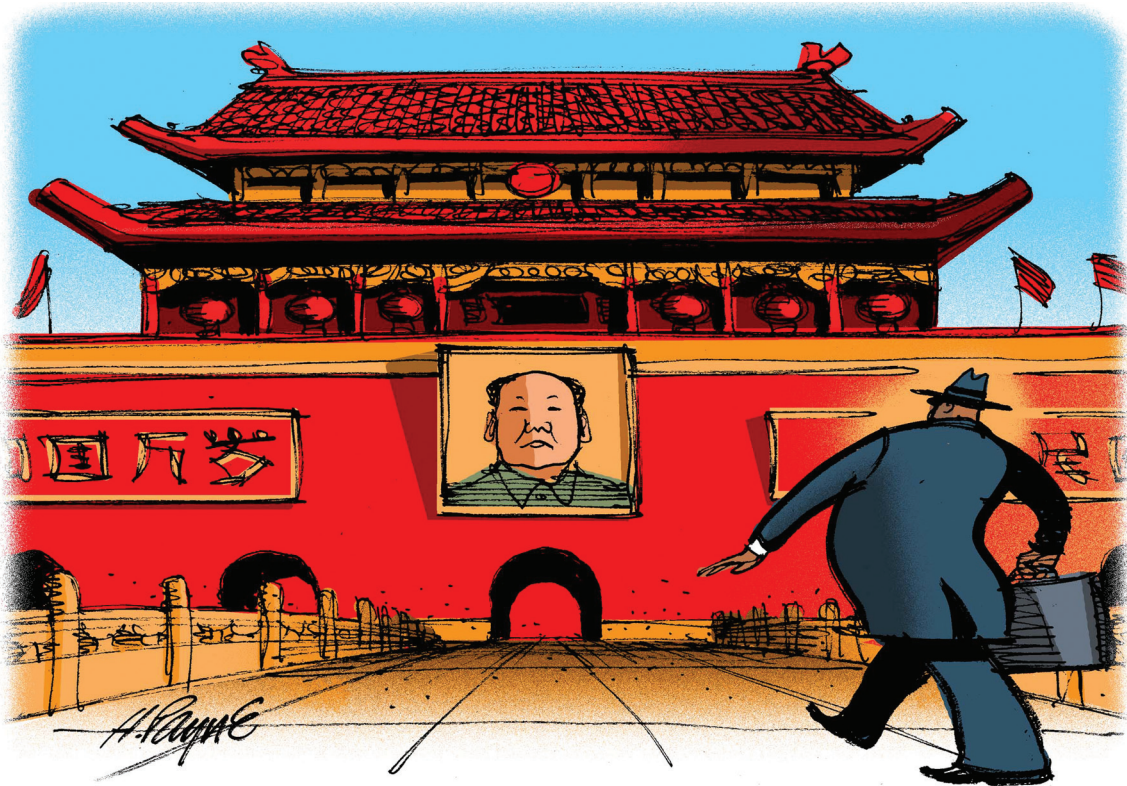


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Lessons Learned for Today

The 1965 White House Conference on Natural Beauty set the stage for the environmental and natural resource laws passed in the next quarter century. Politicians involved in the gridlock of the ensuing twenty-five years would do well to learn from the bipartisan conference's example

By Henry L. Diamond

Fifty years ago, a thousand Americans gathered in Washington to tell the president of the United States that livable cities and healthy land and water were vital to the future of our country. It was an important milestone in the nation's quest for environmental quality: The White House Conference on Natural Beauty. Much of its legacy lives on, but some of its significant recommendations and themes still hang in the balance. The lead-up to the conference, the conference itself, and its aftermath hold important lessons for present and future generations.

