

Al Gore, Senator from Tennessee and Democratic candidate for Vice-President of the United States, wrote the book reviewed here before his selection as a candidate. Our reviewer is attorney / conservationist John Rohe, a regular contributor to The Social Contract.

A Green Marshall Plan

A Book Review by John Rohe

EARTH IN THE BALANCE:
ECOLOGY AND THE HUMAN SPIRIT

By Al Gore
Houghton-Mifflin Co., 1992
408 PP. \$22.95

In spring 1990, President Bush welcomed an international conference on the global environment. Conference materials prepared by the President's staff depicted a scale with several bars of gold balanced against the entire planet Earth. Apparently, the President was indifferent to the irony of placing roughly equivalent values on the few bars of gold with the entire planet and all its natural systems. Ergo, the title of this work: *Earth in the Balance*.

Albert Gore's commitment to ecology and human values was intensified by a motor vehicle accident in 1989. His son, then six, was struck by a car and thrown some thirty feet into the air. He then scraped along the pavement another twenty feet. This was the start of a lengthy "struggle to restore his body and spirit." Senator Gore cites this experience as the "catalyst" which caused him to become "increasingly impatient with the status quo, with conventional wisdom, with the lazy assumption that we could always muddle through. Such complacency has allowed many kinds of difficult problems to breed and grow, but now, facing a rapidly deteriorating global environment, it threatens absolute disaster."

Senator Gore begins his work with the realization that our cumulative ecological impact to the planet now rivals disasters previously believed to be relegated to the exclusive province of forces far beyond our control. For example, he cites the desert which is the former bottomland of the Aral Sea (at one time the fourth largest inland sea in the world); an exponential population growth; the increasing accumulation of waste in nature's sinks (e.g. CO₂ and chlorine accumulation in the atmosphere), the burgeoning extinction rate of our co-tenants on the planet; dead dolphins, oil-soaked birds, and medical waste washed up on beaches; the proliferating landfills. He contends, "...if we are now capable of changing something so basic as the relationship between the earth and the sun, surely we must acknowledge a new responsibility to use that power wisely and with appropriate restraint. So far, however, we seem oblivious to the fragility of the earth's natural systems."

The work analyzes historical causes of our destructive relationship with nature. From a philosophical perspective, he cites Plato's abstract thought and intellectual idealism as distinguished from Aristotle's affinity for the earth, the "ultimate source — through our senses — of all our thoughts". Following the influence of Descartes (I think, therefore I am) "The new modern person pointed decisively upward — away from nature, away from the earth — toward an ethereal realm from which the detached human intellect could observe the movement of matter everywhere in the universe." From a religious perspective, he cites the biblical mandate for 'dominion' over the Earth.

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Gore indicates that our global civilization is a threat to the natural diversity previously sheltered by "the inaccessibility of the mountains and the isolation of the valley." Our consumptive orientation (for example, the stroll through the mall is now considered a form of recreation) is seen as imposing burdens both upon our nonrenewable resources, as well as upon our landfills. 'Future abuse' by our dysfunctional civilization is identified as another cause: "Like a parent violating the personal boundaries of a vulnerable child, we violate the temporal boundaries of our rightful place in the chain of human generations."

After identifying the problem and its causes, Senator Gore proposes a means of resolving the crisis in the context of our conventional social, cultural, philosophical, religious, democratic and political framework. The NIMBY (Not in My Back Yard) is the protagonist in the author's scheme. The definition of "My Back Yard" is a function of environmental awareness. Is "My Back Yard" limited to the landfill stench a few feet from my home, or does it also embrace the atmospheric sink for CO₂ emissions? — the toxins in distant groundwaters? Enhanced ecological literacy and a heightened sensitivity are prerequisites for Gore's democratic resolution to the

crisis.

The book closes with Gore's "Global Marshall Plan" under which efforts would be made to stabilize world population, to develop and share environmentally appropriate technologies, to change the economic rules by which we measure our choices, to negotiate a new generation of international agreements, and to establish a cooperative plan to educate the citizens of the world about our global environment. His list of solutions includes a pragmatic revision of our tax code: "There is an economic rule of thumb: whatever we tax, we tend to get less of; whatever we subsidize, we tend to get more of. Currently, we tax work and we subsidize the depletion of natural resources — and both policies have contributed to high unemployment and the waste of natural resources. What if we lowered the tax on work and simultaneously raised it on the burning of fossil fuels?"

This masterful work has a literary value beyond its profound environmental insight. ■