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environmentalism for the atlantic alliance:

NATO'S EXPERIMENT

WITH THE "CHALLENGES OF MODERN SOCIETY"

ABSTRACT

As new environmental programs, organizations, and laws proliferated in the late 1960s and 1970s, U.S. President Richard Nixon began using environmental cooperation as part of his foreign policy. But his decision to pair global environmental action with the most powerful military alliance in history—NATO—puzzled nearly everyone, including the NATO allies. Recently scholars have pointed out the role of the Nixon administration in inaugurating “environmental diplomacy,” raising the status of environmental accords and winning approbation for global environmental leadership. But most studies have glossed over the role of NATO as Nixon’s principal vehicle for East-West cooperation, and have neglected entirely the views, resistance, and downright hostility of the allies to the American style of environmental leadership. In presenting these views, this essay provides a counterweight to existing studies on global environmental action in the years leading up to the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in 1972. The essay shows how Nixon’s use of NATO deepened political animosities between East and West, and between North and South, hastening the bloc-to-bloc politicization of global environmental issues.

WHEN U.S. PRESIDENT RICHARD NIXON pointed out the need to give the world’s most powerful military alliance a third dimension beyond defense and détente—a social dimension—most saw it as a lukewarm rhetorical

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Jacob Darwin Hamblin, “Environmentalism for the Atlantic Alliance: NATO’s Experiment with the ‘Challenges of Modern Society,’” *Environmental History* 15 (January 2010): 54–75.

doi:10.1093/envhis/emq008

gesture. When that social dimension turned out to be “the environment,” Europeans in particular were baffled. They knew that Nixon had been stunned by the Santa Barbara oil spill of 1969, and that he had been supportive of environmental legislation in the United States. But few anticipated his attempt to pair environmentalism with its most unlikely partner: the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Even NATO’s Secretary-General, the Italian Manlio Brosio, seemed puzzled by the American president. At a speech at the NATO Defense College, Brosio said that the alliance’s aims were defense, political solidarity, and possibly *détente*. “Social cooperation may help,” he said, “but certainly not overtake them.”¹

Under American pressure, NATO’s North Atlantic Council created the Committee on the Challenges of Modern Society in November 1969, specifically to address environmental issues. The *New York Times* heralded it thus: “NATO Joins the Fight to Save the Environment.”² That newspaper pointed out the prophecies of doom from eminent scientists such as Barry Commoner on the use of nitrates in fertilizer and its depletion of oxygen in nearby waters, Paul Ehrlich on the population explosion, and numerous other predictions about the atmosphere, forests, and melting ice caps.³ According to one *New York Times* commentator, at least NATO was trying “to face the ecological consequences”; but he added that “it is pathetic groping so far.”⁴ Others were more optimistic that the “environmental thing” (as it was known at NATO Headquarters in Brussels) would succeed.⁵ An editorial in the *Times* of London praised Nixon’s plan, because it reminded people not just of the need for defense, but of what needed defending—not only political freedom but also quality of life. Both sides of the cold war conflict needed to look inward at social problems, the *Times* opined, because they “are gradually losing the certainty that they alone have been granted by God or by history the key to the future.”⁶

Whether motivated purely by politics or by genuine conviction, one thing was clear: Nixon was trying to be an environmental president. His appropriation of the environmental movement at the turn of the decade resulted in epoch-making pro-environment legislation, though historians have demonstrated that this was based largely on the fact that the environment polled well at the time.⁷ Nixon’s fickle attitudes toward environmental regulation over the course of his presidency revealed that coherent political contours of “environmentalism” had not yet appeared.⁸ He found it useful to harness this relatively new movement for a variety of political ends in the United States.⁹ As one historian noted in a review of books on these crucial years, looking back on the Nixon era is a “fine laboratory” to analyze the formulation of environmental legislation and policy.¹⁰

The era also is crucial to understanding the key trajectories of global environmental politics, and the use of NATO as an instrument of international environmental action played an essential role. Yet scholars have ignored it: historians of NATO barely notice it, and environmental historians only recently have begun to take military organizations seriously.¹¹ But in fairness, NATO’s environmental actions were more diplomatic than military, as the allies geared up to formulate major regional and global environmental organizations. Historian J. Brooks Flippen has written that Nixon’s efforts during these years gave birth to modern American environmental diplomacy. Chronicling the

globe-trotting adventures of Nixon's personal environmental envoy Russell Train, Flippen justifiably credits him with helping to make "the environment" an integral part of the geopolitical landscape in the early 1970s, forging environmental accords and encouraging several countries to formulate their own environmental policies for the first time.¹² But while the Nixon/Train team did contribute to this, historians have glossed over NATO's role as an instrument for accomplishing it, and have neglected entirely what transpired inside NATO, particularly the extent of the allies' distaste for Nixon's unilateral and blatantly disingenuous grasp for environmental leadership.

Taking into account the views of European allies provides a significant counterweight to Nixon's image as an innovator of environmental diplomacy. Not only do these perspectives illustrate the profound weakness of American environmental leadership within the alliance, but also they reveal the ways in which Nixon's choice to use NATO hastened the entrenchment of East-West and North-South blocs in global environmental politics. NATO's environmental group struck Europeans as Nixon's attempt to fold political allies and industrialized countries into a single unit dominated by the White House. They resented it, and they resisted it. They saw Nixon's brand of diplomacy as a threat to substantive environmental negotiation through scientific and regional economic bodies, because it favored high-level talks between well-defined political factions. Despite the rhetoric of cooperation, Nixon's diplomacy encouraged bloc-to-bloc fissures, dividing cold war enemies or dividing industrialized nations from those of the developing world. Nixon's environmental diplomacy through NATO faltered on numerous fronts: it failed to forge meaningful cooperative links with the Soviet Union, and it failed to reach out to the developing world. It even failed to cultivate the respect of allies. Instead, NATO and its Committee on the Challenges of Modern Society encouraged the consolidation of powerful fault lines in the global political landscape, as the United States thrust its vision of environmental diplomacy onto the world stage through the most powerful military organization the world had ever seen.