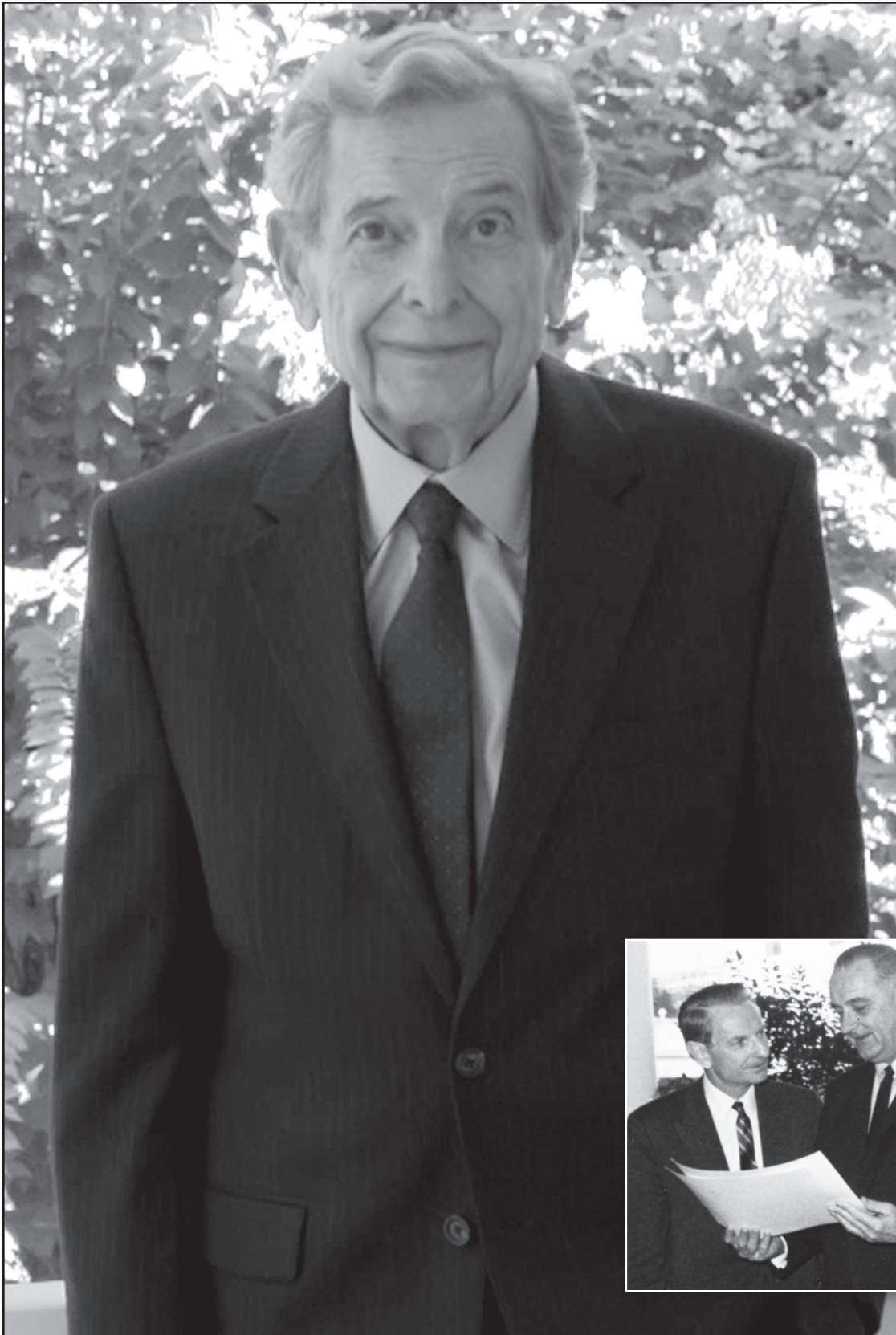
Conservationists, cabinet members, local officials, members of Congress, businessmen and women, and ordinary citizens gathered in answer to the president's call. They met for two days after much advance preparation, and now they were ready to urge action. The conferees told the president firsthand what they thought ought to be done about natural beauty in America. The conference focused on our highways and roadsides. There were recommendations to ban billboards and junk yards and to improve the way highways were designed.

The brand new federal Land and Water Conservation Fund received much favorable attention and support. It was a first-of-its-kind program to help safeguard natural areas, water resources, and the nation's cultural heritage, to provide recreation opportunities for all Americans, and to further protect and enhance our National Park system.

The conferees covered a wide range of other topics. They sought stronger controls on strip mining. They urged utility companies to get their power lines underground. They proposed an urban beautification program. They advocated for landscape grants for the countryside. And they urged increased efforts at educating citizens to understand the environment and its importance.

