

APOLLO NOW

'THE NATION'

January 2nd, 2006

By William Greider

The tragedy of New Orleans provides Americans with an ominous metaphor for understanding our future. We did not fix the levees, though we were warned. That is a simple way of expressing the national predicament in this new century. As a society, we are engulfed by similar vulnerabilities — forms of ecological and economic deterioration that are profoundly more threatening than an occasional hurricane. And we have been told. Yet we are not “fixing the levees.” Preoccupied with current desires and discontents, this very wealthy nation has lost sight of its future.

The levee metaphor, vividly dramatized by the Gulf Coast disaster, has the potential to move the country in a new direction — to inspire a generational shift in thinking that could launch a new era of fundamental reforms. But the imperative to act requires nothing less than a reordering of American life — a result that seems most unlikely. Given the corrupted condition of representative democracy, politicians are seldom punished for keeping the hard truth from voters. The mass culture marinates American citizens in false triumphalism.

Events, nevertheless, have delivered a teachable moment — an opportunity to reframe and reargue many long-neglected matters. The wheels are coming off the right-wing bus. The President of Oil and War is no longer much believed. The vast suffering and physical destruction in New Orleans have made all too visible what ecologists and social critics have been trying to explain for years. Their warnings once seemed too abstract or remote to require public action. New Orleans announced, for those who will listen, that the future is now.

Oceans are warming, the Arctic ice cap is shrinking. The deep topsoil of Iowa is draining into the Mississippi River, leaving behind chemical swamps. Good drinking water, once freely available to all, has become a scarce commodity for commercial exploitation. Much of the population, dispersed farther and farther from urban centers, is pole-axed by soaring gasoline prices. Meanwhile, the gorgeous abundance of consumer goods continues to poison earth, air and water. This year, Americans will throw away something like 100 million cell phones, pagers, pocket PCs and portable music players, interring their toxic contents in the “dump” called nature.

Should we blame the farmers? The oil and chemical companies? The teenagers who love their gadgets? The politics of blame-and-shame was brilliantly perfected thirty years ago by the environmental movement but gradually lost its effectiveness, partly because it framed the contest as a righteous struggle between good guys and bad guys — virtuous citizens versus dirty industrial polluters (and often their workers). It felt good to identify the culprits, but moral indignation eventually loses its power to enforce. Plus, the enormity of what we face is too all-encompassing. Not many of us can truly claim innocence.

The predicament is fundamental and universal: It is the collision between industrial society and nature. Politicians and environmental activists can be forgiven for not wishing to take on the “American way of life,” but essentially that is what’s required. Eliminating this collision, before it destroys the very basis of modern prosperity and life itself, calls for nothing less than the transformation of the American industrial system and mass-consumption economy. Among other things, it means reinventing the processes of production and redesigning virtually every product. It means taking responsibility for what we make and consume — recovering what is now discarded in landfills, dumped in rivers or vaporized in air and atmosphere. It means remanufacturing components and materials into new products.

Daunting and radical as that all might sound, the good news is that these great changes are technologically feasible. The

transformation will take decades, even generations, to complete, but industrial experts affirm that it is doable. Starting promptly on this historic commitment will avoid (or at least mitigate) the larger catastrophes ahead.

The real obstacle is political, not scientific, because reform depends on the choices society makes (or fails to make). Who is the “we” responsible for these choices? One way or another, it is all of us. Virtually every institution of capitalism — manufacturers and merchants and, above all, the financiers who discipline them — will be compelled to alter routine functions in deep ways. But so will consumers and workers. As with other aspects of American life, the burden will not fall evenly on every citizen. Sacrifices and disruptions are typically maldistributed downward on the ladder of income and status. The goals of environmentalism often sound preciously elitist because the most severe costs usually fall on the working class or poor, people with limited margins. Not surprisingly, they sometimes resist.

It will be essential to recognize that inequality is an ecological issue. If this sweeping transformation proceeds, the impact on work, wages and living standards has to be a central component of the reform agenda — not just necessary for political support but also to insure that a healthier society emerges from the deep changes. In fact, the logical promise of industrial transformation is that it will lead to better lives for all — improved circumstances and health, greater economic security and brighter prospects for the future. Every ordinary American wants that, and every ordinary American is entitled to expect it.