ECOLOGY IN ACTION

PRESIDENT NIXON AND OTHER SUPPORTERS of the Committee on the Challenges of Modern Society had a difficult task from the start: to reconcile global ecological consciousness with a NATO culture that envisioned a bipolar, ideologically defined world. They tried to bring these worldviews together by adopting the holistic language of American environmentalists, emphasizing problems common to all. Initially, Nixon's vision was comprehensive. Not limited to the degradation of the physical environment, it encompassed every aspect of man's relations with his surroundings. Hence, "Challenges of Modern Society" rather than "Environment." NATO cast these problems as those faced by the industrialized world. These included not only air and ocean pollution, but also highway safety and job satisfaction. Observers were not convinced. These were legitimate issues, but why choose liaison within NATO? "Traffic safety seems a far cry from the linking of American and European military strength to hold off any threat from the Soviet Union," commented the *Washington Post*.¹³

The CCMS dispensed with such objections by citing the fundamentals of ecology: nature is a dynamic, interdependent system. The chairman of the committee, Norwegian physicist Gunnar Randers, was not an ecologist but he used ecological language to construct a justification for NATO's involvement. If all things were interdependent, he pointed out, then it was no oddity to have a military alliance act as the custodian of nature, urbanization, and industrialization. Notions of international security had evolved, to include the vitality of societies as much as the strength of armies. As Randers put it, freedom had evolved "from simple to complex forms," from personal liberty to political liberty—with the need to provide a quality of life to unlock each individual's potential. Science and technology had created enormous opportunities, he observed, but they also posed challenges, such as the enormous rise in motor vehicle crashes. Science and technology were "bringing about a changing ecological balance which raised problems mankind had never had to deal with before and which could cause disasters of an irreversible nature."¹⁴

Because most NATO countries had tough environmental problems, the Nixon administration argued that they should use the organization as a vehicle for collaboration. The allies complied willingly at first, offering a variety of cooperative projects to be sponsored by CCMS. NATO members brought forward their pet projects, hoping to bolster support for them at home with alliance-wide consensus. The American delegation, for example, stressed that cooperation among industrialized countries was vital to combat air pollution. Others, such as the Belgian delegation, felt that sea pollution held a special significance for NATO, because all of its members bordered the ocean and their economies were tied in part to fish and tourism in coastal waters. Meanwhile the Canadians reminded everyone of the importance of inland waterways and the contamination of drinking water by industrial pollution.¹⁵ The CCMS claimed all of these as its own, leaving it to individual nations to spearhead their own pet projects. That allowed the CCMS to facilitate cooperation without a massive investment in time and resources.

It soon became clear, however, that the CCMS leadership was primarily interested in promoting East-West cooperation, as part of Nixon's overall strategy of *détente* between the superpowers. CCMS treated this as a natural extension of its ecological worldview, emphasizing complexity, interdependence, and permeability of boundaries. A variety of environmental problems needed to be studied simultaneously in several different countries, regardless of their internal politics. "Indeed," Randers wrote, "the solution of one problem in isolation might exacerbate the difficulties already created by other interconnected problems." That meant that environmental projects should be sweeping in scope, with far-reaching geographical implications. Taking this to its logical conclusion, Randers argued that CCMS would be in a position to open a dialogue between East and West, particularly in Europe.¹⁶

Despite a wide-ranging flurry of ideas for international action, CCMS paired down its list of programs considerably in order to focus on those that might encourage East-West collaboration. NATO abandoned the social programs and focused principally on the natural environment. These were more likely to involve several nations at a time, and less likely to embroil NATO in divisive questions about political ideology. Many agreed with British ambassador to NATO Sir

Bernard Burrows who thought that social projects were a little too gloomy because they implied that personal happiness decreased with greater industrialization.¹⁷ The projects themselves mattered little to Nixon, as long as they had the potential for engagement with the Warsaw Pact in order to promote *détente*.¹⁸

The allies did not share Nixon's optimism for using CCMS to promote *détente*. In early 1971, Nixon sent a letter to NATO Secretary-General Manlio Brosio outlining the central challenges confronting the alliance. Nixon mentioned three: meeting Allied security challenges effectively and equitably, finding common ground and resolving points of difference within the alliance, and meeting the problems of advanced industrialized societies. On the last point, Nixon stated his desire to meet such problems collectively and to make the effort worldwide in scope.¹⁹ Brosio's short response to this letter relegated the CCMS to two sentences, referring to "good progress" but noting that further efforts would be needed to move toward practical results.²⁰ Undeterred, the Americans kept trying to make the environment a major issue, to make it worthy of high-level negotiation. At some council meetings, American ambassador to NATO Robert Ellsworth tried to persuade his colleagues that existing scientific conferences on the environment could benefit from some "upgrading," by increasing attendance of Western countries and making expressions of political will for East-West cooperation from all the allies. The Economic Commission for Europe (ECE), for example, was planning a conference in Prague in 1971—why not send high-level officials to manage the discussions there in such a way that NATO could promote East-West collaboration on environmental issues?²¹

The allies were surprised by the American strategy of "upgrading" environmental issues through NATO, primarily because the idea seemed so self-evidently doomed. To them, it appeared obvious that NATO was unlikely to have any success building bridges with the East using the environment, and it might hinder progress on genuine environmental programs. "On the surface it appeared that the involvement of a military alliance such as NATO would give the kiss of death to any East/West dialogue on the environment," one British official mused, and therefore a body like the ECE—packed with experts, not merely diplomatic negotiators—seemed a more sensible vehicle for cooperation. Why complicate it with the presence of a military alliance?²² Openly the British tried to be supportive of the United States, but behind closed doors they attempted to kill the environmental committee. Officials at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office routinely warned other British ministries and departments away from the CCMS. They pointed to the tiresome empire-building of CCMS chairman Gunnar Randers and of Russell Train, the chairman of Nixon's Council on Environmental Quality and staunch support of the CCMS.