The White House conference helped bring about a major transition: creating a bridge from traditional conservation to a new environmentalism and prompting a surge of groundbreaking legislation. Since Theodore Roosevelt, Gifford Pinchot, John Muir, and George Perkins Marsh taught the nation it must treasure its natural resources and use them wisely, there had been a concern for conservation. There had been a preservationist movement concerned largely with the wilderness. There had been concern for public health, particularly the adverse impacts of air and water pollution.

But these issues were then a low priority indeed on the public agenda. Ecology was thought to be for ec-



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In the inset picture, taken a half century ago, Diamond looks over President Johnson's left shoulder at plans for the event. Conference chairman Laurance S. Rockefeller is to LBJ's right. Photo courtesy Rockefeller Archive Center. ©1965.



centrics; conservation was an afterthought on political platforms, slightly ahead of Esperanto and a single tax. The White House conference helped change this.

A new public concern about a broader range of vital environmental issues had been sparked and was now going to be tested in the political marketplace. At the federal level, five years after the conference, EPA was created — by a Republican president. In New York, Governor Nelson Rockefeller, also a Republican, went to the voters with bond issues for land acquisition and water pollution control; they were passed resoundingly. Other politicians took note, and New Jersey, Wisconsin, California, and other states soon followed suit.

By the end of the 1960s and into the early 1970s, the cry for conservation became a chorus. Landed gentry in tweeds and regular folks in denim came together on the first Earth Day in 1970 to pronounce that the quality of our environment was central to the larger public welfare. It was not lost on Congress that voters were willing to support environmental quality with both their voices and their taxes.

A surge of specific legislative action quickly followed. First came the National Environmental Policy Act, directing all federal agencies to take fully into account the environmental impacts of their proposed actions before spending taxpayer dollars. NEPA was the keystone of the environmental progress of the 1970s and remains a critical environmental management tool to this day.

Congress enacted new, powerful, and more targeted laws to address air pollution, water pollution, pesticides, and toxic waste. It was an extraordinary burst of legislative action. Behind each of these laws lay deep-seated concerns which had been initially fostered by conservationists decades before. These concerns became further focused and dramatized by the Earth Day enthusiasm of the early 1970s, but their roots lay deeper in long-standing concerns for conservation. These roots were nurtured, expanded, and shaped by the White House conference and by the interest and actions it spurred.

Since the conference, conservation and environmentalism have matured into an integral part of American life. Corporations, for the most part, plan on compliance with environmental law and regulation as a part of doing business. Government agencies such as the Environmental Protection Agency and the Council on Environmental Quality, created in the early 1970s, are now so well recognized in our national life that they are practically old-line agencies on par with the departments of Agriculture and the Interior.

There are more billboards polluting the visual landscape today than there were 50 years ago. Lady Bird would not be happy.

It's all to the good that conservation and environmentalism, now more broadly defined, are embedded in American life. But, ironically, they now may be taken for granted and even neglected. Environmental issues have sagged on the national agenda. With the major exception of global climate change, the environment does not appear in the current presidential campaign. The climate change issue itself has become more of a political football than a serious debate over a major problem.

The fate of two issues prominently featured at the White House conference provides a cautionary tale about environmental progress. They are not existential matters like other pressing environmental concerns, but they remain symbols of a commitment to the overall enrichment of the quality of life all citizens should enjoy: the beauty of the nation's highways and the promise of the then newly enacted Land and Water Conservation Fund. These subjects of special focus and hope fifty years ago are gasping for life today.

As the conferees filed out of the White House, they took great pride in the attention they gave to highway beautification. It seemed that with Lady Bird Johnson's leadership and her husband's political clout and savvy, the nation was soon to be rid of the scourge of unsightly billboards cluttering its highways. To be sure, by October the Congress had passed the Highway Beautification Act of 1965. The act did good things like covering up unsightly junk yards and paying for convenient rest stops along the interstate system. But the main thrust of what came to be called the Lady Bird Bill was an effort to control billboards. Indeed, there was language which seemed to do that. However, unable to defeat the bill head on, the billboard lobby artfully booby trapped it.

They managed to insert provisions that assured the law wouldn't work. First, they provided that billboard owners must be compensated for taking down their billboards. At first blush, this seems like a reasonable protection under the Constitution's Takings Clause. But as billboard critics pointed out, it was in actuality paying polluters to remove the pollution they already had visited upon the public. Even when governments tried to pay, the billboard people managed to block appropriations or set outlandish values on the offending property.

