

## Political Habitat: After the ball

*The parade and the parties are over. History has been made. Today is for the hangover, and then the hard work. Six distinguished environmentalists weigh in.*

**PETER DYKSTRA**

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IT'S COLD OUT HERE: A spectator watches as people file onto the inaugural stage ahead of the inauguration of Barack Obama. (Photo: EPA/Win McNamee)

**POLITICAL  
HABITAT**  
Peter Dykstra



It's been a while since environmentalists could get the time of day at the White House, let alone a warm welcome and an attentive ear. So on the first working day of the Barack Obama administration, we sought out some of the longest-suffering veterans of Washington environmentalism to get their take on what we can really expect. All of the people quoted here have been working the corridors of power since at least the Reagan administration, and they've all seen the whipsaw changes in policy and politics from Reagan to Bush to Clinton to Bush II. Together, they paint a fairly rosy picture of the future of energy, environment, and climate change legislation in Barack Obama's Washington. A few couldn't resist my request for a final assessment

of the Bush years. In fact, these seasoned, dedicated Capitol Hill vets sound quite a bit like they've just left a dark forest and caught their first glimpse of an uber-green Emerald City. The moral of this story is at the end:

"The promises of following science, following the rule of law and the transparency and openness and are the kind of principles that will lead to results. Obama doesn't just have the right policies on his website, he is setting up to follow through. They're principled and pragmatic. Big oil and dirty coal aren't exactly going to fold up their tents and go home but the public has always been on the side of protecting the environment. With a strong green team in place in the White House, we're confident that we'll overcome the obstacles in our path."

-- **Gene Karpinski, President of the [League of Conservation Voters](#).**

"There's a lot of hope, but not certainty. Obama gets it. He's the real thing. He has named some of the best people around, for energy, EPA, climate czar, CEQ (Council on Environmental Quality). He's named some spectacular people who care about the issues, know what to do, and want to do it. Their success depends on how hard the president wants to push it. On [global warming](#), leaving it to the staff won't cut it. It also depends on how devastating the economy is going to be. A lot of these people understand that a key way to get the economy going again is to create jobs and develop clean energy. I have a lot of enthusiasm right now. The potential is enormous, but it's going to be tough."

-- **Dan Becker, longtime Sierra Club lobbyist on global warming, now Director of the Safe Climate Campaign.**

"I am energized. This is the most pro-clean energy team in history. It starts at the top with Obama. Energy and environment will be a focus of his domestic agenda. We're going from an eight-year smog alert to pure clean skies. No one ever gets everything they want; there will be some rough sledding. If there's disappointment ahead, it will be Obama's inability to bring all of the Democrats along."

-- **Dan Weiss, Senior Fellow at the [Center for American Progress](#).**

"High hopes and raised expectations are always good for making change. Whether or not Obama meets all the expectations, this new era of potential is encouraging new activism and perhaps more political courage among members of Congress to potentially achieve the change."

-- **Rick Hind, Toxics Campaign Legislative Director, [Greenpeace](#).**

“In the 1970s, thirty major laws were passed. It was bipartisan. Things went downhill with the Reagan administration, and we never really caught up with the devastation he put on EPA’s budget. In the 90s, Congress got worse, even with Clinton and Gore in office. In the last eight years, we’ve witnessed the most anti-environmental White House in history, staffed either by industry lobbyists like [Steven Griles](#) or ideologues like [Gale Norton](#), who were opposed to the mission of the agencies they were supposed to run. What we’ve got now in the House and Senate is similar to the mood of Congress after Watergate. They’re determined to change the nation and change our way of governance. I don’t know if they’ll realize their potential, but the potential is there. Obama campaigned on the basis of change. Anyone would be better than Bush, but the key is how well [his cabinet](#) performs, and what direction Obama takes with economic recovery. Will this economic stimulus reduce this country’s carbon footprint?”

**-- Brent Blackwelder, President of [Friends of the Earth](#).**

“In terms of what he says, he certainly sounds good. Compared to what we’ve been listening to for 8 years he sounds really good. It may take some time to adjust to someone who shares our values ... Obama understands carbon emissions and climate and the need to boost energy efficiency; he’s been on Detroit for some time to move in this direction. He seems to be saying the right things. The people he’s appointed are our kind of people. (Obama’s choice for Energy Secretary) [Steven Chu](#) has made it clear that coal-fired power is his worst nightmare. [Jane Lubchenco](#) (Obama’s appointee to head the [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration](#)) has been working on sustainable development for years. [John Holdren](#) headed the energy institute at Berkeley (Holdren is Obama’s pick to run the [Office of Science and Technology Policy](#)). There are some really good people here. I was sorry to see Bill Richardson fall by the wayside; among the presidential primary candidates he had the strongest platform, and we have a very good supporting cast in Congress. We’ve got an administration that appears to have some of the right players in it and a Congress that’s ready to go. I can’t remember when we’ve had such a pro-energy, pro-environment situation.

**-- Lester Brown, the founder of [Worldwatch](#) and the [Earth Policy Institute](#).**

In short, veteran Washington environmentalists -- with every reason to have become jaded over the years -- are jazzed. And the moral of the story? We’ll check in with them every six months or so, to see if they’ve really found a wizard in the Emerald City.

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