For the NATO allies, Russell Train was the face of Nixon's vision for global environmental action. In his biography of Train, historian J. Brooks Flippen describes him as a sincere environmentalist, in contrast with Nixon, who saw environmental action as a tool for *détente* or as a means of currying votes.²³ Nixon's presidential style was to concentrate foreign policy initiatives in the White House rather than the State Department. This made Train an important figure, acting as a kind of personal foreign emissary, constantly traveling and speaking directly for the White House rather than acting through the usual State Department channels. Nixon reportedly encouraged him to invoke his

name when interacting with foreign officials.²⁴ In the face of British resistance to sending high-ranking officials to CCMS meetings—which would have lent it legitimacy—Russell Train played his Nixon card. On White House stationery he sent a letter to Britain’s Secretary of State for the Environment, Peter Walker, inviting him personally to attend a CCMS meeting to discuss international environmental plans. Under the influence of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Walker previously had avoided the CCMS. But now he had been requested personally by the White House to attend.²⁵

Train’s heavy-handed approach put off American allies. He may have been a sincere environmentalist, but Train was perceived rather differently across the Atlantic. One French diplomat complained to a British colleague that he thought the CCMS was supposed to be a group of experts, and it was not a place for “personalities,” and that the Americans in particular were turning the environment into a mere vehicle for East-West dialogue.²⁶ German diplomats felt obligated to support the pet projects of the Americans, but saw the CCMS as pointlessly repeating work better suited to existing bodies.²⁷ The British put it bluntly, “we do not like the CCMS, which is too susceptible to United States pressure, particularly from White House empire builders. We shall be stuck with it for good if it becomes the main channel for East-West environmental work—and have little control over its activities.”²⁸ Many of the allies were amazed that the Americans were so serious about it. It oversimplified environmental problems and suggested that creating East-West dialogue was itself the principal goal. At best, it promised only bloc-to-bloc cooperation, leaving neutrals such as Yugoslavia and Spain out of the picture. It certainly did not include the countries of the developing world.²⁹

On the whole, NATO delegates remained apprehensive about the “environmental thing,” but they did not openly oppose it. At a private meeting separate from its official plenary in April 1971, the Dutch, Norwegian, and Danish delegates each agreed that they personally and many of their countrymen were “unenthusiastic about CCMS,” believing that environmental issues should be left to existing nonmilitary bodies. But the Secretary-General clamped down on discussion, saying that they had already crossed that proverbial bridge; at this point they should be concerned about improving the CCMS, “but to be careful to leave the basic philosophy untouched.”³⁰

Behind the scenes, the British government worked against the American vision. Despite Russell Train’s personal invitation to Peter Walker to attend the CCMS plenary session, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office intervened to stop it. Why denigrate Walker’s office? The French had declined to send their minister, and the Germans were unlikely to do so. “[A]lthough the U.S. Government would undoubtedly be highly gratified by the attendance at the CCMS of Mr. Walker together with a second Minister, this might give them the impression that we had no longer any reservations about this Committee as a forum for environmental work, and could lead to demands for greater participation in other aspects of its work which we would prefer to avoid.” It would be unwise, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office warned, to encourage Americans to increase the pace of activities even further, adding the reminder that the British “go along with the Americans in CCMS only for political reasons—as do other European countries.”³¹

Walker's undersecretary, Eldon Griffiths, went to the plenary instead; he and Russell Train immediately clashed. At a press conference, reporters asked Griffiths if Britain would have been taking action on pollution had Nixon not pushed it with the CCMS. Griffiths naturally said yes, one representative reported, and then "he commented adversely on US over-excitability in dealing with environmental problems." Such comments belittled the significance of Nixon's environmental diplomacy, and stirred the rancor of Russell Train. Later that evening, at a dinner party hosted by Ambassador Ellsworth, Train pulled Griffiths aside and reportedly scolded him for making the remarks, and for his "cool attitude" toward the CCMS. Trying to put out the fire within the alliance, lower-level British officials argued that Griffiths had been talking to British reporters and was simply trying to play up his countrymen's contributions in the field. This "storm in a teacup," as more than one official termed it, blew over, but resentment on both sides lingered.³² The CCMS itself made a horrible impression on Griffiths: "Mr. Eldon Griffiths may not want to go to another meeting," wrote one British official. "He took a great dislike to Dr. Randers' chairmanship." Indeed the whole NATO environmental enterprise left British environmental officials cold.

Far from embracing American leadership, the allies dragged their heels. They went through the motions, gave speeches, and picked their battles, getting involved in things that interested them and steering clear of issues about which they cared little. CCMS's actual projects were coordinated by member nations, the CCMS could claim credit for them as NATO projects, even if some or most members kept their distance. For example, Britain and the United States supported meetings on oil spills, since both countries had experienced major disasters in recent years, such as the *Torrey Canyon* tanker crash in 1967 and the Santa Barbara drilling platform blowout in 1969. The United States took the lead in coordinating work on pollution, and invited delegates to its International Conference on Cities. Belgium and others hoped to sponsor panels and workshops on coastal and marine pollution, but many felt that existing bodies already were doing plenty of work, negotiating details about limitations on ocean dumping. Why crowd the field further with NATO conferences? One British official mused, "The Americans still suspect half-heartedness."³³ Complaints surfaced in official reports by May 1971, when Gunnar Randers voiced his qualms with the projects so far: sluggish progress, vague recommendations, emphasis on research rather than action, lack of practical follow-up or clearly defined goals, and ineffective information exchanges within the pilot projects. In addition, despite his efforts, NATO's programs had received little press coverage.³⁴

Officially, the CCMS reported quite different results. Russell Train treated it as a feather in the American cap, and Gunnar Randers exaggerated its impact in Europe. Calling the past year an "extremely active period," Randers wrote in 1971 that NATO had been very effective "in awakening public opinion to the challenges presented by rapidly advancing technology to the physical and spiritual well-being of the people of the Alliance." It cited the pilot projects on coastal and atmospheric pollution, disaster relief, and road safety—most of which had been "proceeding swiftly and smoothly."³⁵

ENVIRONMENTAL COOPERATION THROUGH THE IRON CURTAIN

WHAT REALLY HAD OCCURRED was indeed swift but hardly smooth. The NATO group failed to achieve East-West cooperation, and the United States continued to alienate its NATO allies by pushing a global vision of international action rather than a regional one based on practical solutions to real environmental problems. The allies resented the White House's tendency toward unilateral action on NATO's behalf, and they looked for ways to undermine it. Such issues came to a head as NATO prepared to participate in the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, planned for 1972.

