

"we are more concerned about the farmers, occupationally exposed workers, pesticide applicators, weekend gardeners, and

others who may be repeatedly exposed to much higher levels of pesticides and therefore are at greater risk."

False Fixes

"Sense and Nonsense on the Environment" by Warren T. Brookes, in *The Quill* (Jan.-Feb. 1991), Society of Professional Journalists, P.O. Box 77, Greencastle, Ind. 46135-0077.

When McDonald's Corp. agreed last fall to abort its program to recycle the polystyrene cartons it uses for its hamburgers, and to go back instead to using coated paperboard, some environmentalists and journalists hailed the decision as "good news for the planet." In reality, says Brookes, a Washington-based editorial writer for the *Detroit News*, the hamburger chain's decision was "on balance, *bad* news, because it will at least double the net adverse impact on the nation's environment."

That's because coated paperboard, unlike polystyrene, is not recyclable, and because producing it takes 40-50 percent more energy and results in two to three times the air pollution and at least 70 percent more waterborne wastes.

Why, then, did McDonald's decide to switch? Brookes suspects that the firm was concerned less about the environment than about its corporate image. McDonald's was under pressure from the Environmental Defense Fund, and the foam packaging had simply become "a public relations liability."

But the "Big Mac" threat is hardly the only environmental peril that's been greatly exaggerated in recent years, Brookes maintains. For example, he points to the "ecological disaster" of the March 1989 *Exxon Valdez* oil spill in Alaska's

Prince William Sound.

"Contrary to the hysteria generated by the news media and environmentalists," Brookes writes, a report published last year by James Mielke of the Congressional Research Service found that the ecological effects of such spills are relatively modest and short-lived. The chemicals in petroleum, Mielke noted, "have long been part of the marine environment and physical impacts are likely to be temporary in the dynamic natural flux of the coastal environment." As an example of how little lasting ecological damage was done in Alaska, Mielke said that 40 million pink salmon—an all-time record number—were caught in Prince William Sound last year, and most of the fingerlings had been released into Sound hatcheries *after* the *Exxon Valdez* spill. In Mielke's view, the \$2 billion spent on the cleanup there was "money that could have been better spent."

Who's responsible for all the exaggerated environmental fears? Brookes says that the news media deserve much of the blame. Journalists are properly skeptical of environmental claims made by industry, he says, but they also need to be skeptical of claims made by the Environmental Protection Agency and by "self-styled public-interest groups, many of which misuse or abuse scientific data to arouse fear."

ARTS & LETTERS

Flag Revolution

"Waving the Red Flag and Reconstituting Old Glory" by Albert Boime, in *Smithsonian Studies in American Art* (Spring 1990), Oxford Univ. Press, 2001 Evans Rd., Cary, N.C. 27513.

When young radicals burned the U.S. flag during the antiwar protests of the 1960s, the venerable Socialist leader Norman

Thomas (1884-1968) was appalled. He thought the protesters "should be washing the flag, not burning it." Little more than

two decades later, however, a conservative U.S. Supreme Court took a more permissive view. In a 5-4 decision, the Court held that burning the flag was an allowable form of free speech. "We do not consecrate the flag by punishing its desecration, for in doing so we dilute the freedom that this cherished emblem represents," said then-Justice William J. Brennan, Jr.

That 1989 decision (reaffirmed last year when the court struck down a new federal law making it a crime to burn or deface the American flag) was "the end result of a cultural revolution" that began in the mid-1950s, according to Boime, an art historian at the University of California at Los Angeles. Jasper Johns fired the revolution's first shot, with *Flag* (1954) and other images of the Stars and Stripes. "Sometimes painted monochromatic gray or white or painted on bright backgrounds, Johns's flags served to neutralize the grand metaphor of Old Glory by holding it up to close scrutiny in the secularized space of [an] art gallery," Boime says. With the flag's image "completely divorced from those sites in which the ritual of respect or

decorum is normally played out," it became possible to see the flag "as a depersonalized, flat image," like the Campbell's soup cans that Pop Art later immortalized.

Soon Claes Oldenburg and other Pop artists were using the flag as an element in their collages, montages, monoprints, and other creations, and thus inadvertently contributing to the "desacralization" of the flag as the era of Vietnam protest drew near. Celebrity protester Abbie Hoffman, perhaps inspired by the work of the Pop Art masters, made a shirt out of the flag in 1968. Many, less "hip" people, however, continued to regard the flag as sacred. Hoffman was arrested in Washington, D.C., for wearing his flag shirt.

It was significant, Boime contends, that Johns, Oldenburg, and other artists whose flag images contributed to the cultural revolution filed a friend-of-the-court brief against flag-desecration laws in the 1989 Supreme Court case. "Once the flag could be viewed as just another object in the visual field," he says, "it could no longer be seen as either a record of conquest or a universally accepted patriotic symbol."

Looking Backward

"Tomorrow Never Knows" by Gail Collins, in *The Nation* (Jan. 21, 1991), 72 Fifth Ave., New York, N.Y. 10011.

In 1935, historian Charles Beard, philosopher John Dewey, and editor Edward Weeks were asked to name the 25 most influential books published in the preceding 50 years. Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* topped each man's list, but right behind it, in all three cases, was a utopian novel—*Looking Backward* (1888).

Written by Edward Bellamy (1850–1898), a minister's son from Chicopee Falls, Mass., *Looking Backward* told the story of Julian West, a wealthy Bostonian who went to sleep in 1887 and awoke 113 years later to discover that the world had been greatly changed, and entirely for the better. The novel was all but devoid of action, but late-19th-century readers didn't mind, notes Collins, co-author of *The Millennium Book*. They "were fascinated with

[Bellamy's] picture of society in the year 2000—from the day-to-day practicalities ('Our washing is all done at public laundries at excessively cheap rates, and our cooking at public kitchens') to his grand vision of an economy in which all business has been swallowed up into one Great Trust run by the state and the work force transformed into an eager industrial army of patriotic citizens."

The novel appeared at a time when middle-class Americans were alarmed by labor strife and violence, and by the flood of new immigrants into the country. They also were resentful of the Gilded Age rich, who flaunted their wealth with gaudy displays of conspicuous consumption. Bellamy and his "Nationalist" vision of social organization seemed to offer a solution. Sixty thou-