

LOOKING AHEAD AND LOOKING BACK: *The Economy, the Environment, and the World*

Paul R. Portney

Any time one gets to listen, back-to-back, to one of the country's great historians and one of the world's shrewdest observers of political and economic developments, it is bound to be compelling. That was surely the case when William Cronon, the Frederick Jackson Turner Professor of History at the University of Wisconsin, and William Emmott, editor of the weekly newsmagazine The Economist, kicked off RFF's 50th anniversary symposium.



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The two speakers had very different assignments. Cronon spoke about the past—specifically, conditions in the United States leading up to the founding of RFF in 1952.

Emmott, on the other hand, talked about what the future might hold politically and economically for the United States and the rest of the world.

Despite the lack of any advance coordination, the most interesting aspect of the talks was the light they shed when heard in tandem. Had they schemed to do so in advance, they could not have succeeded better in highlighting the dramatic

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changes that occurred in the United States in the 50 years in which RFF has been in existence.

As Cronon pointed out, the central concern that gave rise to the creation of RFF was the fear that the United States might find itself, in the aftermath of World War II, with inadequate stocks of natural resources—fuel and non-fuel minerals alike. Coupled with post-war concerns about the economy (would the United States return to its depressed pre-war state?), this worry made the period between 1945 and 1952 an uncertain one at best, one in which many thought it likely that the tide of history was running against America and in favor of systems and regimes hostile to it. Contrast that with the picture painted by Emmott's

talk: he described a United States in 2002 about which some ask, “Will the most powerful nation the world has ever seen use its immense power for good or ill?” What a difference 50 years makes!

Both speakers ranged far and wide in their presentations. Cronon began by talking about two of the ways the word “nature” might be interpreted—and about the two very different conceptions of environmentalism that might flow from that important distinction. Conservation, in Cronon’s eyes, is premised on the view that humankind is part of nature; for that reason, conservationists believe in managing nature at least in part for the benefit of human beings. Multiple-use forestry would be but one example, under which ecosystem integrity would be balanced against timber harvesting, recreation, and other human-centered needs. Preservation, on the other hand, suggests “managing” nature for nature’s sake, including the prohibition of many activities in certain wilderness areas no matter how commercially valuable they may be to humankind. The debate over oil exploration in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is only the most recent and dramatic manifestation of the preservationist perspective.

Cronon also pointed to the explosion of the atomic bombs that ended World War II as having significance far beyond their wartime purpose. He argued that

these bombs demonstrated in a way no new technologies ever had that both human power and technological change were two-edged swords. Going farther, Cronon suggested that it was this demonstration that led to the creation of the modern environmental movement and its skepticism of many new technologies.

Emmott set a different course for himself, one that set the tone for much of the day, in fact. His references to the power of and the potential benefits that could be derived from democratization, globalization, freer trade, and reliance on (carefully policed) mar-

kets for goods and services were echoed by former Treasury Secretary Lawrence Summers, *New York Times* columnist and symposium moderator Thomas Friedman, and several other speakers. No other theme was sounded as often during the idea-packed day.

The environment plays a key role in all of this, Emmott said. If the United States can demonstrate that envi-

ronmental protection is consistent with a heavy reliance on the free market for the provision of most goods and services, then the market will be given a legitimacy it might not have otherwise. He went so far as to suggest that RFF has a role to play in this as well, perhaps by helping ensure that market-like mechanisms, such as tradable discharge permits or effluent taxes, really do result in environmental enhancement as well as economic efficiency. This is a challenge that

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my colleagues and I gladly accept.

To return to my theme above, neither presentation was by itself nearly so powerful as the two taken together. To be sure, we cannot characterize the United States of the late 1940s and early 1950s as a weak nation. After all, fighting side-by-side with the United Kingdom, Soviet Union, and other allies, the United States had just prevailed in the Second World War. Nor can we properly characterize the United States of 2002 as all-powerful. America learned on September 11, 2001, that its power is not sufficient to secure it against devastating attacks by determined terrorists. And its ability to conquer social ills, although formidable, has been insufficient to result in a complete triumph over poverty.

Nevertheless, Cronon's and Emmott's words cannot help but remind us of how much more confident the United States has become on the world stage. Whether we in the United States or others elsewhere like it or not, we have become the world's policeman, capable of making peace—and sometimes war—where we alone see fit, although thus far choosing instead to do so only with a coalition of the willing, to borrow a phrase from our president. Moreover, we are the world's economic locomotive, pulling the moribund economies of Japan, Germany, and Latin America behind it—thanks to what may prove to be unsustainable consumer spending. Culturally, too, the United States is a leading exporter, to the occasional delight of many and the constant chagrin of the French.

How is it that all this happened during the five decades of RFF's existence? How did the United States go from a nation fearful of resource scarcity, defeat by



William Emmott, editor of *The Economist*, and William Cronon, professor, University of Wisconsin, Madison, spoke about the U.S. in 1950 and 2050.

competing ideologies, and renewed depression to its current status as the world's only superpower?

This is a question for far-sharper students of history, politics, and economics than I. Along with many of the day's speakers, however, I believe it has much to do with this country's commitment to the rule of law, representative democracy, the provision of goods and services through competitive markets wherever feasible, and the expansion of free trade. Now, any student of U.S. politics knows that democracy can be and occasionally is corrupted; that we sometimes regulate markets we shouldn't—and fail to regulate those we should; and that our national commitment to free trade sometimes detours around farmers' fields, steel mills, and textile factories. By and large, though, we get it right—to the advantage not only of citizens of the United States but to those of other countries, as well.

We in the United States do one more thing awfully well, too, something as important as our commitments to law, democracy, markets, and free trade: we make room for those from around the world who are striving to make a better life for themselves and

their families. Between 1952, when RFF was formed, and 2002, the population of the United States increased 82%—from 158 million to 288 million. While many were the children of parents themselves born in the United States, many were not. In 1952, for example, 11 million Americans were foreign born, about 7% of the total population; by 2002, the foreign-born population numbered nearly 30 million, more than 10% of this country's 288 million inhabitants. Moreover, more than 56 million Americans in 2002 were of "foreign stock"—either born abroad themselves or born to at least one parent from abroad.

While often (though by no means always) unskilled, those who come to the United States generally are industrious and entrepreneurial. Leaving one's own country for another, after all, is risk-taking on a grand scale. For that reason, the United States has been blessed with an infusion of hardworking and talented people who aspire to the standard of living here—and who, in the process of striving to attain it, raise that standard still higher for all. I am one who believes that the best thing we can do for the environment is meet people's basic needs for food, shelter,

and clothing. Accordingly, I believe that the immigrants that have streamed into the United States since 1952 have not only made our country stronger economically, politically, and militarily, but in the process also environmentally.

This is not a popular view in all quarters. Indeed, there are those who believe that the pursuit of environmental quality and resource conservation requires the United States to limit immigration sharply, or suspend it entirely. According to this argument, fewer people mean reduced demands on our resources—a way of saying that those who come here have mouths to feed but no hands with which to work. While poppycock to me, one thing is sure: this argument will not be resolved here, nor resolved rationally anywhere else, unless the type of research for which RFF is justly famous can be applied to the issue. Though I'll not live to see it, barring further miraculous advances in medical science, perhaps this will be one of the subjects at RFF's 100th anniversary symposium! ■

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