If genuine regional environmental cooperation had been Nixon's goal, he might have agreed with the Europeans, who preferred to forge these bonds through economic or scientific bodies. Instead, Nixon wanted bloc-to-bloc cooperation between East and West. A. de Staercke of Belgium worried that NATO was trying to politicize the Economic Commission for Europe, which hitherto had been a forum of experts. The UK's Sir Bernard Burrows warned that other organizations—such as the OECD and the Council of Europe—were getting suspicious of NATO's intentions. The same could be said of the Warsaw Pact countries, which feared possible military implications of environmental cooperation through NATO.³⁶ France's F. de Rose warned that they ought to be careful to avoid “a concerted NATO position” at scientific meetings. This would be completely at odds with the purpose of scientific discourse, and it would be met with distrust. It would be extremely difficult to persuade the Soviets or their allies to agree to anything at all. He warned against adopting any posture that might be perceived as “too obviously pre-arranged.”³⁷

With even the best of friends shaking their heads at the CCMS, political critics looked upon NATO's “environmental thing” with intense disdain. While the allies saw practical difficulties, some in the United States saw it as symptomatic of Nixon's insincerity. To them, Nixon was attempting to appropriate a nonviolent, cooperative, earth-friendly political movement and partner it with a nuclear-armed organization that might bring the earth to ruin. Already the United States was deeply mired in controversy over its ongoing war in Vietnam. Anti-war protests and environmental concerns had come together on that issue, because the United States since the early 1960s had been spraying herbicides in Southeast Asia, destroying trees and underbrush in vast areas of countryside to make it easier for bombers to find their targets. Only after enormous pressure from scientists, activists, and politicians—all of whom based their opposition on the demonstrated links between these herbicides and birth defects in animals—did the Nixon Administration agree to phase out its spraying operations in late 1970.³⁸ To many antiwar and environmental activists, Nixon's persistence in pursuing environmental action through NATO must have seemed appallingly insensitive.

Support for the CCMS as America's premier vehicle for environmental action soon became a partisan issue in the United States. Nixon's fellow Republicans favored it, while Democrats kept their distance. Its partisan nature became clear in May 1971, when NATO sponsored the International

Conference on Cities, held in Indianapolis at Butler University. Although touted as a success by CCMS, NATO's sponsorship sparked controversy. "Many regard NATO as basically a warlike institution," Michael Leapman wrote in the *Times* of London, "and feel that its involvement in this particular undertaking is an attempt to cloak its real nature." Gunnar Randers spoke at the event and tried to dispel this impression by saying that NATO's task was to defend "the Western world against dangers that might destroy these countries and the kind of life we have built up and want to maintain in the Western world." Nixon sent his vice president, Spiro Agnew, to deliver the closing address, while Democrat Hubert Humphrey cancelled his plans to attend, shying from controversy.³⁹

At Indianapolis, described by the *Washington Post* as a "Midwestern Republican citadel," Agnew wheeled out Nixon's arguments in favor of NATO's involvement in environmental action. He echoed the imagery used by former President Dwight Eisenhower, saying, "We still need the sword as well as the plowshare." But Agnew had other axes to grind, taking the opportunity to criticize some American cities' desire to be perceived as "national cities" rather than just major cities within a state. The vice president deplored the idea, saying that it would encourage states to abrogate their responsibilities and instead make major cities "wards of the federal government." And while the meeting itself was supposed to be an alliancewide international conference, it turned out to be forum for partisan speechmaking. Most of the American participants were representatives of the Nixon administration. Meanwhile, outside, the conference was "enlivened by about 75 young shaggy-haired student protesters who awaited Agnew's arrival shouting 'No to NATO' and 'Stop the War.'"⁴⁰

Back in Europe, NATO's Senior Political Committee (separate from CCMS) took a dim view of Nixon's plan to use "the environmental thing" to foster East-West accord. Committee members were not sure what to expect from the Soviets and Eastern Europeans on environmental cooperation. Czechoslovakia, Poland and Romania all had demonstrated within the Economic Commission for Europe an interest in East-West cooperation, particularly on marine pollution of the Baltic or river pollution of the Danube and Elbe. Even the Soviets appeared positive about it. At the Twenty-Fourth Communist Party of the Soviet Union Congress in April 1971, Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin mentioned the preservation of the ocean's purity as a potential subject of cooperation. If Kosygin was serious about this desire, then it might be possible to link several ocean projects in Northern Europe: the Belgian North Sea modeling project, a similar one afoot in Eastern Europe, and the upcoming Oslo conference on dumping toxic substances into the sea.⁴¹

Despite these small signs of possibility, most NATO analysts were deeply cynical of the Eastern bloc's desire to open up an environmental dialogue. One document cited "Eastern unwillingness—in part ideological—to recognize the magnitude of the problem," and the Soviet Union's longstanding will to sacrifice environmental concerns in the name of economic growth or political objectives. One source estimated that only about 20 percent of the nation's waste water was treated for decontamination, leaving millions of tons of pollutants to be dumped into rivers. Still, Soviet scientists had created the Joint Council on Problems of the Environment, and had entered a scientist exchange

agreement with the United States that included a section called “Man and his Environment.” NATO was skeptical: in spite of these efforts, one report observed, “the Soviet leadership still clearly places priority on economic growth at almost any cost.”⁴²

Among Soviet allies, NATO saw better opportunities due to a hodge-podge of motivations. Czechoslovakia, recently invaded by the Soviet Union, appeared to be reaching out to the West to address its environmental degradation, especially in the realm of water and air pollution. East Germany had plenty of reasons to want to solve its air and water pollution problems, but NATO doubted whether these concerns could temper the country’s drive for international recognition and increased industrial output. Yugoslavia and Romania, by contrast, already had entered into separate cooperative projects with the United States. Poland had major air and water pollution problems, as did Hungary, with its dependence on the contaminated Danube. Even Bulgaria had created a new Ministry of Forests and Protection of the Environment. Only Albania seemed to have devoted no attention to environmental issues—as NATO put it, “[t]heir economy is the most rudimentary in Europe.” In most countries, cooperation seemed promising; however, any East-West cooperation would depend upon the attitudes of the Soviet Union.⁴³

