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Nation's Business and the environment: the U.S. Chamber's changing relationships with DDT, "ecologists," regulations, and renewable energy

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Abstract

Nation's Business was a monthly business magazine published by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, with a subscription list larger than *Business Week*, *Forbes*, or *Fortune*. This study explores how the magazine responded and adapted to the rise of environmentalism, and environmental regulation of business, by exploring its treatment of four topics: DDT, environmentalists, government regulation, and renewable energy. It is built on a full-text review of all issues of *Nation's Business* published between 1945 and 1981. It reveals the development of a variety of anti-environmental logics and discourses, including the delegitimization of environmentalism as emotional and irrational, the undermining of scientific conclusions as uncertain, the monetization of decision-making using cost-benefit analysis, and the problematization of government overregulation. The study thus traces the origins of the anti-environmental policies of the Reagan Administration to the business community of the preceding decade.

Keywords Politics · Business · Conservatives · Environment · Overregulation

Introduction

The presidencies of Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush, and Donald Trump are rightly understood to represent hostility to environmental governance and regulation. Each of these administrations, of course, was Republican, and ideologically conservative in its own way, and the partisan and ideological divide on environmental issues is widely recognized. This article explores some of the origins of that divide prior to its more public emergence during the Reagan Administration—a topic that is surprisingly understudied but that should concern anyone interested in building political support for environmental causes. It does so by examining how environmental topics were treated in *Nation's Business*, the national monthly magazine of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

Through this analysis I demonstrate that *Nation's Business* was published with a keen awareness of the rise of environmental politics and that it, and the business communities it represented, initially struggled to frame an effective response. Initial efforts at conforming to environmental expectations were quickly abandoned, and, following a period of prominent expressions of frustration and hostility toward environmentalists, the dominant consensus framing shifted toward portraying environmental regulation as burdensome to business. This research shows the rising importance of ideologically conservative institutions and actors in the business response, but also tensions between absolutist anti-government positions and those that supported government, at least to the extent that government could support business.

The study suggests that intensifying environmental regulation posed a difficult choice to business: to change drastically or to dig in and protect vested interests. Over the course of the 1970s, the U.S. Chamber moved toward the latter course, ultimately committing to a strategy of weakening government institutions, and challenging the regulatory implementation of laws rather than the laws themselves—contributing to the process of regulatory conflict that continues to this day, as changes in presidential administrations

All citations to articles in *Nation's Business* are styled yyyy.mm.pp (year, month, page), with article details following the references.

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bring with them enormous fluctuations in the strength of environmental law in the United States, even as the law itself does not change.

Background

There is a partisan and ideological polarization in the framing and evaluation of environmental issues in the United States, with self-identified conservatives and members of the Republican Party reporting less concern with environmental problems and more opposition to government action to protect the environment (Dunlap et al. 2016; McCright and Dunlap 2011; Dunlap and McCright 2008; Dunlap et al. 2001; Dunlap 1991). Understanding how and why this has happened is a multidisciplinary inquiry. Early studies of anti-environmental politics examined business opposition and grassroots and elite conservative opposition separately (Switzer 1997; Helvarg 1994; Cawley 1993). But these distinctions have been complicated by growing literatures on conservative politics and the environment (Turner and Isenberg 2018; Drake 2010, 2013; Smith 2006; Flippen 2000), conservative ideology and the environment (Boynton 2015a, 2015b; McCright and Dunlap 2013), conservative institutions and the environment (Jacques et al. 2008), conservative presidential administrations and the environment (Andrews 2020; Provost et al. 2009; Vig and Kraft 1984), business and the environment (Supran and Oreskes 2017; Layzer 2012; Oreskes and Conway 2011; Kraft and Kamieniecki 2007), the conservative legal movement (with a strong focus on the environment) (Decker 2016; Teles 2008), and conservative-business political activism (Phillips-Fein 2010). With respect to environmental politics and policy, it has become increasingly necessary to consider ideological conservatism, pro-business advocacy, and the Republican Party as separate components of a larger political whole.

Every year since 2001, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce has been the top lobbying spender in the United States, often by a wide margin.¹ It has typically lobbied for reduced environmental regulation and has been a regular participant, through the U.S. Chamber Litigation Center, in federal environmental regulatory litigation—typically taking anti-regulatory positions and opposing environmental controls.² The organization, however, has not been the topic of a great deal of study, in part because it is

suspicious of academic agendas (Katz 2015). Uniquely, it was created to articulate legal and policy positions on behalf of the entire national business community. However, it became increasingly ideological, activist, and combative in the 1970s, abandoning a slow consensus-identification strategy for a more pro-capitalist anti-government laissez faire ideology. It was the recipient of the infamous “Powell Memorandum” (Powell 1971), written by future Supreme Court Justice Lewis Powell, Jr., which advocated for a more activist defense of “the American free enterprise system” and contributed to the development of many of today’s ideologically conservative institutions—thinktanks, foundations, lobbying firms, and media enterprises – funded by business, to promote business interests and pro-capitalist ideology to the same degree that the ACLU championed civil liberties (Decker 2016; Stahl 2016; Phillips-Fein 2010). “During the 1970s, the Chamber increased its membership approximately fourfold, dramatically scaled up its direct and indirect lobbying activities, forged lasting ties to other conservative political organizations, and strengthened its networks with local affiliates, trade associations, and individual business owners around the country” (Waterhouse 2013).

