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Robert Costanza
Portland State University

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When Scoundrels Rule

The Last Refuge: Patriotism, Politics, and the Environment in an Age of Terror. David W. Orr. Island Press, Washington, DC, 2004. 172 pp. \$20.00 (ISBN 1559635282 cloth).

Like most scientists, I like to think of myself as politically neutral. Most natural and social scientists try (even if they do not always succeed) to impose on themselves and their colleagues a strict separation of their science from both religion and partisan politics. Partisan politics is distinct from policy, which for the purposes of this discussion has to do with the elaboration of the implications of scientific findings for important policy questions. Scientists abhor (as well they should) faith-based or politically driven conclusions to important questions of science and policy. But what happens when these rules of conduct are disrespected, as they have been in the last four years? What happens when religious beliefs and political power are allowed to influence science and policy? As a recent Union of Concerned Scientists report has documented (UCS 2004), attempts to influence and distort science for political purposes have reached unprecedented levels.

Oberlin environmental scientist David Orr's book, *The Last Refuge: Patriotism, Politics, and the Environment in an Age of Terror*, puts these issues into perspective. He points out that politics in America have never been as mean and bitter as they are today, and that it has all come at the worst possible time. Just when we need to be taking farsighted steps to deal collectively with climate change, the loss of biodiversity, and a host of other environmental and social problems, American politics have become worse than impotent in addressing these issues. *The Last Refuge* documents this wrong turn in American politics and its implications for the environment.

The book is a series of essays, many first published in the journal *Conservation Biology*, supplemented with some new material. Together they tell the compelling and disturbing story of what is going wrong with politics in America today. The opening chapter documents a meeting Orr and several other top environmental thinkers were invited to attend with high-ranking representatives of the Bush administration early in that administration's first term. The Orr group prepared a thoughtful and balanced paper to lay out a broad, scientific, bipartisan consensus on these issues. That document (reprinted as an appendix to the book) contains analysis and policy recommendations that are compatible with wise stewardship of the nation's resources. They are the extensions of policies espoused by every Republican and Democratic administration since Teddy Roosevelt. The group never met with the promised high-ranking administration officials (only aides spoke with them), and their analysis and recommendations were completely ignored. In fact, the administration's environmental policies are, for the most part, the exact opposite of the group's recommendations.

Orr's book goes on to document a string of abuses of science, the environment, and the democratic process by the current administration and the Republican Congress. He points out that the current powers that be are not "conservative" by any stretch of the real meaning of that word. They are both anticonservative and antiliberal, and they endanger the health and well-being of all of us, including their intended audience—the wealthiest Americans. In a chapter titled "Rewriting the Ten Commandments," Orr discusses 10 political rules that seem, unfortunately, to govern current American politics. A glance at a few of these rules serves to give their flavor. Rule #1: "Appeal always to people's resentments and fears, not to their rationality, compassion, or farsightedness." Rule #3:

"Demonize your opponents and promise to restore honor and 'character,' implying that the other side has neither." Rule #5: "Applaud scientific evidence when it supports corporate profits, oppose it when it has to do with human health, biotic impoverishment, and climate change." Rule #6: "Politicize everything, particularly the courts."

The title of Orr's book, *The Last Refuge*, is taken from a famous quote by Samuel Johnson: "Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel." If scoundrels now rule, then the democratic and truly patriotic solution to the problem is to throw them out. It is interesting to note that the original Greek definition of the word *idiot* is "politically uninvolved person" (Prugh et al. 2000). As scientists and citizens, we have to stop being idiots and encourage our friends and colleagues to do likewise, if we hope to replace the scoundrels with the more reasonable, farsighted, and enlightened leaders we so desperately need at this critical juncture to achieve a sustainable and desirable future. Orr presents 10 new commandments for the conduct of public business, which are so important to achieving this goal that they bear repeating here:

1. Appeal to voters' rationality, compassion, and vision.
2. Instruct, clarify, elevate the political dialogue.
3. Honor your adversaries—politics ought not to be a war, but a conversation.
4. Find common ground.
5. Never corrupt, politicize, or ignore scientific evidence.
6. Maintain the separation of executive, legislative, and judicial power.

7. Hold your own side to rigorous standards of fairness and decency.
8. Maintain the separation of religion and state.
9. Insist on the same kind of separation between money and politics.
10. Be willing to risk losing elections for the right reasons.

Although implementing these new rules of conduct may seem naively idealistic in the aftermath of the last presidential election, they are in fact the only hope we have of surmounting the significant and growing challenges we now face. How can we do it? Orr summarizes: "In practical terms this will mean not merely reforming the way we finance elections, but throwing private money out of the election process altogether. It will mean reclaiming words like 'patriot-

ism' that have been appropriated by zealots. And it will mean rebuilding civic competence and the public capacity to solve public problems." To the skeptics, Orr replies, "We've risen to the challenges before and we must do it again." The first time Americans rose to the challenge was at the founding of the American democracy. It is interesting to note that the American Revolution was fought not against the British crown per se, but more against British corporate interests (the British East India Company) that were attempting to monopolize the tea trade with the colonies (Nace 2003). The founding fathers must be rolling over in their graves to see the corporate plutocracy we have become. We must rise to the challenge again if we hope to recover the vision of democracy on which America was founded, one that embodies Orr's new 10 commandments for the conduct of public business. Ultimately, we need to redirect the political process away from the means—the mechanics of voting, funding, and winning elections—and to-

ward what democracy is really about: envisioning shared goals and building effective institutions to achieve them. Fortunately, work is under way in many places to create this shared vision of a sustainable and desirable America. The future of American democracy depends on the success of these efforts.

ROBERT COSTANZA

*Gund Institute for Ecological Economics
Rubenstein School of
Environment and Natural Resources
University of Vermont
Burlington, VT 05405*

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