The Soviets were not blind to Nixon’s attempt to raise the status of environmental meetings, and in response they ratcheted up the political significance of their own delegations. In May 1971, the Soviet Union sent high-level political representatives to the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) Symposium on environmental problems in Prague. At first, the ECE’s executive director, Yugoslav Janez Stanovic, noted enthusiastically that the conference might lead to an all-Europe regulatory body. But in a matter of days, faced with the molasses pace of East-West negotiation, enthusiasm dwindled and the delegates saw “no present need for any uniform system of pollution control.” They proffered reasons: too little was known about the environment, too little was understood about who might shoulder clean-up costs, and the problems varied too much from nation to nation. The representatives came away with little more than a sense that some kind of standardization was in order, not outright control of pollution.⁴⁴

The real reason behind the Prague conference’s failure was the omnipresent issue of East Germany’s participation. Upgrading environmental action—something Nixon was pushing—meant inviting the difficult issue of national delegations. In fact the “conference” had to be downgraded officially to “symposium” to avoid setting any dangerous precedents about representation. Individual East Germans attended as the guests of the host government. On the question of East-West relations, the Political Committee felt that NATO overall had misjudged the Soviet Union’s ability “to exploit politically the subject of environment in order to enhance the international status of the German Democratic Republic.”⁴⁵ As in so many arenas during the cold war, the lack of progress on the question of Germany halted significant progress on the environment.

Now tied to the volatile issue of East Germany, environmental goodwill deteriorated rapidly. What would East Germany’s status be at the Stockholm conference? “For three miraculous years,” Claire Sterling wrote in the *Washington*

Post in early 1972, “every U.N. decision on the subject has had unanimous agreement.” But suddenly it had become another vehicle upon which to wage the cold war. The “unnatural truce” was broken by the German question and the upcoming Stockholm conference. Neither West nor East Germany belonged to the United Nations, but Westerners hoped to apply the “Vienna formula” which allowed representatives of U.N. Specialized Agencies. But this favored West Germany, because it belonged to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) while East Germany did not. So the Soviets proposed postponing the conference until the whole issue of UN representation of the two Germanys could be resolved. But at the U.N. General Assembly in late 1971, the idea was put to a vote and the Soviet proposal was defeated 54 to 44.⁴⁶ Suddenly the environment was just as divisive as any other issue crossing cold war lines.

As many expected, the East Germany question never was resolved. Some Americans, including former Secretary of State Dean Rusk, argued that the universality of environmental problems justified making an exception, to let East Germany attend. Others favored inviting individual scientists from East Germany. But then Sweden took a hard line, insisting that governments should attend—and the NATO allies fell into line. Soviet enthusiasm for the conference dwindled, and Soviet officials rebuffed efforts to salvage the situation. They voted against the Stockholm budget and began to reconsider their participation. Then they canceled the visit of Maurice Strong (the conference organizer), calling it “inopportune.” Soon Communist-bloc attendance at planning meetings dropped off precipitously.⁴⁷ Ultimately, the Soviet Union boycotted the event.

Had NATO helped to make environmental cooperation another casualty of East-West discord? This particular conflict had always loomed as a possibility, and the upgrading of environmental issues helped bring it to a head. And although the Soviet Union might have boycotted the event anyway, the NATO allies believed that Nixon’s bloc-to-bloc outlook encouraged divisiveness rather than cooperation. Certainly with East-West cooperation now seeming a nearly impossible goal, it was hard to identify what NATO could hope to achieve by having its own environmental programs. Its involvement seemed to be making matters worse, just as critics expected. And yet Nixon and Train continued to push forward with the Committee on Challenges of Modern Society, much to the exasperation of the NATO allies.

CONTROLLING THE GLOBAL BRAIN

WITH THE SPECTACULAR FAILURE of East-West dialogue leading up the Stockholm conference, NATO’s Committee on the Challenges of Modern Society was difficult for the allies to take seriously. This proved especially true when the Nixon administration tried to use NATO as an allied voice in global, rather than merely East-West, environmental affairs. NATO members vigorously debated the American suggestion that the CCMS should seek an official role as part of the Stockholm conference, perhaps seeking “observer” status. The obvious objection came immediately: would this not inject politics into the UN meeting, and even encourage the Soviets to bring the Warsaw Pact

into it? The Canadians, Italians, French, Norwegians, and Portuguese all made this point—and expressed anxiety that the Americans already had made contact with the conference organizer, Canadian businessman Maurice Strong, without any consultation with NATO allies.⁴⁸

The Americans brushed off these concerns, saying that the only criterion that mattered was whether a body was doing significant environmental work. By that measure, NATO should seek participation. Besides, CCMS officials such as Randers worried that if NATO did not participate in the Stockholm conference, it would be left out of environmental affairs permanently.⁴⁹ But in what amounted to a clearly negative vote of confidence, the United States failed to persuade its NATO allies that the CCMS could play a constructive role at Stockholm. The Belgians, Germans, Danes, French, and Portuguese all stood against it. At one North Atlantic Council meeting, the American G. S. Vest grumbled that plenty of lesser bodies were going to draw attention to their work at Stockholm, and he hoped that delegates would at least bring some NATO literature to pass around.⁵⁰

Despite this setback, the committee continued to support environmental action, while the allies geared up to address their mutual interests in the outcome of the Stockholm meeting. Again they found themselves in opposition to American initiatives. The geopolitical momentum seemed to favor a new international “brain” to coordinate environmental action. One key indicator was a workshop on the international management of environmental problems, held in the summer of 1971 at the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies, in the United States. Drawing together scholars, some government officials from Britain, France, Germany, and Sweden, as well as members of the Stockholm conference secretariat, the Aspen workshop produced a series of recommendations for global effort. It embraced the United Nations as the vehicle for action, seeing regional and specialized bodies as supplemental parts of a much larger system. It rejected the notion that cooperation could succeed on a purely East-West basis, but had to include the participation of the global South.⁵¹ Although it did not recommend a new agency, it did encourage a special unit or secretariat to coordinate global action. To this end, the U.S. State Department made the suggestion of setting up a global environmental fund, to which the United States would contribute about \$100 million.

