

# It's Déjà Vu All Over Again

IT WAS BAD UNDER REAGAN, BUT THIS IS MUCH WORSE

**M**y biggest fears from a presidential election gone horribly wrong are coming to pass.

For me, the major issue for a president has always been appointments to run the federal agencies. Our current president is doing what I expected him to do, appointing people who will gut the agencies everyone relies on to protect their health, safety, and the environment. It's been one horrible appointment and executive order after another. Clean air and water regulations go out the window to provide profits to polluters.

Public lands are once again on the chopping block at bargain basement prices for oil, gas and minerals. However, I can't shake an eerie feeling I have been down this path before.

It's winter in Fairbanks, Alaska, 1983. I am standing outside a downtown phone booth on a cold, dark night. A halo of light from a nearby streetlight barely cuts through the freezing ice fog — frozen pollution from the local coal fired power plant — as the temperature hovers at 30 below zero. I am waiting for the phone to ring. I stamp my feet and walk in a circle to help stay warm, even though I am buried in layers of down and wool.

Three years earlier, I was a law enforcement patrolman for the Forest Service in the Oregon Dunes. My primary duties were to police the activities of off road vehicles in the dunes. I occasionally issued citations. I still recall one particularly obnoxious individual I had stopped. As I was issuing him a citation he said something like, "When Reagan is elected we are going to get rid of people like you."

And they did. After Reagan was elected they did get rid of people like me, and a whole lot of others, as the Forest Service and other agencies went through major "reductions in force" (RIFs). Right from the get-go, Reagan, an anti-environment, anti-regulation "populist" went after the federal agencies with a vengeance.

Three years later, as director of the Northern Alaska Environmental Center, I found myself on the frontlines, in the cross hairs of the Reagan Administration's war on the environment. By then Reagan's comic book secretary of interior, James Watt, had been replaced by a far more dangerous man, Richard Hodel. Hodel was smarter than Watt and worked hard to fly under the public radar whenever possible.

The phone rings. I pick it up, after looking around to see if I am being watched. A voice says, "Here's the numbers of the photos that you want," and he recites four numbers to me. Then he says, "OK, you need to also request other photos for cover. We don't want them to realize what they have." I jot down the numbers of the photos.

The next morning I am at the Fairbanks District Office of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as well as the Bureau of Land Management, for good measure, filing freedom of information act requests for a bunch of photos. Once I have the slides, I make copies of the four incriminating photos taken in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR). They will soon be going with me on a trip to Washington, DC.

ARCO Alaska was secretly doing oil exploration work in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge on the north slope of the Brooks Range. These activities were designed to lead to drilling for oil in the refuge.

This was the opening round in a decades long, and still ongoing, fight over drilling for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

But, why the cloak and dagger approach right out of a sleazy spy movie? We needed photo proof of what Big Oil was doing, proof their activities were already having significant impacts on wildlife. I was getting photo proof to document the disruption of polar bear dens, caribou migrations and other impacts from the seismic blasting conducted in ANWR. I was acting like a spy to protect the jobs and careers of some of the foremost wildlife biologists in the world. We needed the photos but we wanted to provide protection for the people who were giving us the information.

The secretary of interior as well as the under secretaries that ran the various agencies were all appointees of the Reagan White House. None of the federal agencies could be counted on to stand up for the public or for the environment. Hard working, dedicated people were being purged or re-assigned from the agencies faster than the arctic ice is melting today.

The anti-environment zealots in the Reagan Administration were making life dangerous for career wildlife biologists, or most anyone with integrity, within the agencies. A biologist who happened to see the wrong thing in the field and reported it to the wrong people could go from being the foremost expert on grizzlies, wolves, caribou, or musk ox, to managing ground squirrels in Arkansas. These people were being terrorized by the upper-level management of their own agencies. And that's why I found myself standing out in the ice-fog waiting for the pay phone to ring.

But, while the events unfolding today conjured up that other time and place, it's way worse today. At least Reagan was a decent human being, a well-adjusted adult. Our president today says Nazis are good people as the Klan marches in the street. I watch in horror as one federal agency after another is turned over to polluters, anti-government zealots and corporate greedheads, and executive orders rescind and eliminate the very regulations that we all count on to clean up and protect our air, our water and protect *our* public lands.

The extreme right wing has taken over the Republican Party, and maybe the country. They view science, environmental protection, even the very notion of public lands as liberal politics. Meanwhile, people walk around like zombies, staring at hand-held electronic media devices instead of talking with each other. And instead of actually doing something, they vent on social media like Facebook.

But maybe even worse, pay phones are soon a thing of the past. In the not too distant future it will no longer be possible to stand outside in the muted glow of a streetlight, on a freezing cold and foggy night, waiting for the phone to ring, to talk to a caller you don't even know.

Bob Warren retired in 2012 as the regional business development officer for Business Oregon for Lane, Lincoln, Linn and Benton Counties. He also served stints as natural resource advisor for Rep. Peter DeFazio and as executive director of the Northern Alaska Environmental Center.

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