Nation’s Business was a monthly magazine published by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce between 1912 and 1999. At its height in the 1970s, its paid circulation exceeded 1.25 million—more than *Business Week*, *Forbes*, or *Fortune*.³ It was the Chamber’s “house magazine” (Katz 2015), and it is one of the best publicly available sources of information on the evolution of the Chamber’s thinking on a variety of issues. Its complete run was made available online in 2012,⁴ allowing new research on questions of interest to environmental studies. How did the Chamber react to the rising environmental consciousness of the 1960s? How did it respond to the enactment of the major environmental legislation of the early 1970s? What did its members think about environmentalists? Were particular industrial sectors or politicians influential in generating rhetoric, discourse, or logic about environmental protection? And when and how did the U.S. Chamber begin to move toward its present oppositional stance?

¹ <https://www.opensecrets.org/federal-lobbying/top-spenders>. Between 1998 and 2001, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce spent \$1.6 billion on lobbying. By comparison, during the same period the largest sectoral industry association spender was the National Association of Realtors (\$646 million), while the largest single corporate spender was General Electric (\$368 million)

² <https://www.chamberlitigation.com/what-we-do/regulatory-lawsuits>

³ The magazine regularly reported its circulation on its cover and as of 1962 also included mandatory paid subscription figures in each issue. In 1980, its advertising editor noted that its paid circulation of 1.25 million compared favorably with *Business Week* (820,000), *Forbes* (690,000), *Fortune* (670,000), and *Dun’s Review* (260,000). “And over 60% of *Nation’s Business* circulation goes to top management.” 1980.08.

⁴ <https://www.hagley.org/librarynews/digital-collections-nations-business-online>

To begin to answer these questions, this study tracks *Nation's Business's* evolving coverage of environmental issues between 1945 and 1981. However, it is important at the outset to acknowledge some of the limitations of such a study. All that can be said with certainty is that particular words appeared in the print run of *Nation's Business* during the study period. It is not necessarily the case that any sentiment expressed there is attributable or generalizable—to the editors of the magazine, to the Chamber of Commerce, to a particular business sector, to a particular political party, or to the business community or conservative political movement at large. It is possible, however, to note patterns in the framing of environmental issues in the magazine's many texts (Chong and Druckman 2007; Pezzullo and Cox 2017). It is also possible to note who is expressing what opinions or employing which frames; to notice patterns in the use of particular words; to consider the likely positive or negative valences of the words used; and to mark changes in the treatment of subject matter over time. Preliminary inferences and conclusions may be drawn from such evidence, and lines of further investigation identified.

Data and method

Prior studies of business journals have reviewed only a very small sample of magazine issues (Grandy 2014; Rowley and Kurpius 2003; Mayo and Pasadeos 1991). While this may be sufficient to study phenomena that appear in most or all issues, it is not sufficient when matters are discussed sporadically, and is not always helpful in identifying shifts across time. Today, however, it is possible to identify all instances of a particular phenomenon over a given study period using computerized search support.

Consequently, this study was conducted on the complete text of *Nation's Business* between 1945 and 1981—approximately 50,000 pages of material. The study period was intended to capture postwar political development up to the beginning of the Reagan Administration, although the majority of the results turned out to date from the 1970s. To facilitate computerized search, every issue between 1945 and 1981 was run through Google's Cloud Vision API, with the resulting texts compiled into a single large file containing every word from every issue, searchable with software built to handle very large text files. This method identified more instances of the search terms and allowed for much faster search than html-based platforms.

Working from a list of search terms known to appear in texts on environmental issues,⁵ the *Nation's Business* compilation was first reviewed for occurrences of each search term, including their total number and their distribution over time. Three of the subjects chosen for analysis here—DDT,

environmentalists, and renewable energy—were chosen because they demonstrated notable patterns: in the case of DDT, a large gap in coverage during the 1960s; in the case of environmentalists and renewable energy, sudden increases in 1968 and 1974, respectively. Articles containing these search terms were collected and sorted into two categories: those wholly focused on environmental issues and those containing passing references to the search terms. For articles containing passing references, the text of the sentences containing the search terms were collected, together with information about the source(s) of the relevant statement. For articles focused more completely on the environment, the entire article was collected. These texts were then examined for similarities, differences, or other patterns in their treatment of the search terms, as reported below. The fourth subject, “overregulation,” was identified as a common theme in the later treatment of environmentalists and was then examined in the same way—a full-text search, identification of a notable pattern (a sharp increase in 1975), collection, and analysis.

To evaluate the body of collected texts, this analysis employs the conceptual terminology of “strategies.” Although this terminology is influenced by studies in rhetoric, linguistics, and environmental communication (Burke 1945; Stillar 1998; Rademaekers and Johnson-Sheehan 2014), it is itself a frame: A “strategy” implies some final aim, and a coordinated plan of action to achieve that aim, which would require some knowledge of interior motivation that is impossible to establish based only on written text. Nonetheless, as used in this study, the term is meant to convey a strategy in the exigent sense of coping strategies, meaning efforts to manage, tolerate, or reduce stress, which are necessarily responsive, reactive, experimental, developing, and short-term. The theory is that environmentalism created enormous stresses on “business”—on its identity and on the claims to moral superiority, respect, legitimacy, and power that business held. These stresses required some sort of response, and it took time and experimentation to develop something that worked. The materials discussed below are consistent with this interpretation.

⁵ The search terms were air pollution, water pollution, smog, sewage treatment, solid waste, DDT, fluoride, Rachel Carson, Silent Spring, thalidomide, national park, wilderness, wildlife, conservationist, Audubon Society, Sierra Club, ecology, ecologist, environment, environmentalist, Edmund Muskie, Ralph Nader, Barry Commoner, Paul Ehrlich, Earth Day, overpopulation, population problem, population control, petroleum, natural gas, energy crisis, solar energy, and renewable energy. This list was developed by the author prior to the review of *Nation's Business*, to support research of media treatment of environmental issues. Some of these terms (e.g., “air pollution” and “petroleum”) yielded many hundreds of results and would reward further research.

