he actually was very kind to me. I met him at lunch and dinner a couple of times at my mom's house. He's a very charming guy. Affable, if you're not in Abu Ghraib.

But I saw him on TV in his suit, and he looked so good, and he's so eloquent and charming and I say, here's a man who's had the best of our country. He's gone to our churches, had the best schools, the education, the contacts, the money everything. And then I see these letters that he wrote back and forth with Alberto Gonzales, his emails debating how much it was permissible for Americans to torture people. And I say to myself, how did these people miss the whole point of America? How do they not know that torture is not an American family value?

And I say that this is an administration that represents itself as the White House of values, but every value that they claim to represent is just a hollow facade, that marks the one value that they really consider worth fighting for, which is corporate profit-taking. They say that they like free markets, but they despise free-market capitalism.

What they like, if you look at their feet rather than their clever, clever mouths, what they really like is corporate welfare and capitalism for the poor, but socialism for the rich. They say that they like private property, but they don't like private property except when it's the right of a polluter to use his private property to destroy his neighbor's property and to destroy the public property.

And they say that they like law and order but they are the first ones to let the corporate lawbreakers off the hook. And they say that they like local control and states' rights, but they only like those things when it means sweeping away the barriers to corporate profit-taking at the local level. And you and the Sierra Club know, and I can give you hundreds of examples. They're suing my cousin, Arnold Schwarzenegger. Detroit is suing him for this -- I know that's not going to get a lot of applause in this room.

But you know -- what do you sign into law? The best automobile-emissions bill that was passed by the Democratic legislature, and now Detroit is saying they're going to sue them just because they recognize that the emissions here were not protecting the health of the people of their state. So they want ones that will. Now Detroit is saying it's going to sue them, and the Federal government is now making noises that it's going to come into that suit on the side of Detroit. That's not local control.

When I'm fighting these hog farms down in North Carolina, and the first people they hear from when local counties try to pass a zoning ordinance to zone out the big hog sheds. The first person they hear from is Ted Olson up in the federal government saying that's an interference with federal commerce, and we're going to come down on you like a hammer.

The same thing in West Virginia, when the localities try to zone out Massey Coal and Peabody from cutting down their mountain, the federal government comes down and crushes them. So they don't like local control.

And you know all of these things they claim to love. They claim to love Christianity but they have violated every one of the manifold mandates of the Christian faith. [applause] That we care for the environment. We treat the earth respectfully and we treat our future generations with respect and all of these things, the values go along with the land. We all know that. I'll close with a proverb from the Lakota people that all of you have heard, that's been expropriated by the environmental movement to a large extent, where they said we didn't inherit this planet from our ancestors; we borrowed it from our children.

I would add to that, if we don't return to our children something that is roughly the equivalent of what they receive, not just in the quality of the environment but in the integrity of the values that have been handed down through generations of Americans. You know, visionary Republican and Democratic leadership only to hit these destructive people who are now running our country. The worst administration that we've had in American history and the greatest threat now to our country and our democracy. And all the values that cherish about America. And you know the way we're viewed and the rest of the world we need to return those things.

I look at this White House and I ask myself --and this may be unfair -- but I ask myself a lot of times, how did they get so many draft dodgers in one place? You know, the president, Dick Cheney five deferments; John Ashcroft, six deferments. Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Perle, Tom DeLay, all of their buddies, Dennis Hastert, Rush Limbaugh. There are a lot of people who dodged the draft during the Vietnam War, and I know a lot of them. Most of them did it because they had moral qualms about that war.

But not these people. These people loved the war; they just wanted somebody else to fight it. And it occurs to me that the reason for that is that these are people who don't understand the values that make America worth fighting for. But America is worth fighting for, and it's worth dying for. Those of us who know that it's worth fighting for have to take it back now from those who don't. Thank you very much.