Making it happen requires a new progressive perspective that fuses the ecological imperative with economic outcomes. We need a synthesis that replaces fear with hope — not as rhetoric but bolstered with proof that this goal is attainable for all. Inventive minds are already working on it.

The [Apollo Alliance](#) offers one positive model for reshaping the future. It started from the premise that American politics will not undertake a serious agenda on global warming and alternative energy sources until labor groups and environmentalists come together on the objective. “When [Apollo](#) started, political progress on energy was mired in the jobs-versus-environment debate,” says Jeff Rickert, [Apollo’s](#) acting executive director. “In order to break that deadlock, we proposed a new way of thinking — a plan that removed the wedge between environmentalists and labor unions by focusing on the job-creating aspects of a clean-energy investment policy.”

Packaged and tested with rigorous economic analysis, the [Apollo](#) proposal calls for a ten-year, \$300 billion investment agenda — federal financing to foster development of alternative fuels, innovative eco firms and energy-conserving reforms in housing, green building codes, transportation and other realms. These investments, analysts estimate, would generate 3.3 million new jobs. One strategist noted a resemblance to John F. Kennedy’s moon-landing initiative in the 1960s — an endeavor that also created high-wage skilled jobs and new tech sectors. Overcoming the ecological threat could become this generation’s Apollo project. Hence the name.

The public capital would be invested — some directly, some as subsidy incentives — in new fuels (solar, hydrogen, biomass, wind); in high-efficiency vehicles as a transition to post-petroleum transportation; in rebuilding urban infrastructure for “smart growth”; in rapid transit and regional rail networks like the high-speed Maglev trains; and in a modernized electrical system that reduces carbon emissions and increases efficient transmission. These and other ventures, [Apollo](#) analysts estimate, would generate \$1.4 trillion in GDP gain for the United States, and nearly \$1 trillion more in personal incomes. The investments would be accompanied by stronger regulatory protections to make sure the subsidies produce real results.

As an organizing device, the [Apollo](#) concept has worked brilliantly. Some twenty-one labor unions and the AFL-CIO, nineteen environmental organizations and fifty-eight business leaders have signed on, along with civil rights and equal-justice groups that recognize that retrofitting buildings and other projects can bring good jobs back to inner cities. Nine “[Apollo](#) governors” are pushing variations on the concept as state legislation. In Pennsylvania, a coal state, Governor Ed Rendell passed an Advanced Energy Portfolio Standard stating that 18 percent of retail electricity must come from alternative fuel sources. A new wind-power factory is set to open that will bring 1,000 jobs, with more jobs to come. Virtually every Democratic presidential candidate in 2004 endorsed [Apollo](#). Democratic leaders in Congress recently

embraced the plan and say they will run on the theme in 2006.

Washington isn't going to enact such a bold program while oil-based Republicans remain in power. But the Apollo agenda is generating forward momentum on state and local levels, field-testing the politics of fusion as blue-green partners argue out their differences. In California a plan for homeowner tax breaks to finance a "million solar roofs" temporarily stalled (and rightly so) on labor's demand for prevailing wage rates for the workers who will do the installation. When Washington State was enacting its green building code, the paper industry initially persuaded machinists and carpenters to oppose the higher standards for timbering as a threat to local jobs. But the unions reversed themselves when the alliance demonstrated that the industry's job claims were false. (In fact, the legislation gives preference to regionally produced lumber.)

"We have a lot of examples where we have gotten rid of the wedge, a few cases where we failed," Rickert said. "It's still the beginning, but I think we've gotten past the toughest patch." In one notable example, the United Mine Workers Union, whose coal miners are the most directly threatened by climate-change reform, has officially acknowledged that global warming must be addressed. That might seem like a small step, but it puts the UMW out in front of ExxonMobil.