Crisis strategies: Silence, distancing, and reassessment in DDT

Between the late 1950s and late 1960s, evidence mounted that the pesticide DDT caused significant harm to wildlife populations and, following the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* and efforts by the nascent environmental legal movement, states, and eventually the federal government began to severely curtail its use (Dunlap 2014). Research into the business community's response to these developments has focused on the agricultural and chemical industries' efforts to discredit and attack Rachel Carson (Lear 1997; Murphy 2007). The response of the business community outside of the directly impacted industries has not received the same attention.

Knowing what we know today, it is difficult to appreciate how profoundly grateful the world was for DDT when it was first made widely available. The excitement for the new pesticide's possibilities permeates the pages of *Nation's Business* after World War II. DDT was "the new wonder product," and the magazine commented on its many promising applications in public health (1945.08.17, 1948.09.35), the meat industry (1945.12.113), and agriculture (1946.07.55; 1949.04.34) and on its ancillary benefits to other business ventures, including chemical research (1946.01.52), pesticide spraying service industries (1951.07.55), and even salt production (1954.05.34). DDT was said to be a discovery on par with radar and atomic energy (1946.11.37). Its dangers, on the other hand, were not much discussed. In December 1945, a news bulletin noted recommendations to avoid acute exposure (1945.12.17), and a 1950 article said that DDT, "when sprayed or dusted in highly concentrated form over a wide area. .. may kill as many friends as foes and do damage to all animal life which will take Nature years to repair." (1950.03.40). But that was all.

Then, *Nation's Business* stopped talking about DDT entirely. Following a single indirect reference in February 1960 (1960.02.14), the word "DDT" did not appear again in the magazine's pages until February 1968. Similarly, the terms "insecticide" and "pesticide" were almost never mentioned and never in the context of the nationwide controversy over their use (e.g., 1960.04.14; 1962.12.90; 1963.03.38; 1964.07.42; 1964.07.47; 1964.07.50). This period encompassed the emergence of scientific literature on the topic of DDT's ecological impacts, the serialized publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, the corporate response to the book, the subsequent state and federal discussions over new regulatory controls, the resulting series of bans, and the nationwide press coverage of all of these events in the newspapers and magazines of the era. The first response, then, in the national magazine of the organization claiming to represent US industry interests, including those of the chemical and agricultural industries, was to entirely avoid

the topic of one of the greatest challenges to their power that they had ever confronted.

This strategy of silence, however, did not survive the rise of the ecology movement in the late 1960s. Between 1968 and 1970, there was an enormous increase in awareness and concern about environmental degradation (Shabecoff 2003) and, for a brief time, a wide bipartisan consensus on the need for federal intervention—with national politicians vying to be seen as demonstrating leadership on the subject (Flippen 2000). At the same time, the silence on DDT in *Nation's Business* ended. Instead, contributors began referring to their own history with DDT in favorable ways. The most illustrious of these voices was the then-Governor of California, Ronald Reagan, who, in a lengthy pro-regulatory commentary titled "The Environment Crisis," published in *Nation's Business* two months before Earth Day said among other things that California's treatment of DDT proved his progressivism on this topic (1970.02.25). Similarly, Dow Chemical reported that it was engaged in developing safer alternatives to DDT as part of its pro-social business mission (1968.02.56). The publisher of *Sunset* magazine defended his magazine's treatment of social problems with the following explanation: "We probably are more constructive in relating to problems than many magazines that simply dwell on the problems. We were pioneers in conservation. We were using the word 'environmental' 40 years ago. We were the first to ban DDT as an advertising category. That was in 1969." (1973.01.35). DDT, then, became a byword for a mistake that could be used to demonstrate the technological advancement and learning that were the hallmarks of strong business and intelligent government. This strategic distancing, and the narrative of learning, attempted to build something positive on top of the damaging narrative of DDT.

This contrition shift, however, was about as short-lived as Richard Nixon's heartfelt interest in environmental laws (which is to say, it lasted about two years). As was the case on other topics, more anti-ecological perspectives began to emerge around DDT in monthly business briefings beginning in late 1970. As an assistant editor at the magazine wrote: "DDT and other persistent pesticides are archvillains to ecologists. But they haven't been replaced yet with suitable substitutes. .. Scientists find that DDT can be made to detoxify in a matter of days... Since patents on DDT have expired, federal funding of research this costly is a must" (1970.10.106), and "[the gypsy moth], once kept in check through use of chemicals such as DDT, has been spreading rapidly in nine Northeast states." (1971.10.85). Each of these statements contained an implication that the recent bans on DDT were ill-advised: There were no suitable substitutes, it could be detoxified with further research, and bans were having damaging follow-on effects. Along the same lines, the magazine published a letter to the editor from a bank executive who said: "For example, the social and economic

benefits of DDT were substantial, but it is not available today because of some exaggerated concern about its possible future effects.” (1976.07.20). Although these were the only instances of this narrative during the study period, even a cursory review of the revisionist literature on DDT makes it clear that this is now the dominant framing of the question of DDT in conservative political circles (Beatty 1973; Whelan 2010; Kelly and Miller 2016; Roberts et al. 2016).

On the regulation of DDT, then—the question of the banning of a chemical pesticide causing ecological harm—it is possible to trace the emergence of an oppositional rhetorical strategy, a shift from defense to offense, from contrition to self-justification, during the early 1970s. DDT, however, was largely an issue of the 1960s and early 1970s. Following the enactment of the first major federal environmental laws and the creation of the EPA in 1970, business attention shifted.