Although Aspen participants came away believing that a consensus had been reached, some Europeans abhorred the idea of a special fund, or even a global brain.⁵² In a speech at the University of Sussex, the chief scientist at Britain’s Department of the Environment, Martin Holdgate, was very critical of the Aspen workshop. He called it “a masterpiece of global generalization without adequate awareness of the national—like a building in which the architect begins by designing a roof and omits specifications of the walls by which it is to be supported or the function of those who are to work within its shelter.”⁵³ The biosphere may be a unit, he said, but most environmental problems were local, national, or regional, not requiring clunky international organizations and global action. But as Eldon Griffiths complained, “our determination to deal with this problem on a regional basis in the first instance is not really in accord with the Americans’ more global philosophy.”⁵⁴

Displeasure with the Americans also came from the French, who felt bullied by the Nixon Administration's unilateral moves. Confiding to the British ambassador in Paris, one Foreign Ministry official pointed out that most NATO members expected the allies to agree on the most important issues behind the scenes, then to present a common front at broader international meetings. But the Americans did not always support their allies, despite Americans expecting them to support NATO's work in the CCMS.⁵⁵

Bristling at the shortcomings of the White House approach, a few NATO countries created an informal "Brussels group" to help define their genuine interests in environmental politics.⁵⁶ Not only did this sidestep the CCMS, it also circumvented the White House in favor of State Department diplomats, who struck European diplomats as more experienced and reasonable. They wanted to avoid following the lead of Nixon and Train, who rarely seemed to ask their opinions—and even less often listened. If a global body were unavoidable, Britain insisted that industrialized countries (most of them conveniently housed in NATO) first should establish consensus among themselves. They could then decide what issues to bring to regional bodies or large international organizations, "including those in the LDC-ridden UN family."⁵⁷ If there had to be a global environmental brain, it had to be a feeble one that would take no initiative of its own. As one official penned in a 1971 memo: "No more machinery."⁵⁸ The allies feared not only American dominance, but also the role of developing countries in any new international body. The NATO allies feared a future of environmental action that might bleed their coffers dry, without addressing environmental concerns at home.

The Brussels Group was even narrower than NATO's already exclusive membership: it comprised the United States, Britain, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, and West Germany. They agreed to keep in touch with Maurice Strong, who headed up the plans for the Stockholm conference, and that "we should not be deflected by his grumbling that we were working in a 'secret group.'"⁵⁹ This secrecy mattered: the Brussels Group members believed that the substance of environmental agreements had consequences, that each nation had its own interests, and that the allies ought to negotiate with each other first. The very public, ecology-infused language of the White House, along with its unilateral actions, had convinced the allies to take matters into their own hands rather than to rely on American leadership.

On a small wooded estate outside Brussels, the Château du Val Duchesse, key allies outlined the steps they could make in unison in any international forum in the face of pressure from either the Soviet Union or the countries of the developing world. "The Brussels Group will continue as an unofficial policymaking body to concert the views of the principal governments concerned," Foreign and Commonwealth Office official Ronald Arculus wrote after its July 1971 meeting. He added: "But it will have to remain informal and confidential."⁶⁰

Within the Brussels Group, the irritation with the American vision came out in full flower, though State Department official Christian Herter had to bear the brunt of criticism aimed at the White House. The allies disliked the idea of pooling money and handing it over to the United Nations, particularly if American diplomats were going to ignore Europeans. In these discussions, two possible futures materialized, associated with the United States and the

United Kingdom: the American “power of the purse” and the British “power of persuasion.” Speaking for the Americans, Christian Herter continued to support the “special fund” that would provide money to a U.N.-based secretariat. Martin Holdgate and other British officials feared that the American vision would give too much influence to the “LDCs” (less developed countries). At the notion that environmental programs might expand after Stockholm, Holdgate complained, “I am sorry to be dense but do we want any extra work?” He wanted a future of streamlined programs, not a greater role for donor countries—“we expect to improve efficiency by cutting out overlap and thankless imperialism.”⁶¹ If the Americans were to get their way, Holdgate believed, Europeans would find it impossible to withhold funds from projects they did not like. He observed, “I believe the pistol must be kept on display in the cupboard as a potential final weapon which if brandished simultaneously by all the major donor countries could hardly fail to be effective.” The last thing they wanted was to have their environmental funds tied up in a U.N. body they could not control.⁶²

The extent of European opposition to America’s environmental leadership was surprisingly total within the Brussels Group. Christian Herter believed in “the power of the purse” because new environmental work would be financed from this voluntary pool of funds, and thus it actually would control spending. But all the other members of the Brussels Group disagreed, resisting any new expenditure. Most of them sided with Britain’s emphasis on the power of persuasion. The only way they might agree to the American option would be with a strong commitment to allied consensus, something Nixon and Train had never bothered with. Their governments would need to control their delegations, “so that at least the leading industrialized countries who provide most of the funds would speak with one voice in the Agencies.” A core alliance-based position would be essential on all major environmental issues. And, as one British official added, “we must be careful when expanding the group not to include awkward bedfellows.”⁶³

The NATO allies needed such assurances from State Department officials—not from Nixon and Train—in order to get on board the creation of a post-Stockholm global environmental brain. Despite the high-minded ideals of a global environmental secretariat, the allies were deeply skeptical. In Britain, Foreign and Commonwealth Office bureaucrat Frank Wheeler observed that despite the “pleas of many outside experts and academics not to mention world federalists ... when all is said and done and *pace* Maurice Strong and his friends the amount of additional environmental work on a global basis required during the coming years is in our view limited.” He and others were content to keep the real international discussions confined to the occasional “skull session” between trusted friends.⁶⁴

Reinforcing this perspective was the steady consolidation of geopolitical blocs in environmental forums. NATO allies were not the only ones acting in concert; the Soviet Union did the same with the Warsaw Pact, and the Soviet allies joined in the eventual boycott of the conference. But also Brazil attempted to shore up regional support for its environmental goals, and it assumed leadership of an emerging “LDC” bloc. Attending a Latin American regional environmental meeting in Mexico City, a British observer cynically noted that “it became clear quite early in the working sessions that the

Brazilian delegation had, as expected by some, prepared themselves to dominate the seminar, and impose their pre-conceived policies on its final product. In this they proved most successful." Europeans, invited as observers, complained that the Brazilians had sent diplomats rather than scientists to the technical meetings. Agreeing, the Canadian observer called the final report an "unmitigated disaster."⁶⁵