Meanwhile, a new coalition of Christian conservatives — Set America Free — has launched its own campaign to reduce US oil consumption with reform ideas that parallel the Apollo Alliance. Unfortunately, both left and right efforts are embracing the utterly illusory, soothing-sounding goal of "energy independence" within the next decade or two. But the two efforts demonstrate the potential for new alliances that leap across the usual barriers of party and ideology.

While our government remains indifferent, the European Union has launched a coherent, long-term strategy for industrial transformation — nothing less. The EU is forcing industry, sector by sector, to undertake the redesign of products, production processes and packaging. These industries have resisted the specific costs, of course, but they do not argue with the goal or complain about "bad science."

Starting next year, European auto manufacturers will be required to "take back" their old vehicles and recover 85 percent of the content, reformulating the materials for use in new cars or other products. Consumer electronics, computers and cell phones are next in line. This program leaps far beyond the recycling of old newspapers or bottles familiar to American consumers, because the Europeans put the ecological responsibility directly on the manufacturers, not individual consumers. Forced to recover value from their discarded consumer goods, companies will have a strong incentive to design the toxics out of their products and to make them easier to disassemble and remanufacture.

Ford and General Motors will have to comply with the EU rules, since they make cars in Europe. But imagine how Detroit would react if Congress or a future President dared to propose a similar "take back" law for the United States. The usual naysayers — the Business Roundtable and Chamber of Commerce — would unleash their dogs (pet scientists and economists) to explain why this is impossible. Ford and GM would wail about massive job losses. The United Auto Workers would likely side with the companies, as it generally has in the past, when reformers demanded greater fuel efficiency and auto safety, or less tailpipe pollution. (No matter that the US auto industry's resistance to change is a major reason it continues to lose customers.)

Washington regulators decided long ago, with heavy-handed advice from corporate lawyers and lobbyists, that supposedly trivial amounts of toxic pollution should be tolerated. But science marches toward the opposite conclusion. The prevalence of toxic industrial chemicals in the environment, even at extremely low levels of exposure, is being implicated in rising cancer rates and also in disabilities and deformities in children. That shouldn't surprise us. The chemicals are, after all, poisonous. But corporate-driven propaganda has often overwhelmed science in the United States.

Even so, the struggle for industrial transformation advances here on many fronts. Activist campaigns are encouraging American companies and sectors to adopt higher ecological standards in their products and purchasing, covering everything from wood to hamburgers. Other efforts are developing enterprises that embrace the new values.

The concept of take-back laws is slowly gaining traction at the state level for consumer electronics and packaging,

though not yet for cars. Local governments, which bear the financial burden of waste disposal, are beginning to think seriously about shifting some of the cost to manufacturers, through fees or taxes on sales — giving companies a strong reason to produce less waste in the first place. Xerox and other industry leaders are developing take-back and reuse programs, anticipating the legal responsibility that will someday be the standard. The ultimate goal is producing waste-free products.

California — first in the nation as usual — has enacted a take-back law for computer monitors and television sets; the customer pays a fee of about \$10 up front, financing the eventual recycling and recovery costs when these items are discarded. Maine's new law on recycling electronics is much closer to the European approach, however, because it compels the manufacturers to internalize these costs on their balance sheets. The companies, not the consumers, will either pay pound-for-pound for recycling their worn-out products or do the work themselves. Either way, the cost pressure is on them to reduce waste and harm — a concept known as “extended producer responsibility.”

A potential breakthrough exists in a consortium of legislators from ten Northeastern states. The consortium members are developing a model state law based on the Maine example. If they get it right, we could see rapid political advances at the state level. (Bush's Environmental Protection Agency, meanwhile, studied the matter for four years — and then punted.)

When industrial transformation does finally come to our shores, Americans will discover a wonderful wrinkle — it creates jobs, many millions of them. The consuming public will be more enthusiastic about serious reform once folks recognize that industrial reordering delivers good jobs with good wages for Americans — not more bucket-shop employment that exploits workers.

If the United States takes the high road, every level of our society can benefit from the economics of doing what we need to do anyway. The metaphor of the New Orleans levees poses the question: Will we decide to reshape the future in positive terms, or sit back and let the bad stuff happen to us?