Personalizing strategies: Emotional, unreasonable, demanding environmentalists

The late 1960s saw the rise of the environmental movement as a popular social and political force and, with it, the rising use of words to describe people who held such views: first, “ecologist,” and later, “environmentalist” (the former being displaced by the latter beginning around 1968). It became possible to articulate impressions of the people who held pro-environmental beliefs, as a group, using these terms. Before 1970, the magazine did not much discuss ecologists or environmentalists (or conservationists). In fact, as suggested by its treatment of DDT, it had remained largely silent on all ecological issues throughout the 1960s. This changed, however, in a shift that also began in late 1970. *Nation's Business* began talking about environmentalists, and every reference to them was negative.

The charge of “environmental hysteria”—that environmental concerns are overly emotional and insufficiently rational—traces back at least to sexist criticism of *Silent Spring* (Smith 2001) and has been a hallmark of anti-environmental rhetoric ever since (Killingsworth and Palmer 1991). This rhetorical association was also present in the very first use of the word “environmentalist” in *Nation's Business*, in January 1971. In a report on the work of the National Industrial Pollution Control Council, one of the council members was quoted: “From the outset there has been a clear realization that we couldn't catch up with some of the near hysteria that had been cooked up by some of the environmentalist groups.” (1971.01.18). As will become clear, several representative themes emerged here: Environmentalists were discussed only from the perspective of business elites in major polluting industries, those discussions were uniformly critical, and the criticisms were generally directed only toward some putative subset of environmentalists. While the NIPCC's conflicts of interest

and other shortcomings were well understood at the time (Rodgers 1971; Steck 1974), the point here is that powerful industry leaders were developing a characterization of irrational environmentalists that began permeating business discourse more broadly. The specific word “hysteria,” however, did not reoccur in association with environmentalism in *Nation's Business*. Rather, environmentalists began to be consistently associated with destructive emotionality. For example, pesticides were “archvillains to ecologists” (1970.10.106); civil suits were filed by “indignant ecologists” (1971.08.20); “glum” ecologists (1973.08.68D) had their “hackles” up (1972.08.70); coal was “a villain to environmentalists” (1973.12.36); and ecologists would become “infuriate[d]” (1974.06.30) and would “fear for the fish, the sea birds and the beaches” (1974.01.44). They were, in other words, simultaneously fearful and angry—a delegitimizing emotional combination (Valor et al. 2020).

In addition to being emotional, environmentalists in *Nation's Business* were unreasonable, a charge that found expression in two separate ideas: first, that the problems they saw were imaginary, and second, more commonly, that they failed to consider the cost of their desires or to regulate their thirst for purity. The petroleum industry was “lambasted [by ecologists] for various problems - real and *imagined*” (emphasis added) (1973.09.53). The fish and bird deaths from the Santa Barbara oil spill were “not in the numbers that ecologists' cries implied” (1974.01.44). The head of American Electric Power explained: “The environmentalists have an advantage because they don't have to be responsible to anybody. They can speak in terms of hyperbole, making the most exaggerated statements without facts. And, what's more, they regularly do so” (1974.09.47). According to the Chairman of Mobil Oil, “some” environmentalists “push causes without knowing facts... They never put a cost to what they want. They simply decide what they want and, regardless of cost to everybody else, that's their only goal... You have to have some ‘give’ on both sides... Some environmentalists simply want to dictate to meet their own desires, and to hell with the cost.” (1973.09.53). In a similar vein, environmentalists called for pesticide bans but did not offer substitutes and called for banning coal but “fail[ed] to nominate a substitute for the needed energy” (1971.07.29), while a utility was the “victim of a pendulum that seems to have swung too far – a pendulum pushed by zealous environmentalists whose purity of purpose can look very different in the bright light of reality” (1973.10.60). In an otherwise favorable discussion of pollution control, a conservative Senator explained that “[t]here are certain environmentalists who can never be satisfied even by going back to the kerosene lamp, which the public is not going to do,” and warned of backlash if demands led to “severe dislocations, such as prolonged blackouts or rationing of fuel” (1973.04.29). Lacking oil drilling on the continental

shelf: “Do they want to stop heating and air-conditioning their homes and offices, stop driving their cars, and start eating their food raw?” (1974.01.44). The business diagnosis of environmentalism, then, identified a pressure toward overzealousness that would result, if left unchecked, in costs beyond what society at large would be willing to accept.

By 1974, the “environmentalists are unreasonable” rhetoric was also coming from the top of the Republican Party. In an interview, then-Vice President Gerald Ford echoed the Chair of Mobil Oil: “I have said to my environmental and ecological friends that they can’t be as inflexible as they might want to be, because if we don’t have a healthy economy we are not going to have a country where we can save the ecology or the environment. .. We would be far wiser to be a little less rigid, to permit the economy to continue its steady growth. We can only have a better environment if we have a strong enough economy to support those things that people want done” (1974.03.54). That is, Ford premised tradeoffs between economic growth and environmental protection and promoted environmental forbearance in the case of conflict. There were expressions of doubt that this was possible, however. As the future national chairman of the U.S. Chamber put it: “Insofar as burning coal is concerned, there’s no return to sanity by the environmentalists” (1974.06.30). “Some environmentalists and their allies in Congress don’t agree that the [EPA’s] standards go too far. In fact, they say, the regulations don’t go far enough.” (1977.10.38A). By the end of the decade, the first appearance of the word “obstructionist” to describe environmentalists appeared (1978.07.32), and the two words most often used to describe what environmentalists did were to “demand” and to “fight”—unpleasant combative associations associated with power-seeking and manipulation (Anderson et al. 2020).

