

PERSPECTIVE

The Fog of War, the Veil of Ignorance, and Historical Hindsight

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“The future isn’t what it used to be”—historian Ken Hesselstine

In October 1944, the Battle of Leyte Gulf was the first step in the recapture of the Philippines during World War II. The United States eventually won the Battle of Leyte Gulf, but it was a real mess. The “fog of war”—Clausewitz’s famous phrase—set in where no one knew what was happening.

This fog-of-war situation, I propose, is where we stand in environmental policy-making, such as past cases like Alar and Love Canal, and current debates over Superfund and brownfields.

In that war-weary October, the famous admiral “Bull” Halsey got fooled by the Japanese and went rushing off north from Leyte Gulf with his main fleet of battleships and aircraft carriers to attack a Japanese decoy fleet which he thought was his real prize. He left open a key sea passage, the San Bernardino Strait. Through this passage sailed a Japanese fleet of battleships, cruisers, and destroyers. It attacked and destroyed most of an American fleet of small escort carriers guarded only by destroyers. Several hundred American sailors were left for almost a day to drift and die in shark-infested waters.

The fog of war put Bull Halsey’s battleships, cruisers, and carriers in the wrong place, going in the wrong direction, chasing an ephemeral goal that briefly allowed a major Japanese victory. A mistake mushrooms into a disaster. Environmental decisions often end up with a lot of dollars thrown at a problem, and the money goes down a black hole with no results. James Gleick, in his recent popular study of the science of chaos describes human and natural affairs as “a complicated dynamical system, not with a

few points of instability—critical points where a small push could have large consequences—but *instability at every point*.” Nothing stays put. In fact, the act of playing the game has a way of changing the rules. Any experienced environmental practitioner knows these realities.

Rachel Carson, when she published *Silent Spring* in 1962, saw through the fog of environmental war. She made connections between pesticides and the food chain, and the spread of chemical pollution on a global basis. One small application of dieldrin, DDT, or other chlorinated hydrocarbon pesticides had unexpectedly large and dire consequences. Carson’s act of reporting definitely changed the rules. We also have historical hindsight to see that the banning of Alar was probably wrong, but that the recognition of toxic chemicals in Love Canal was on target. No one saw through the fog when Superfund was passed that most of its funds would end up in the pockets of lawyers. On the other hand, the banning of leaded gasoline in the 1970s was incredibly effective in cleaning up the air.

We are still in Bull Halsey’s position. In the long view of history, despite major improvements in scientific and technological know-how, we Americans still have very limited means to soften or counteract 150 years of industrial pollution and waste. For much of our history, we did not monitor or understand the threats to our environment and human well-being. We virtually did not even notice them. When I worked summers in the 1950s at my father’s metal fabricating plant on the South Side of Chicago, no one worried over the dumping of barrels of old lead paint, used lubricating and motor oil, and sheets of asbestos insulation on the back lot by the railroad siding. I worked on his plant reconstruction job, and spent my time ripping out old asbestos insulation, tarpaper walls, and asphalt roofs, piling them in an open lot, and burning them in a huge fire that poured out a stifling black smoke and left a sticky residue. Until the 1970s, we looked upon pollution and waste as the inevitable price of industrialization. Today we are just beginning to learn the rules of the environment.

Environmental policy, environmental science, and environmental ethics are all still in their infancy. We are not yet very sophisticated, nor very wise.

The philosopher John Rawls’s concept of the “veil of ignorance” is useful to clarify environmental decisions. The veil of ignorance is where no one knows anything about his or her future place in society. Yet most environmental activity implies future goals. The existence of the veil should prevent anyone and everyone from penalizing too heavily any specific sector of the future society, for once the veil is lifted, any person could find himself or herself heavily disadvantaged. Once the veil was lifted in October 1944, a US Navy sailor found himself swimming in shark-infested waters. Outside of Buffalo, New York, in the 1970s, a housewife discovered she was living on the chemical time bomb called Love Canal. Perhaps John Rawls would call Bull Halsey’s situation an actual historical instance of the “veil of ignorance” about the outcome of life-and-death decisions. When the veil was lifted and the disaster costing hundreds of American lives was revealed, Halsey was so shocked that he never recovered. Nor did he ever take responsibility.

More than most decisions in society, environmental choices are not simply theoretical but directly shape the future. The chaos is still there, as well as the fog of environmental war and the veil of environmental ignorance. What is noise and what is signal? As Americans we have chosen to designate some places as “good,” such as Yosemite, and other places as “evil,” such as Love Canal. In the current brownfields projects are we turning evil into good? In Appalachia’s strip-mined country have we turned good into evil? Thus we create a geography of choices that have long-lasting, even permanent impacts.

The task of lifting the fog, or veil, is not easy. The policy crisis today is that NEPA, the establishment of EPA, and the passage of the clean water and air acts in the 1970s, did much to temper the harm, but these laws and policies did not anticipate the mood of the 1990s that prioritized other agendas.

When I look at Al Gore or that young George Bush, I still see Bull Halsey. Economists have long spoken of the "invisible hand" of the marketplace in shaping material life. Environmental practitioners understand that the natural world is a powerful "visible hand" that only seemed invisible because we ignored it. What if we turned the tables and made the environment-humanity connection the dominant feature of our civilization, and then tried to relate politics, economics, technology, society and culture to this connection?

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