

# A Pioneer's Reflections

Book Review by John F. Rohe

Senator Gaylord Nelson of Wisconsin was inflamed by flammables on the Cuyahoga River. He was outraged by choked landfills, river front waste disposal, marauding sludge, vanishing wetlands, toxic smog, congested federal lands, burgeoning solid waste streams, permeating pesticides, and exploding populations. Armed with a pen and ennobled by a spirit of unyielding patriotism, Sen. Nelson laid the framework for the first Earth Day on April 22, 1970. Through a seven year effort, he lavishly delivered these issues to the conscience of the country and beyond.

In 201 concise pages, Senator Nelson explains the history of mobilizing twenty million demonstrators on the first Earth Day as he sheds light on the drama that continues to unfold.

Senator Nelson explains the ill-fated Conservation Tour planned for President John F. Kennedy on September 24, 1963. The well-conceived, but poorly-timed, effort was overshadowed by the Senate's vote on ratification of a Nuclear Test Ban Treaty coincidentally scheduled for the same day.

As the ill-timed Conservation Tour fizzled, Senator Nelson continued pressing for an event to cultivate an environmental spirit. His letter of 1963, addressed to President Kennedy, set the stage. The letter is reproduced in Appendix I of the book. His eventual presentation to the 91<sup>st</sup> Congress on January 19, 1970 is found in Appendix II.

The book reflects upon the successes of Earth Day, including landmark legislation of the 1970s, such as the Environmental Protection Act, the Endangered Species Act, the Clean Water Act, Coastal Zone Management Act, Endangered American Wilderness Act, and many others. Senator Nelson's book also reflects on the continuing failings of Earth Day as the ongoing

environmental crises continues to be exacerbated by population pressures.

On the heels of Paul Ehrlich's *Population Bomb* in 1968, the stage was set for population to be all the rage in 1970. Between the mid-1960s and the mid-1970s, U.S. fertility rates plummeted from 3.5 children per women to 1.7. Surely this cannot all be attributed to the singlehanded efforts of Senator Nelson, but his influence was incontestably one of the prime moving forces.

Senator Nelson is not known to shrink from controversy. He has a track record of advancing an agenda based on critical thinking. Our ability to flee from reason has recently caused Senator Nelson to focus on immigration. The United States stands alone among its peers in the industrialized world with an explosive population growth rate. Ours is fueled not by high fertility, but rather by unprecedented levels of immigration. At page 144, Sen. Nelson points to the growing influx of immigrants and the on a nation's resource base. He observes that immigration undermines our ability to achieve replacement level birth rates.

He offers this observation on immigration: "Never has an issue with such major consequences for this country been so ignored. Never before has there been such a significant failure by the president, Congress, and the political infrastructure to address such an important issue. We are faced with the most important challenge of our time—the challenge of sustainability—and we refuse to confront it. It is the biggest default in our history." Senator Nelson laments the charges of "nativism" and "racism" leveled against proponents of immigration reform.

Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. penned the Foreword to this book. Kennedy is a staff attorney at the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), publisher of *OnEarth* Magazine. Curiously, the Summer 2002 edition of *OnEarth* scoffed at respected allies of Senator Nelson in the immigration reform movement. The article was entitled: "When Hate Goes Green." This aptly titled essay was an acrimonious condemnation of persons

## Beyond Earth Day: Fulfilling the Promise

by Senator Gaylord  
Nelson

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involved in immigration reform.

Just how might Kennedy deal with the issue of “major consequences” which Senator Nelson finds to have been “ignored”? Would Kennedy’s complimentary Foreword applaud Senator Nelson for courageously addressing the issue? Would Kennedy take exception to Nelson’s position on the “ignored” issue, the “most important challenge of our time”? Or, would Kennedy fall into the convenient mode of just disregarding the issue? In short, Nelson’s prediction that the issue would be “so

ignored” was prophetic. Kennedy simply ignored the issue in his Foreword.

Senator Nelson can confidently reflect on his successes. But this book is not a self-serving tribute to a glowing success story. Environmental losses abound. They continue to plague our legacy. The ongoing loss is tragic and lamentable. If, however, any of us can still cling to unsullied waters, fresh air, and space to breathe free, we hold an eternal debt of gratitude to Senator Nelson. •