Government, for its part, was said to have caved to pressure from the “bearded jerks and little old ladies” who did not care for business (1974.07.53). The nation had gone on an “ecology binge” in the early 1970s and had made some poor decisions (1973.10.86). Industrialist Willard Rockwell explained: “When the Clean Water bill was passed by the Senate in 1972, there were no votes against it, I believe. One senator admitted to me that just about none of the Senate had read it before voting on it. The issue was voted in without really being thought out – because the senators felt it was like motherhood and the flag. Everybody had to vote for it. .. Environmental laws passed without due consideration of what they do costwise have quite a snowball effect.” (1975.07.45). Thus, by 1976, business faced a “thickening network of governmental regulations” and were warned that “[f]ormerly passive, unorganized interest groups have become highly organized and strident in their demands for detailed governmental regulation of business.” (1976.08.36). In response, business was called on to act: “Specifically,

business must do everything within its power to communicate with Congress and to let Congress know where it stands on current issues and the reasons for its views. Labor engages in lobbying. The environmentalists engage in it. The consumerists engage in it. And so do many other organized groups” (1976.10.38). Whatever their other flaws might be, then, the environmentalists’ tactics had worked, and the representation of those tactics as combative and obstructionist would justify a more combative reaction.

That response, however, would not be directed toward the environmentalists. Environmentalism was popular. Rather than criticize the critics, business would turn its sights toward the government itself.

Depersonalized strategies: Overregulation and “regulatory reform”

In 1975, *Nation’s Business* began shifting its critical focus away from the people who supported environmental laws and regulations and toward government regulation of business generally. Although there were still some attempts to personalize attacks against unthinking politicians and government “regulators,” the targets were usually now more abstract: the government, overly burdensome regulation, and costly red tape. In mid-1975, this bloomed into a broad anti-regulatory consensus among conservative economists, regulated business owners, pro-business voters, and the Republican Party. This is several years earlier than is typically recognized as the beginning of business’s overregulation discourse (e.g., Layzer 2012), and the sources reveal important associations between conservative foundations, conservative academic economists, business interests, and the Republican Party.

Although “regulation” was a constant topic of discussion at *Nation’s Business* throughout the study period, the term “overregulation” had only appeared a few times prior to the 1970s, during the New Deal era, and was not used at all in the 1940s, 1950s, or 1960s. Then, in 1973, Senator James L. Buckley (Conservative Party-NY, and brother of *National Review* editor William F. Buckley, Jr.) used the word when discussing the then-proposed Consumer Protection Agency: “At some point I think the public is going to begin to understand the cost of this type of consumerism – of overregulation, of the attempt to take so many risks out of life that the consumers ends up being ill-served” (1973.04.29). “Overregulation of the economy” was next identified as a cause of inflation in 1974, with the emphasis on wage and price controls imposed by regulatory agencies such as the Interstate Commerce Commission, Civil Aeronautics Board, Federal Communications Commission, and Federal Power Commission (1974.10.24). But there was not yet a coordinated problematization of government regulation as burdensome or costly to business.

This changed in June 1975, when “overregulation” was the *Nation’s Business* cover story for the first time, and the subject of an article-length interview with economist Murray Weidenbaum presented together with excerpts from a speech on deregulation by the President of the United States, Gerald Ford. Weidenbaum had just founded the Center for the Study of American Business at Washington University in St. Louis with a grant from the conservative John M. Olin Foundation and had just published a book against price controls with the conservative American Enterprise Institute. That is, he was a government-oriented academic with strong connections to the growing world of conservative thinktanks. He would go on to head Reagan’s Council of Economic Advisors and be credited as the primary architect of Reaganomics.

With respect to the environment, Weidenbaum’s interview first focused on what he saw as problems of regulatory conflict—he used the examples of solid waste byproducts of coal desulfurization that “creates water pollution problems” and materials requirements in food processing that also created additional noise and therefore problems under OSHA. But he also claimed that “350 foundries in this country have closed in the past three years because they couldn’t meet EPA or OSHA requirements,” contributing to unemployment and military production bottlenecks, and argued that although the economic impacts of ICC and FCC regulation were increasingly understood, “No one has ever accused newer agencies like EPA and OSHA of that. All they’re concerned about is their programs. Somehow, we’ve got to get that broader idea of the total national interest across to OSHA, EPA, and the rest of the federal regulators Congress created” (1975.06.26). To do this, he advocated for raising awareness of the costs of regulatory programs and for injecting cost-benefit analysis into all regulatory decisions. “Take a leaf from the environmentalists. They pushed through a rule that before you do anything, anywhere, you must determine what impact this will have on the environment. I would turn that around. I’d like to see legislation which says that, before EPA or any other regulatory body does anything, it must file a statement describing what this will do to the economy – an economic impact statement.” The strategy, therefore, was one of communication and framing: associating environmental protection with economic cost, explicitly, every time it was considered. It was justified as a proportional reaction to the actions of the environmentalists.

Gerald Ford had ascended to the presidency in August 1974, following Nixon’s resignation. In April 1974, as Vice President, he had been the subject of a cover-story interview in *Nation’s Business* in which he had discussed his views on the energy crisis and inflation, argued for the lifting of all federal wage and price controls, and called for compromise between environmentalists and business (1974.03.54). In excerpts from a speech he gave to the National Chamber annual convention early in his presidency, he discussed the

September 1974 Summit Conference on Inflation, where, “[a]lmost without exception, the conferees recommended reform or elimination of obsolete and unnecessary regulations.” With respect to newer environmental, health, and safety regulations, he argued that the “central issue here is the need for a proper assessment, or evaluation, of costs and benefits,” and particularly the costs in consumer prices. “We must know [the] costs and measure those costs against the good that the regulations seek to accomplish” (1975.06.34). Ford, then, began working on anti-regulatory issues during his vice presidency in the Nixon Administration and began advocating for the injection of cost-benefit analysis into the regulatory process in order to weaken environmental controls much earlier than is typically appreciated.

