

Breaking Three Hearts

Part I: Democracy

Eugene City Councilor Bonny Bettman recently told me, "I ran for council four years ago to address environmental issues facing my ward. Now, I realize my main work is to retain democracy."

After 22 years in environmental advocacy, I am realizing the same thing. So are millions of other Americans. The heart of democracy is being attacked by the Bush administration. The ultimate source of this problem is an ancient human tendency of those in power in social organizations, whether a community, religion, political organization, or government: The tendency to limit alternatives, which are seen as threats to their retention of power.

The crucial distinction between a dictatorship and a democracy is the absence or presence of processes that allow alternatives to enter public discourse. Authoritarian regimes don't like alternatives. Independent courts are avoided, because alternative perspectives on law and evidence will surface. Journalists who report evidence or ideas that contradict the regime's messages are reined in. Dictatorships dissolve legislatures that are independent or can't be purchased, because legislators may discuss or enact policies that are alternative to the regime's.

Democracies, on the other hand, acknowledge the importance of alternatives, and install laws, processes, and support systems through which people can bring alternatives to the decisionmaking table. The Bush administration's major attack on democracy is its systematic elimination of processes by which those whose ideas differ from theirs can bring ideas to the table.

One example is the Bush administration's attack on the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), which was signed by Richard Nixon on Jan. 1, 1970. NEPA requires federal agencies to prepare an environmental impact statement (EIS) for "major federal actions significantly affecting the quality of the human environment." Such actions might include renewing a dam's permit, cleaning up a hazardous waste site, building a highway in wetlands, or logging a steep watershed.

In a move that counters the human tendency to consolidate power and suppress alternatives, NEPA requires that every EIS include "all reasonable alternatives to the proposed action." This is the heart of an EIS. Equally crucially, NEPA requires that the development of all these alternatives take place in coordination with the public, who can submit complete alternatives for comparison with the agency's alternatives.

NEPA doesn't sit well with the Bush administration. For example, with the ostensible goal of restoring natural fire regimes to logged, fire-suppressed forests, and protecting communities adjacent to such forests, President Bush signed the Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003. This legislation excuses the Forest Service from considering "all reasonable alternatives." Free from the constraints of logic or alternatives that would actually help restore forest health, the agency simply announces plans to log large, old, fire-resistant trees in remote, roadless locations, far from communities at risk.

In a move to shield agencies from the public and their ideas, the Department of Homeland Security is proposing to prepare certain EISs in secret, for example regarding cleanup standards following a nuclear power accident.

The Bush Forest Service is drafting regulations that would entirely eliminate EISs from the development of national forest plans. No EIS means no consideration of alternatives or analysis of environmental impacts. The regulations would also relieve the Forest Service from the responsibility of even trying to retain native species on any of the nation's 177 national forests and grasslands. In sum, the regulations would prevent citizens from standing up for their national forests and the species that live there.

This pattern of strangling democratic, public consideration of alternatives is endemic throughout the Bush administration. For instance, the administration has argued that Guantanamo Bay prisoners should not have access to courts and lawyers. Our nation's energy policy was decided behind closed doors, by unidentified people who appear to have been less than innovative about alternatives to oil.

You can look at instances of eliminating consideration of alternatives one by one, or you can acknowledge their collective significance: the destruction of democracy. Americans depend on democratic processes in order to stand up effectively for the vulnerable, the silenced, the wild. The Bush administration daily works to eliminate those processes.

Our main work right now is to restore democracy.



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Donald Aitken

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Donald Aitken, PhD

Donald Aitken Associates

Thursday, July 15 7:00-9:00 PM

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"Oil and War: Fighting to Feed Our Addiction"

Richard Heinberg

New College of California

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Jim Lloyd, Facility Manager

Oregon State University

Thursday, July 22 7:00-9:00 PM

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