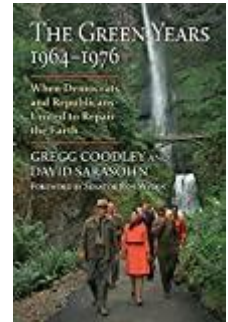


**Gregg Coodley, David Sarasohn.** *The Green Years, 1964-1976: When Democrats and Republicans United to Repair the Earth.* Environment and Society Series. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2021. 375 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7006-3234-3.



**Reviewed by** Bart Elmore (The Ohio State University)

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**Commissioned by** Caryn E. Neumann (Miami University of Ohio Regionals)

Physician Gregg Coodley and retired Oregonian editor David Sarasohn have penned a well-researched and elegantly written book that reminds us that fighting for the environment was once something that brought Americans together rather than divided us. Building on the work of numerous environmental historians—including Robert Gottlieb, Martin V. Melosi, Carolyn Merchant, Roderick Nash, Adam Rome, and Paul Sutter, among many others—Coodley and Sarasohn offer here an exhaustive play-by-play account of the legislative battles between 1964 and 1976 that led to the passage of some of the most important environmental laws in the United States. The central takeaway of this book is that though Democrats controlled Congress throughout these years, “all environmental laws passed from 1964 to 1976 commanded huge bipartisan support” (p. 257). Coodley and Sarasohn explore how political compromises formed to yield environmental laws, like the Clean Water Act of 1972 or the Toxic Substances Control Act of 1976, but also save room for concluding chapters that discuss the factors that led Republican Party

members away from supporting environmental legislation in the 1980s and beyond.

In tracing the roots of the “Green Years,” Coodley and Sarasohn give the Johnson administration a great deal of credit. The authors effectively demonstrate that Lyndon B. Johnson, working closely with his wife Lady Bird Johnson and Secretary of Interior Stewart Udall, championed a truly astounding array of environmental legislation, from water pollution control acts to bills that led to protection of wild rivers and national trails. But Coodley and Sarasohn are not exclusively interested in the executive branch and its leadership. Rather, much of these chapters on the 1960s discuss the lives of lesser-known politicians, such as Representative John Saylor (R-PA) and Senator Howard Baker (R-TN), who became staunch supporters of landmark environmental legislation, such as the Wilderness Act of 1964 and Clean Air Act of 1970.

The Richard Nixon years are well covered, though material draws heavily on secondary

sources, including the works of historian J. Brooks Flippen, *Nixon and the Environment* (2000) and *Conservative Conservationist: Russell E. Train and the Emergence of American Environmentalism* (2006). This heavy reliance on secondary sources published by historians is characteristic of much of the book, though Coodley and Sarasohn do an excellent job peppering in sources from the archival papers and publications of particularly important politicians as well as interviews with key public officials, including William Ruckelshaus, the first administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

An important point of emphasis in the section on the late 1960s and early 1970s is that though Nixon was never personally passionate about environmental issues—he once “walked on the beach in wingtips,” quip Coodley and Sarasohn—key members of Nixon’s staff, especially Pacific Northwesterner John Ehrlichman and Council of Environmental Quality adviser Russell Train, were major proponents of big legislation designed to preserve and protect America’s wildlands, waters, and natural resources (p. 4). The central message here is that Nixon’s impressive environmental legacy—which included the signing of the National Environmental Policy Act in 1970, creating the EPA the same year, and supporting the Clean Air Act and the Endangered Species Act of 1973—was largely a product of Nixon’s calculating desire to maximize political capital by supporting signature legislation that had widening popular support from constituencies on both sides of the political aisle.

But Coodley and Sarasohn are careful to point out that Nixon’s willingness to push for environmental laws did not last forever. The turning point in the book is the winter of 1971 and 1972 where Nixon began to express serious concern that he would soon face major backlash from pro-industry voters if he continued to support stiff environmental regulations. “I have an uneasy feeling that perhaps we are doing too much,” he wrote his

chief of staff, H. R. Haldeman, in February 1971. “Just keep me out of trouble on environmental issues,” he told Ehrlichman around the same time (p. 142). Nevertheless, despite Nixon’s waning interest in environmental issues, Republican members of Congress continued to find common ground with Democratic colleagues even as the toxic political bitterness of the Watergate scandal embroiled the nation.

The book concludes by looking at the years since 1976. The authors show how Gerald Ford took little interest in expanding environmental legislation, in part because his administration was trying to deal with the effects of a worsening energy crisis and stagflation. This economic downturn, Coodley and Sarasohn contend, was one of the factors that seeded divisions in bipartisan coalitions by the Ronald Reagan years. Increasingly, the authors write, Republicans came to see environmental regulations as something that would hinder business growth and increase taxes—cardinal conservative sins in the era of Reaganomics. Another factor the authors point to in explaining conservatives’ shift away from conservation was the exponential rise in the late 1970s of corporately funded think tanks, such as the Heritage Foundation, and the expansion of new professional class of lobbyists backed by big oil and coal. Coodley and Sarasohn also discuss the Sage Brush Rebellion in the American West, the death of key Republican advocates for environmental change, and the “breakdown of a common mainstream media” as other contributing causes to the collapse of bipartisan environmental coalitions (p. 264). Again, much of the discussion here regarding the Republican turn away from environmentalism draws on the work of historians, including Morton Turner and Andrew Isenberg’s recent work, *The Republican Reversal: Conservatives and the Environment from Nixon to Trump* (2018). Readers specifically interested in this political shift in the 1970s and beyond may want to turn to this work, which is more centrally focused on what

happened after Jimmy Carter came into office in 1977.

Throughout the book, a great deal of space is devoted to minute details regarding the back-and-forth brokering between politicians that preceded the passage of various environmental bills in Congress. More text might have been devoted to the efforts of activists and environmentalists on the ground who were not on Capitol Hill. Though we see such figures as Rachel Carson briefly in this book, we only have a vague sense of the people outside the halls of Congress or the White House who were involved in the modern environmental movement that played such a pivotal role in chan-

ging the political climate around environmental issues.

Nevertheless, I know this book will remain on my reference shelf for years to come, sitting alongside other works mentioned in the footnotes, such as Richard N. L. Andrews's *Managing the Environment, Managing Ourselves: A History of American Environmental Policy* (1999). More than anything else, I hope this book finds its way into the hands of people in positions of power in Washington, DC, who must find ways to find common ground with people of differing political affiliations if we are to avert the serious environmental problems we now face.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-fedhist>

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