Syndicated conservative columnist James J. Kilpatrick, who contributed a monthly piece to *Nation’s Business* at this time, picked up on these themes in his column the following month (1975.08.11). Quoting Weidenbaum, the President of General Motors, Edmund Burke, and Alexis de Tocqueville, Kilpatrick wrote that the United States had entered the “Age of the Regulators,” where emotional responses to tragedies that “pluck the heartstrings” are converted into regulatory regimes like pesticide control and consumer protection from flammable toys, to such a degree that a “new national nightmare” of stifled individual freedom, increased business costs and prices, and inflated government payrolls had begun. He heartily welcomed deregulation—not only of the older sectoral regulatory agencies but especially of the newer environmental health and safety regulations.⁶

From this point forward, “overregulation” and “deregulation” were a constant presence on the pages of *Nation’s Business*. In an article exploring issues important to voters, Oregon tire business pioneer Les Schwab was said to be “irked by what he called environmental overregulation,” particularly about prohibitions on burning tires for energy (1975.11.22). A Citicorp survey was said to have found 75% agreeing that there was “too much government control of our lives” (1976.01.06). There was another large feature on overregulation the following spring (1976.03.20). Overregulation was named one of the top six “big challenges to business” in August (1976.08.36). The President of Pitney Bowles identified overregulation as one of the top three problems facing business (1977.04.40). The CEO of Continental Airlines said: “I feel we are vastly overregulated. And the cost of overregulation is high” (1976.09.41). Another feature article claimed that “regulation poses [the] biggest challenge to

⁶ While outside the scope of this review, Kilpatrick was an important architect of the South’s “massive resistance” desegregation strategy following *Brown v. Board of Education* and had spent the 1960s and 1970s reinventing himself as a nationally syndicated columnist and early political pundit. For more information, see Atwood (2014) and Hustwit (2013).

growth” of the US business (1976.10.8A). Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield (D-MT) agreed that government’s size was getting out of hand and that overregulation was a major problem for business (1976.11.30). Senator Charles H. Percy (R-IL) offered a deregulatory prescription for “our regulatory ills” (1976.12.25). James J. Kilpatrick celebrated the initiation of constitutional litigation over OSHA inspections (1977.03.15). By the time Shearon Harris, the head of Carolina Power & Light, was elected chairman of the U.S. Chamber in May 1978, he was able to summarize the business outlook by reference to only two general problems: “The U.S. can overcome many of its problems by rejecting deficit spending and overregulation” (1978.05.58). By 1981, the subheading of the cover-story interview with Vice President George H.W. Bush, entirely about deregulation, explained: “The Vice President, leading a drive to end overregulation, pledges that the job will be done” (1981.09.28). After exploding onto the scene around 1975, the rhetoric of overregulation grew to an all-encompassing diagnosis for the problems of the nation’s business, until it was one of the primary missions of government.

Within this larger anti-regulatory sentiment, specific criticism was most often reserved for OSHA, which was mentioned far more than any environmental law in the 1970s. Of the environmental laws, criticism was most often pointed toward the Clean Air Act. The treatment of the law prior to 1974 reflected a conciliatory strategy, emphasizing the way that businesses had responded to the new requirements (1974.03.60D). But after the rise of the overregulation discourse, the U.S. Chamber, and *Nation’s Business*, turned against the law entirely. The first critiques followed the enactment of the Clean Air Act Amendments of 1977, which had created the program for the Prevention of Significant Deterioration, effectively closing “escape valves” in the 1970 law and “tightening the screws” on industries that, it was said, were already struggling to comply (1978.07.29). It became apparent that the cost-benefit analysis framework was gaining traction: The article reported critically on EPA’s claims of savings, and the U.S. Chamber’s efforts to discredit EPA’s analysis, and highlighted other costs, particularly business relocation costs, that the Chamber argued were associated with air regulation but ignored by EPA. New strategies were also present: first, the fact that the Chamber was taking positions at all and highlighting them—not something that previously occurred—second, the interest in developing “independent evaluation of the research EPA used” in standard setting and conflicts between the EPA and its Scientific Advisory Board (1979.06.83). After Reagan’s election, supported enthusiastically by the business community for his commitment to deregulation, the Chamber was said to be waiting expectantly for the recommendations of the administration’s environmental deregulatory taskforce:

“Scrapping superfluous red tape is a specialty of new EPA Administrator Anne McGill Gorsuch” (1981.07.36).

Throughout this period, overregulation was very rarely blamed on Congress, which had passed the laws requiring regulation, and had power to change them should they wish. It was never pointed at the voters who demanded environmental protection and whose interests Congress represented. Rather, the blame was cast toward environmental groups—particularly the Sierra Club and Friends of the Earth—who were said to have pressured Congress not to weaken the laws, and toward the agencies that had been handed the responsibility for implementing the laws that Congress had passed. The business anti-regulatory movement had developed in the Nixon and Ford administrations in response to long-standing economic regulation, the consumer protection movement, and new business regulations following the creation of OSHA and EPA, and had continued even under the Carter Administration, particularly but not exclusively as a project of the Republican Party. By 1981, efforts to deregulate the air travel, electric utility, railway, communications, and other business sectors were well underway, and environmental regulation, particularly under the Clean Air Act, had become the target of contestation in strategies emphasizing dispute over benefit and cost calculation and decision-making under scientific uncertainty.

