

# 15 Chapter

## Living to Learn

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I found Finnish society beguiling on many levels, but in the end concluded that it could not serve as a blueprint for the United States. National differences matter. The Finns are special and so are we. Ours is a society driven by money, blessed by huge private philanthropy, cursed by endemic corruption and saddled with deep mistrust of government and other public institutions. Finns have none of those attributes.

—Robert G. Kaiser, writing in *The Washington Post*, August 7, 2005, on what Americans can learn from Finland

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WHAT CAN AMERICANS LEARN FROM THIS BOOK? It seems that the main obstacles to a switch to renewables in the US are cultures and mindsets. Two of the people who have influenced European policy the most are Americans: former US president Jimmy Carter and Amory Lovins of the Rocky Mountain Institute. Quite possibly their ideas have influenced Europe more than the United States.

When I was looking for a US publisher for my book, every publishing house I contacted said that Americans would not be interested in a book on German energy policy. What did German policy have to do with the US? I was reminded of 1993, when politicians in the US Senate claimed that government health care coverage would be too expensive and ineffective. It turned out that in 1993 the US spent much more per capita on health care than other OECD countries, still could not cover some 15 percent of its population with insurance, and performed near the bottom of the OECD pack overall. The US was not learning from the best practices abroad. As the Rocky Mountain Institute writes, “In general, Europeans seem to understand better and employ more regularly the principles of integrated design, whole-systems thinking, smart growth, and life-cycle costing.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, the first thing Americans will have to change is their minds.

Why is that? Part of the answer may be vested interests. The US is home to five of the seven largest oil companies in the world — known collectively as the

Seven Sisters — with BP and Shell being the only ones based in Europe (neither of them in Germany). While the US currently imports around 60 percent of the oil it consumes, this figure easily exceeds 90 percent for most European countries, a level the US probably will not reach for a generation. The relative lack of resources in Europe may explain why the EU is already looking for alternatives more intensively than the US is. If so, this explanation would also probably hold true for Japan.

Does that explain why the two European “Sisters” support renewables so much more than Chevron, Gulf, Texaco, and the now merged ExxonMobil? Is the general political climate in Europe simply more conducive to supporting renewables? Perhaps, but we should not overstate the success of Europe. While Europe has ratified the Kyoto Protocol, in all likelihood it will fall slightly short of its target. In addition, Europe certainly has its own vested interests. For example, as we saw, in numerous long-term road tests Greenpeace’s SmILE car performed just as well as the Renault Twingo from which it was developed, but Renault has yet to implement Greenpeace’s design changes, which would double the car’s gas mileage without raising the price of the car considerably.

If we return to the list of obstacles to environmentalism in the US that Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus discuss in “The Death of Environmentalism,” we see that they begin with “the radical right’s control of all three branches of the US government.” I take this statement not as an indictment of the Republican Party or an endorsement of the Democratic Party but simply as a sober observation that a group calling itself “neoconservative” (in a curious twist of terms, almost the exact opposite of “conservationist”) now runs the US.

The distinction between Republicans and neoconservatives is crucial because, as Germany shows, conservatives can also be conservationists. At the same time, the differences between Democrats and Republicans should not be overstated. There are and always have been quite sensible Republicans, just as there are and always have been foolish Democrats. Then – vice president Al Gore may have signed the Kyoto Protocol, but Democrats and Republicans alike opposed this move, with the US Senate voting 95-0 to reject it in the Byrd-Hagel Resolution, named partly after Democrat Robert Byrd, and with future Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry also voting against Kyoto.

The proclamation of the “death of environmentalism” seems unfair if we understand it as a criticism of environmentalists. The message that environmentalists must convey is complex, and part of their political opposition misinforms the public. Perhaps the greatest difference between public debate in Europe and in the US these days is that debate in the US is more ideological, less civil, and more mendacious. The course American environmentalists should take therefore has to be at least somewhat different than in Europe and certainly dif-

ferent from the manipulative neocon approach. We must be open and respectful, not misleading. Are we out to make enemies or friends?

If we believe (as polls suggest) that a wide majority of Americans support our agenda, then we should not be picky about our bedfellows. The country may still be split on gay marriage, abortion, gun control, and any number of other currently divisive issues, but we all agree that a clean environment, low unemployment, and energy independence are important. Our goal, then, is to demonstrate that a switch to renewables will provide all of these. A sustainable world will be a better world. In addition to adopting new technologies we will have to change our lifestyles, but the tradeoff will be positive. In October 2005, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that a Harris Interactive Poll had found that three-quarters of Americans believe that environmental protection is important and that “standards cannot be too high.”<sup>2</sup> With such a majority, how can we be losing the debate?

Let us engage our fellow Americans in long, detailed, calm discussions. The more civil our discussions are, the more easily our complex arguments can be presented. We may not convince everyone, but the unconvinced may be reduced to those behind <[www.raptureready.com](http://www.raptureready.com)>, who seem to believe that the faster we consume the planet, the faster Christ will come again.

Many societies have perished either because they refused to learn how to change or because their demise was seen as an inevitable act of God. Author Jared Diamond has described how the Vikings failed to learn from the native Greenlanders how to survive there once the warm period came to a close in the 15th century, and how the first Easter Island culture continued to cut down trees to transport the large stone monuments to their gods even when it was clear that the island’s ecosystem would collapse without trees.<sup>3</sup>

In the decades ahead, the US could send its military all over the world to secure its supply of ever scarcer resources. Some Canadians fear that under Section 605 of NAFTA the US will rob Canada of its fossil riches. When will the US realize that it has more than enough renewable resources at home? The outcome is crucial not only for the US but also for the rest of the world. If its unique combination of neoconservatism and consumerism causes US society to collapse, it may take the whole planet down with it.

Jimmy Carter said it well at the end of the 1970s: “We must not be selfish or timid if we hope to have a decent world for our children and grandchildren.”<sup>4</sup> Or as Article 20a of the German constitution puts it, “Mindful also of its responsibility toward future generations, the state shall protect the natural bases of life.”<sup>5</sup>