With NATO allies openly acting in concert, "industrialized" countries made an easy target—and Brazil did not hesitate to fire. In Britain's view, Brazil stubbornly refused to agree to restrictions that "might slow down their unfettered race to join the ranks of the industrial super-league, pollution and all."⁶⁶ Brazil and other of the "LDCs" had the moral high ground, in that they had a long way to go before they polluted as much as industrialized countries did, and they argued that they ought to be exempt from most regulations. According to one British observer, the Brazilians teamed up with the Chileans and the Cubans to suppress objections and to achieve widespread assent, resulting in a "distinct Latin American viewpoint." It did seem clear that "the Brazilian steam roller may in fact have flattened rather than convinced." But it did not matter: the resulting document would no doubt be used to persuade other LDCs around the world to take a similar view.⁶⁷ The Brazilian success darkened NATO's hopes to avoid a clash between industrialized countries and the LDCs. As one official bleakly put it, "it is so much easier to handle a subject of this sort, if you are an LDC, from the political standpoint."⁶⁸

Trying to keep the Stockholm conference on track, Maurice Strong bristled at Brazil's sudden leadership push. Writing to Martin Holdgate, the chief scientist in Britain's new Department of the Environment, Strong observed that the Brazilians had begun to dramatize environmental issues aggressively among developing countries. "They are obviously laying their plans carefully and thoroughly," Strong wrote, "and the shots are being called from the highest levels of their government." Brazil's principal strategy was to galvanize support in the Group of 77, a coalition of U.N. member states who identified themselves as part of the global South. Founded in 1964 at the U.N. Conference on Trade and Development, the Group of 77's goal was to negotiate collectively and to promote South-South cooperation. Brazil now leaned on the Group of 77 to approve its U.N. resolutions on the environment, the most important of which was that no Stockholm resolutions should hinder economic growth in developing countries. Holdgate wrote that these less-developed countries "see the world at their feet" and that they wanted special privileges to ensure a route for rapid industrialization amidst environmental consciousness.⁶⁹

At the U.N. General Assembly, the Brazilian delegate Miguel Ozo Rio de Almeida lampooned what he called the "para-or-pseudo-scientific extrapolation" given by Northern scientists about environmental risks. "We are threatened with the melting of polar ice-caps, the consequent increase in sea levels and the wholesale drowning of some of the largest cities and capitals in the world." He complained that such statements had caused the price of real estate to escalate at higher elevations in Rio de Janeiro. He was particularly critical of the audacity of environmentalists to complain about the depletion

of the Amazon rain forests—which consumed a great deal of carbon dioxide, as if it were the responsibility of Brazil to compensate for the North American and European excesses. He went on to list the catalog of threats due to scientific extrapolation of a “terroristic or brain-washing kind:” cancer, hunger, emphysema, poisons, and numbers of people “not on earth, but in our little already half-scuttled space-ship.” He mocked the “body of ecologists who have been free to escalate their threats and adopt an apocalyptic approach to public opinion.” Brazil’s approach, he claimed in contrast, was to set aside overdramatization and utilize “a little bit of good old common-sense.”⁷⁰

With Brazil’s and others’ identification of industrialized nations as the villains, overt action through NATO seemed more harebrained than ever before. The allies risked repeating the failure of East-West relations, this time with the global South. Even some at the U.S. Department of State tried to rein in the White House’s enthusiasm for NATO’s environmentalism. In fact, analysts and officials there had been wondering why the allies went along so uncritically with what seemed like the ill-conceived brainchild of President Nixon and Russell Train. One U.S. State Department official, John McDonald, asked a colleague at the British Embassy in Washington about NATO’s role, and “expressed some horror at the thought that [Her Majesty’s Government] might acquiesce in this idea of CCMS appearing at Stockholm.” According to McDonald, the American position was extremely controversial at the State Department. The White House had put its weight behind the CCMS and had pushed for an invitation to attend the Stockholm meeting, without consulting the bureau responsible for international organizations. According to one British embassy official, McDonald and others “were fighting a rearguard action against it, relying on the good sense of their NATO allies to kill the idea.” To McDonald, it was “pure folly,” giving the Soviets even more grist for the propaganda mill regarding East Germany.⁷¹

The U.S. Senate was not overly impressed by CCMS either, and voted in late 1971 to cut its budget completely out of a U.S. Aid bill. John McDonald conveyed the news informally to the British Embassy “with no little glee.” It was welcome news and the British relished it, writing to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in London that “you will be amused to know” about the vote, and that McDonald “thought we would no doubt appreciate the joke.”⁷² Unfortunately for the British (and State Department foes), the CCMS was not yet finished—the White House would find ways to fund its activities. It was a temporary victory that ultimately the British lamented. “It is a pity,” one official wrote, “that the State Department, whose views on CCMS remain so much closer to our own than to those of the White House, does not or cannot exercise much influence over the latter.” The upshot was that the British had to go through the motions, under pressure “to be (or at least to look) active,” playing a full role in the CCMS.⁷³

CONCLUSION

DESPITE THE WISHES of many NATO allies, the Committee on the Challenges of Modern Society did not die a natural death in the 1970s. Indeed the CCMS would remain a part of NATO until 2006, when it merged with the NATO

Science Committee to form the new Science for Peace and Security Committee. It soldiered on, continuing to support new pilot projects and to assert its place as a major player in global environmental action. Its detractors saw it as “one of the few major solecisms [Nixon] has committed in his foreign policy.”⁷⁴ But its supporters saw it as an important symbol of the alliance’s commitment to social issues and to the environment. The workshops and major conferences it sponsored culminated in resolutions calling for various measures of environmental protection. Thus NATO could claim a stake in the successful international efforts to limit oil pollution, as well as the studies to identify unsafe levels of carbon monoxide in the air. CCMS’s most stalwart cheerleader, Russell Train, even claimed that other bodies had learned to respect NATO because of its ability to facilitate national action quickly.⁷⁵ In 1976, NATO claimed credit for having improved the air quality in many European cities. Train said that a survey of major cities in NATO countries had shown improving air quality in forty-seven cities, stable air quality in twenty-seven, and only one (unnamed) case of worsening air quality.⁷⁶

A rose-colored view of this period shows the Stockholm conference as the culmination of the environmental movement’s global reach by the early 1970s—it was the dawn of a new day, the start of environmental action at the United Nations level. And the United States stood steady at the helm in this maiden voyage, because of the stream of progressive initiatives undertaken by the Nixon White House. Train later boasted that “the United States was recognized and accepted as the world leader in environmental protection programs.”⁷⁷ The American vision succeeded: the post-Stockholm era saw the creation of a new United Nations “Environmental Programme,” with a secretariat based in Nairobi, Kenya (the first major intergovernmental body based outside Europe or North America), financed by a World Environment Fund.⁷⁸ With major funding from the United States, this added to the appearance that the Americans were the global leaders of the environmental movement, and that Nixon’s and Train’s environmental diplomacy had brought it about.