The result is that there are more billboards polluting the visual landscape today than there were 50 years ago. In fact, technology has created new, more offensive intrusions on the landscape. There are now giant flashing boards which can change their message. They throw unwanted light into neighborhoods and unsafe distractions into the eyes of drivers.

Lady Bird would not be happy.

Another major focus of the conference was the Land and Water Conservation Fund. The conferees saw great opportunities for the fund, and for many years it indeed did good work. It provided grants to the states to acquire and develop lands to secure and protect open space and recreational opportunities across the country. Based on recommendations of the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission, also led by the White House conference chair, Laurance S. Rockefeller, it provided funds for the acquisition of lands to expand the nation's parks, forests, and wildlife refuges.

Money for the fund was to come from receipts from offshore drilling leases in federal waters. The concept was to use the proceeds from the sale of one public asset to provide for another. Over its 50-year life, the fund has had its ups and downs. It seldom received anything like the \$900 million annual authorization that was promised. Nonetheless, it has had a significant impact.

The part of the fund that establishes grants to the states has provided some \$4 billion, matched at least dollar for dollar by state and local governments, to support some 40,000 projects across almost every county in the country. The federal side of the fund has provided some \$12 billion to the federal land agencies for acquisitions. In the massive budget compromise package which was agreed to in December, the fund emerged in better shape than expected at least for the short term. The appropriation is for some \$470 million versus an average of \$300 million over previous years. However, in a bow to its critics, the new authorization is for only three years. That battle will have to be refought soon.

Even more important than the specific programs urged by the conferees and the fate that has befallen them are the intangible values that marked the White House conference. We need to revive the spirit of the conference which embraced these values with enthusiasm and a sense of urgency. There remain important lessons from 50 years ago which need to be relearned.

The first is that government and citizens working together can get great things done. The people who came together a half century ago were convinced of this. They realized that government can't do everything, but that does not mean it should do nothing. They knew that government is not the enemy. At both the federal and state levels, it can be a powerful and effective ally, particularly when it works in partnership with citizens and businesses. The challenge is to strike that delicate balance where government does what it can do best, and private initiative — both nonprofit and profit-making — is left free and encouraged to do

what it does well. But faith in the ability of government is under attack, and environmental issues are in danger of being swept up in the general wave of cynicism.

A second key lesson from the successes of 1965 is leadership. The White House conference brought together not only the president, the first lady, and a quorum of the cabinet, but also thoughtful leaders — Republican and Democratic alike — and citizen activists from across the land. President and Mrs. Johnson, Stewart Udall as secretary of the interior, Nelson Rockefeller and Gaylord Nelson as governors, Laurance Rockefeller as a private citizen, and others. They did what real leaders should do: they focused and shaped a deep-felt concern into the basis for real action.

The word went out from the White House that the president and first lady and leading citizens cared, and the nation responded. Government agencies are awfully good at getting the word. Good bureaucratic hearing means more appropriations and more clout. Federal departments, until then little concerned with the environment, began to get on the bandwagon. Housing and Urban Development, Agriculture, even Defense, found ways they could help. Clearly, conservation is not receiving that kind of attention now.

The federal agencies, the states and cities, and the public began to understand that natural beauty was not something frivolous. A lot of thinking people had come together to make a point: that what this country looks like and how it treats its land, water, and air is important; that what was involved was a test of our society, and a challenge to the human spirit.

Where are the Johnsons, the Rockefellers, and the Udalls of today? Who are the champions and protectors of the environment?

A final lesson from the White House conference was the power of bipartisanship. People were invited to the conference on the basis of their performance, not their party. There was plenty of debate, but no divisiveness. Today, discussions about environmental issues are often partisan, petty, and downright nasty. Our water, our land, and our air are far too important for partisanship. Politics ought to stop at the water's edge in ecology as well as in international affairs. Bipartisanship in environmental matters is not simply civility. It is essential to getting things done.

We must return to the spirit of that afternoon in 1965, where government-citizen cooperation, high-level leadership, and bipartisanship can again be brought to bear upon today's unfinished agenda.

We cannot allow complacency to take hold. There is work to be done. **TEF**

Where are the Johnsons, the Rockefellers, and the Udalls of today? Who are the champions and protectors of the environment?