

Breaking Three Hearts

Part III: Public ownership

I heard Laura Bush talking recently on public radio about how she enjoys restoring native grasses and flowers on parts of the Crawford, Texas land she and her husband purchased in 1999. She said country in that region of Texas had been damaged historically by livestock grazing, so recovery is slow, but promising.



"There's something in a way that is reassuring about being outside," Laura Bush told NPR, "and that is ... that all of us, everyone who lives here on Earth, has this beautiful Earth to live on and to seek solace with when we're outside."

The irony seemed to escape her: Her ranchmate is actively degrading the public's solace in similar Bureau of Land Management and Forest Service lands throughout the West by slashing public input into private livestock permit holders' practices; bulldozing oil, gas, and mining leases past community objections; and encouraging nightmarishly increasing webs of off-road and snowmobile industry-spawned routes. Not surprisingly, Terry L. Anderson, Bush's public lands advisor, is principal author of a Cato Institute Report titled "How and Why to Privatize Federal Lands."

Privatizing public lands is the tip of the iceberg. My Aug. 18 Google two-word inquiry, "Bush privatization," yielded 188,000 entries. Scrolling through the first 30 or so newspaper articles, analyses, and reports produced an astonishing diversity of Bush administration initiatives for privatization of Social Security, half of all federal jobs, Medicare, welfare, government information, Iraq, Latin America, interrogation, prisons, water, the military, and public schools.

Presumably this is what Bush is referring to when he promotes the concept of an "ownership society."

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"I understand," Bush has stated, "if you own something, you have a vital stake in the future of America."

Bush figures he doesn't need to say the word "private" in front of the word "ownership." He assumes it. One heart of America he intends to break is public ownership, the only ownership that includes all Americans as partners with an equal stake in America's future. When public lands, education, information, military activities, health care, welfare, prisons and water are privatized, they become the property of corporations and individuals and are effectively lost to public oversight and governance. Loss of public governance is the loss of the single most vital stake in the future of America: it is the loss of democracy.

It's not that the Bush administration is against all public ownership. National debt; corporate bailouts (e.g., of savings and loan institutions and airlines); industry subsidies (e.g., for public lands logging, cattle grazing and mining; tobacco; sugar); and war tabs will surely continue to be owned by the vast majority of the public. But this is the ownership characteristic of feudal serfs, not of a public, self-governing society.

Given that the top one percent of American households own almost 40 percent of the nation's wealth; the top 10 percent of Americans own over 70 percent of the nation's wealth; and the bottom 40 percent (i.e., almost half) of households own 0.2 percent (one-fifth of one percent) of the nation's wealth, privatization of public assets would be expected to accrue in the same proportion. The Bushes, Gates, Enrons, and Halliburtons are gaining; 90 percent of the rest of us are losing.

Ultimately, the problem arises from the fictional constructs that any physical action can be "private" (i.e., without public consequences) and that Earth can be privately "owned" by individuals of the human species simply by amassing a lot of human-invented money. Private ownership tends to float free from social and environmental objectives such as affordable water, power, health care and sanitation services; worker safety and dignity; bus service in poor areas; freedom of information; protection of native biodiversity; and broad access to courts, quality education and natural amenities. Witness Laura Bush's delusion that all of us, everyone on Earth, has beautiful Earth in which to seek solace, right outdoors.

Laura's husband is correct: If you own something, you have a vital stake in the future of America. After the past four years of Bush privatization, fewer Americans now own something; and after four more years of a Bush administration, a lot fewer will own something, including their government.

This is the third installment in a three-part series, "Breaking Three Hearts," regarding Bush administration impacts on democracy, nature, and public ownership.

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