The Reagan Administration did not invent this program, it implemented it. Although in 1970 he had joined other Republicans in encouraging a commitment to environmental regulation (1970.02.25), the 1970s saw Reagan’s abandonment of those commitments in preference for ideological conservatism. In his inaugural address in January 1981, Reagan summed up his governing philosophy with the famous phrase: “Government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem.” In this, he was echoing what had been said in *Nation’s Business* for the last five years. Instead, he issued Executive Order 12,291 (Feb. 17, 1981), requiring a cost-benefit analysis statement to accompany all major federal regulation—as Murray Weidenbaum had suggested to the readers of *Nation’s Business* in July 1975. His absolutist pursuit of deregulation would be his lasting legacy to the environment. In this, he reflected the new consensus position of business interests, the conservative movement, and the Republican Party.

Innovation strategy? The case of renewable energy

Throughout the study period, energy was a major topic of concern for *Nation’s Business*. However, it became one of the most important topics during and following the energy crises of 1973, and the energy industry was often the source of the anti-environmentalist and anti-regulatory rhetoric discussed above. This criticism was especially prevalent in the fossil fuel exploration industries and among electric utilities

that relied on coal to serve their customers. The 1970s, however, brought a major change in the energy industry with the tentative rise of renewable energy development. *Nation's Business's* initial response was enthusiastic, and through 1981, it appeared that there was a chance for business community support for wind and solar energy industry development in a manner that would resolve environmental concerns and create new high-technology industries.

Renewable energy was first reported positively in *Nation's Business* in 1955. In a review titled “Solar Energy May Reshape the World,” the magazine reported on an “analysis – the first of its kind” that predicted a major role for solar energy in the future energy mix (1955.11.43). The “most promising” commercial sources of energy would be “nuclear, chemical, and solar,” together with “winds, tides, and geothermic energy” resources (1959.01.66). Wind power similarly began being mentioned as a potential source of power, although much less frequently (1958.08.60). Revolutions in energy resources due to solar were occasionally predicted in the 1960s (1960.04.100; 1965.01.58).

After the October 1973 oil shock, *Nation's Business* became strongly interested in the expansion of domestic fossil energy production and in nuclear energy development. But in the immediate wake of the crisis, the President of Gulf Oil also promoted “a federal government-supported research effort. .. in such systems as geothermal energy, solar energy, magnetohydrodynamics, nuclear fusion, fuel cells, use of agricultural and waste products for power, tidal power, wind power, ocean currents and thermal gradient power” (1973.10.77). Other energy majors followed suit, supporting government research and highlighting industry efforts (1975.02.23). In April 1974, an article on “the energy sources of tomorrow” examined solar energy and many other potential alternative energy resources (1974.02.20), and the magazine ran another feature-length positive treatment of solar a few months later (1974.09.38). The magazine promoted the development of the solar industry repeatedly, reported on its noteworthy technological breakthroughs, and kept readers abreast of federal research and demonstration projects (1975.05.76, 1975.05.8B; 1975.06.14B, 1977.04.18, 1977.12.42B, 1979.01.8E). The industry received a third positive writeup in September 1975 (1975.09.78).

There were a few notes of caution, but not many. AEP warned that “the exotic paths of geothermal, tidal or solar energy” were not the way to energy independence. “As intriguing as they may seem they’re probably decades away from being our answer. / Coal. .. and electricity generated by coal. .. is the answer” (1975.10.7). James J. Kilpatrick agreed, in a laudatory piece on California’s decision to permit nuclear energy development: “Come the millennium, we may have so much solar power, wind power, tidal power, and geothermal power that power from both nuclear and fossil fuels may be largely replaced, but. .. the millennium, literally

and figuratively, is a ways off” (1976.08.13). These types of warnings, however, were few and far between, and *Nation's Business* was content to highlight many more techno-optimistic views, especially where that enthusiasm overlapped with the other high-technology field of the late 1970s: space exploration (1976.09.25; 1978.02.25; 1980.11.46; 1981.03.57).

Immediately before the 1976 election, when asked about their views on energy independence, both President Ford and Governor Carter answered with support for solar power development combined with fossil fuel expansion—Ford with oil drilling in Alaska and Carter emphasizing energy efficiency, “a major shift to coal,” or “increased dependence on nuclear power,” of which only the latter he wished to avoid (1976.09.30). After Carter’s victory, however, solar power and other renewable energy options spent several years being ignored. In October 1977, the writeup on the newly formed Department of Energy barely mentioned it (1977.10.44), and other writeups on energy similarly treated it very cursorily (1978.09.78; 1978.12.28). However, solar began to receive neutral and then positive treatment again in 1979 (1979.03.62; 1979.04.26B; 1979.05.21; 1980.03.76A). The difference was that it was now regularly framed as a far-future solution that could not replace immediate investment in large-scale centralized nuclear and fossil resources (1980.01.52; 1981.02.17). “Alternate sources of energy like solar power are still in the Tinkertoy stage” (1978.06.64). As Rep. Mike McCormack (D-WA)—author of solar development legislation—was quoted as saying: “We’ve developed a solar energy cult that has distorted what we can expect from this resource. .. [D]ramatic breakthroughs are wishful thinking” (1980.08.22). Thus, by the beginning of the Reagan Administration, the pages of *Nation's Business* had begun to reflect an ambivalence toward renewable energy development, but not an all-out rejection of support for government research in the field.

Although the Reagan Administration’s later actions are beyond the study period, it is notable that *Nation's Business* voiced no support at all, up to the end of 1981, for defunding public investment in renewable energy development or for the concept that the free market should decide which energy resources should prevail in the United States. Although the magazine had increasingly highlighted doubts about the immediate potential of renewable energy resources, these doubts had always been combined with support for government-funded research and development into new technologies and enthusiasm for government financial support for emerging renewable energy industries. But this did not translate into federal policy during the Reagan Administration, which instead defunded federal solar energy development and energy efficiency research programs (Narum 1992; Kraft and Axelrod 1984) under a “let the market decide” logic that benefited established energy technologies and practices.

