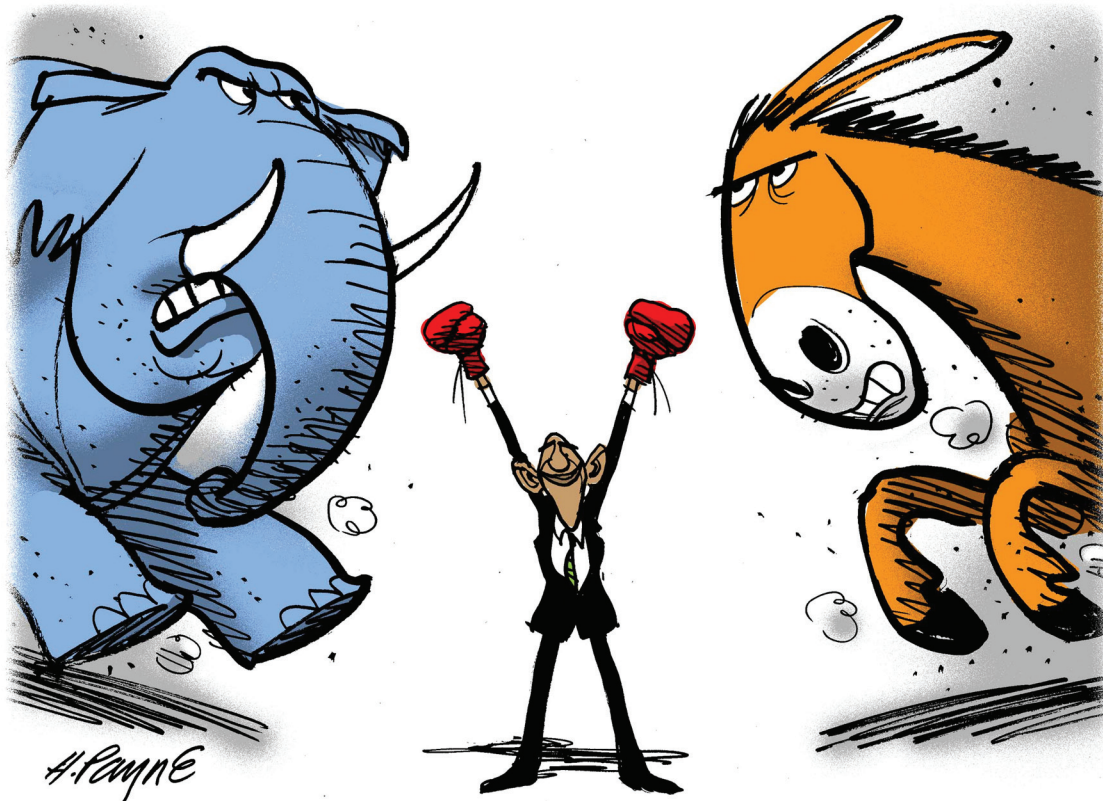


The Environmental FORUM[®]

Advancing Environmental Protection Through Analysis • Opinion • Debate



Round Two: Obama, Triumphant, Faces a Divided Congress

Rating Obama

*A Report Card
and Scorecard*

Carbon Taxes

*Why Conservatives
Should Support*

Contaminants

*Water Treatment
and the New Arsenic*

A Poor Track Record, but a Chance to Excel

WILLIAM J. SNAPE III

It is tempting, and traditional policy analysis, to cast the president's first term environmental record as a predictable back slide from his smooth campaign rhetoric. President Clinton suffered temporarily from this malady, recall, before finishing out his eight years with a slew of major environmental initiatives, including the protection of millions of acres of national forest roadless areas and vast tracts of endangered species and migratory bird habitat as well as the designation of many national monuments under the Antiquities Act.

President Obama's challenge with climate change may be more formidable but the current White House holder also needs to define his turf. And this is the crux of the matter: what will Obama fight for? Even the creation of Yellowstone National Park, the crown jewel of this country's and the world's protected area system, necessitated a political brawl in the 19th century with opposing business interests. Would Obama have gone to bat for Yellowstone?

This is a fair question because if anything has defined the president's first four years, it's been the byzantine world of cost-benefit analysis. In other words, to Obama, it appears everything is a trade off. Domestic politics, economics, international relations: it's all one large chess match. While no one denies such balancing must occur, there need to be some science-based bottom lines. This president has not yet defined any environmental bottom line for which he is willing to duke it out against profiteering polluters.

Let's start with global warming. It is true that President Obama's Environmental Protection Agency

reversed the Bush administration's negative "endangerment finding" and concluded that greenhouse pollutants do harm public health and welfare (as the Supreme Court had essentially already held). It is also true that EPA issued long overdue toxic mercury rules for coal-fired power plants. And it is similarly true that Obama raised the automobile fleet's fuel efficiency standards — though not nearly as much as Japan and Europe.

But, really, beyond these relatively obvious or cursory things, the president has done practically nothing on climate change. That's right, close to nothing. His treaty negotiators at the State Department continue to block any progress with our world partners. EPA has issued only one final regulation on climate pollutants, a pre-construction permit rule that allows new sources to gain approval with "efficiency" improvements. Methane, a greenhouse pollutant over 20 times more powerful than carbon dioxide, is largely unregulated despite, or because of, the massive amounts leaked by the oil and gas industries annually in their drilling operations. A legally binding performance standard for big power plants and other industrial sources is stuck at the proposal stage, and does not include existing power plants. There is no over-arching scientific goal for the United States' ambient air quality under the Clean Air Act. The list goes on and on.

Simultaneously, President Obama brags about the amount of oil and gas that the United States is now producing, indeed the highest rate in many years. Obama's offshore oil drilling plan virtually mimics that of George W. Bush, including the disastrous idea to allow Shell and others to drill in the fragile Arctic, where an oil spill even a fraction of the BP oil gusher would mean the end to an ecosystem that stabilizes the world's weather patterns. Oil and natural gas fracking, the process of fracturing geologic rocks for

miles below then across the earth's surface, is being actively encouraged by this administration, even on federal public lands that are supposed to protect other long-term natural values. Further, the president joined with know-nothing Republicans to dump on Europe for daring to add a carbon tax to airline flights, and then approved a fast-track portion of the Keystone tar sands pipeline from Canada just days after 20,000 people surrounded the White House and asked him to stop the entire project. If these pro-drilling actions constitute a bottom line, we are all in big trouble.

It's not just energy politics but public lands, natural resource, and wildlife issues as well. Old growth logging in Alaska and the Pacific Northwest continues to be approved. In this era of tight budgets, the president can't seem to push for an end to destructive public land subsidies by resource-extractive industries. His embattled interior secretary, Ken Salazar, has made a mess of various endangered species decisions, including the premature delisting of the wolf, the refusal to protect the polar bear from greenhouse or toxic pollutants, and an Orwellian proposed policy that would prohibit the agency from looking at historic habitat loss when listing a species despite the fact that most species are threatened precisely because of habitat loss.

So the president's grade is incomplete. His work is nowhere near done. He could end up getting an A. He could end up failing. History has a harsh way of looking at cheap opportunists. The stakes are real and high.

William J. Snape III is Senior Counsel of the Center for Biological Diversity and a Fellow at American University Law School.