In a less charitable view, by the time of the Stockholm conference, environmental politics appeared hopelessly circumscribed, following the contours of existing East-West and North-South tensions. The choice by Nixon, Train, and others to use NATO as a vehicle for environmental action hastened the process of global environmental politicization, which was all the more remarkable because most of the allies opposed doing it. While it may be true that the United States promoted a wide range of activities, even its closest allies did not recognize the importance of American environmental leadership. It was politically wise to go along with the Americans, to pay lip service to the Committee on the Challenges of Modern Society, and to work within NATO with the hope of formulating consensus. But away from the public eye, Europeans—especially the British and French—heaped scorn upon American environmental leadership.

So why on earth, amid such profound skepticism, did Nixon choose to use NATO to pursue global environmental action? The answer to this question is one verdict on Nixon’s own commitment to environmental issues. Scholars of Nixon’s domestic environmental activities suggest that he was insincere, just

Figure 1. Nixon and NATO.

NATO Photos: <http://www.nato.int/multi/photos/1969/m690410a.htm>.

At a 1969 ministerial meeting commemorating the alliance's twentieth anniversary, President Richard Nixon proposed that NATO begin working on environmental problems.

looking for votes and hoping to offset his unpopular policies in the Vietnam War.⁷⁹ Should his commitment to international environmentalism have been any different? Some suggest that his sincerity was irrelevant; Russell Train insisted that the record of accomplishment spoke for itself, and those involved could be proud of their accomplishments (as Train certainly was). Some even claim that Nixon's international environmental actions, because he had no votes to win, reveal that he saw it as a genuine priority.⁸⁰ But it is worth remembering that Nixon considered himself a realist in foreign policy, and that he saw the cold war conflict as his highest priority. His key diplomatic innovation was his commitment to linking a variety of different issues, to keep diplomats talking and to maximize ways to lubricate the process of give-and-take.⁸¹ It makes far more sense to view his environmental initiatives in this light. The "environment" was fodder in the process of East-West détente, grist for the dialogue mill—it was *something to do together*, much like scientific cooperation was. What precisely got done was of marginal importance.

The problem, of course, was that the strategy did not work. NATO allies had their own environmental ideas and did not want to hand their plans bodily over to Russell Train's "empire." They did not believe it would accomplish worthwhile work on environmental problems, they did not believe the Soviets wanted to play along, and they believed working through NATO encouraged the politicization of the entire field of environmental action. But they were unwilling to oppose it openly, so their skepticism amounted to passive-aggressive disdain for American environmental ideas and lukewarm cooperation in NATO. And they turned out to be right: the Soviets did not want to cooperate on environmental problems. In fact, the experiment with the CCMS may have deepened

tensions, encouraging the Soviets to bring the issue of East German recognition into environmental issues and ultimately to boycott the Stockholm conference. As a measure of their lack of respect for Nixon's environmental diplomacy, the allies eventually avoided the CCMS altogether and created a more exclusive "Brussels Group" to achieve consensus in the face of the countries of the developing world. And as expected, countries such as Brazil saw NATO as a symbol of the industrialized world. The advocates of the CCMS kept touting its supposedly grand successes in cleaning up Europe and inspiring other global organizations. But they failed to mention the possibility that the Committee on the Challenges of Modern Society's most important achievement was to shepherd the budding environmental movement into a more familiar mold of divisive global politics.

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NOTES

The author gratefully acknowledges the generous support of a Scholars Award from the National Science Foundation (award number 0738377).

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2. "NATO Joins the Fight to Save the Environment," *New York Times*, November 7, 1969, 3.
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5. Duncan Norton-Taylor, "NATO Will Promote Studies of Society," *Washington Post*, September 14, 1969, 2.
6. "What NATO Defends," editorial, *The Times*, April 12, 1969, 9.
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11. Lawrence Kaplan has written extensively about NATO in several books, but its environmental work plays a minute role in the sweeping history of the organization. See for example Lawrence S. Kaplan, *The Long Entanglement: NATO's First 50 Years* (New York: Praeger, 1999). The disconnect between military history and environmental history may have more to do with disciplinary biases than anything else. The connections between war, military organizations, and environmental issues are myriad. One fine example of the significance of military imagery in confronting nature is Edmund Russell, *War and Nature: Fighting Humans and Insects with Chemicals from World War I to Silent Spring* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). Interest among environmental historians in peacetime military activities has picked up in recent years, particularly among geographers interested in militarized spaces. See especially P. Whitney Lackenbauer and Matthew Farish, "The Cold War on Canadian Soil: Militarizing a Northern Environment," *Environmental History* 12 (October 2007): 920-50. Environmental historians increasingly are taking an interest in war and strategy, with explicit interest in bringing the fields together. See for examples Lisa M Brady, "The Wilderness of War: Nature and Strategy in the American Civil War," *Environmental History* 10 (July 2005): 421-47; J. R. McNeill, "Woods and Warfare in World History," *Environmental History* 9 (July 2004): 388-410.
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15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*
17. "Summary record of a meeting of the Council held at the NATO Headquarters," meetings January 28, 1970, and February 2, 1970, dated February 13, 1970, C-R(70)5, NATO Archives.
18. On Nixon's desire to use environmental action to forge bonds with the Soviet Union, specifically through Russell Train, see Flippen, "Richard Nixon, Russell Train," 1613-38.
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20. Manlio Brosio to Richard Nixon, March 25, 1971, reproduced in "Correspondence with President Nixon," March 30, 1971, PO/71/168, NATO Archives.
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22. F. B. Wheeler, "NATO and the Committee on the Challenges of Modern Society," September 3, 1971, FCO 55/659, British National Archives, Kew, England (hereafter BNA).
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41. "U.N. Body Prepared to Fight Pollution," *New York Times*, May 7, 1971; 14; James Feron, "No World Control Seen on Pollution," *New York Times*, May 9, 1971, 17.
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