Under Reagan, the overriding ideological commitment became to reduce the size of government. In addition to the weakening of environmental protections, this resulted in the undermining of one of the few governmental functions that the business community had typically supported: financial assistance in the development of new technologies.

Conclusion

It is not claimed that texts from *Nation's Business*—a single publication from a single organization highlighting a diverse range of contributors and opinions—can provide a complete representation of the business community's opinions about and responses to environmentalism or environmental regulation. Nor can it be said that the arguments and rhetoric published in *Nation's Business* necessarily reflected the views of the entire U.S. Chamber, or even the magazine's editors. It is claimed, however, that these texts capture many of the broad contours of the business community's development of anti-environmental discourses over the study period. That development occurred in many venues, public and private, and has left traces of itself throughout the historical record, requiring careful review and interpretation. *Nation's Business* is but one archive among many, but the consistency of the patterns observed in its treatment of the topics examined here is suggestive of a wider generalizability.

If the broader business community's discourse on the environment developed as it did in the pages of *Nation's Business*, then it emerged through a progression of strategies, from silence, to distancing, to questioning, to personalized attacks, to institutional attacks. This progression suggests a community, or communities, taken by surprise and struggling to adapt and respond to a new challenge—first by attempting to be conciliatory, but increasingly discontented and oppositional—first directly and, then, more effectively, indirectly. With the clarity of hindsight, this progression demonstrates the importance of business's embrace deregulation generally and cost-benefit assessment of environmental, health, and safety regulations specifically, as unifying political strategies that transformed the focus of problematization from individuals and pro-environmental opinions to a more abstract and vilifiable federal government and regulatory state. Even so, there remained support for business innovation and an accompanying approval for the federal support of emerging industry—at least for a time. This suggests that it is the combination of anti-regulatory economic policymaking and the protection of vested interests that, combined, became the hallmarks of business anti-environmentalism.

This posited narrative progression is, of course, an oversimplification of what was in fact a more complex, layered, and multi-faceted reality encompassing many individual and organizational responses. Comparing the findings of

this study to, for example, the periodicals studied in Boynton (2015a, b) reveals that other pro-business conservative publications developed response strategies to environmentalism that while broadly similar to those discussed here had their own unique emphases, approaches, and timings. Ideas appeared elsewhere before and after they appeared in *Nation's Business*, and other ideas gained currency in pro-business conservative circles without ever making an explicit appearance in the magazine, as it and its contributors participated in a larger conversation within and between business communities and organizations, conservative political communities and organizations, and the Republican Party, about the appropriate approach to environmental law and policy. The methods used here may be usefully applied to materials from these other organizations in the future, to develop an even more detailed understanding of how the current conservative-business anti-environmental consensus developed. Nor does this review exhaust the study of the U.S. Chamber, which did a great deal of organizational and lobbying work on environmental and natural resources topics (Decker 2016; Jacobs 2012) that were never mentioned in *Nation's Business*. Nor has this study uncovered everything to be found in *Nation's Business*. This article has relied on human interpretation of relatively small selections from the total text of *Nation's Business*, but the use of other environment-relevant terms that appear at higher frequency may require natural language processing or other quantitative approaches to understand.

Nonetheless, this study contributes to the growing body of evidence of the complex and evolving relationship between the business community, the Republican Party, conservative institutions and elites, and academia. In particular, the close association between the John M. Olin Foundation, Murray Weidenbaum, Gerald Ford, and the rise and spread of the broad anti-regulatory consensus deserve further study. It is remarkable that “overregulation” was conceived in such a way to align the interests of major national industries (air transportation, communication, energy) opposing traditional regulatory programs such as the Civil Aeronautics Board and Federal Communications Commission and smaller businesses primarily activated by opposition to OSHA. It seems particularly notable that fossil fuel and coal-powered electric utility interests were strongly represented in the Chamber—and that their views on environmentalists were those most often quoted in *Nation's Business*. The degree to which fossil fuel and other vested interests began to dominate the Chamber's leadership, and its fundraising, as against new and potentially competitive industries, would be an interesting question for future research into the organization. In addition, it would be worthwhile to further examine the Reagan Administration's abandonment of federal support for renewable energy development and the way that the Chamber's views developed on these questions, to understand how

and why the technological optimism of the late 1970s and early 1980s was abandoned in favor of laissez-faire policies that favored entrenched business interests.

Ultimately, this research also demonstrates the high value of openly available information. The Chamber is a powerful and influential political force in the United States, but it operates largely outside the public view. While there has been an increasing focus on financial activities and “dark money” in lobbying and American politics generally (Mayer 2016), and in environmental politics specifically (Brulle 2014), the development of ideological commitments and rhetorical strategies is also important and worth examining further in part because it suggests avenues of political response in addition to political finance reform. Finally, the research shows the value of in-depth examination of a magazine over time and consequently the potentials in exploring the increasingly comprehensive digital repositories of previously obscure or inaccessible periodicals and other materials. A close review of *Nation's Business* has revealed new information about how the response to environmentalism developed within the US business community, conservative movement, and Republican Party. It is hoped that future investigations will reveal much more.

Festschrift Acknowledgements Monty Hempel wrote in this journal about the connection between the environmental politics of today's Republican Party and the Reagan GOP of the 1980s. “Much of today's anti-environmental rhetoric and use of political appointments to sabotage environmental regulation were on display in the early 1980s” (Hempel 2018). He also lamented the “declining trust in many large institutions and growing contempt for political compromise” that define environmental politics today (Hempel 2014). If we are ever to resolve the partisan and ideological divide over environmental protection, we would be well served to better understand where it came from and how it developed. This paper is an effort to contribute to that cause.

Data availability Public code is available at: <https://github.com/ado2102/NatBusEnv/>.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author declares no competing interests.

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