Richard Nixon stands out as one of the most enigmatic political figures in modern U.S. history, and his record on the environment is one piece of the puzzle that is finally getting appropriate attention. The man photographed on the beach in a dark suit and black wingtips turned out to be about the greenest president in history, signing treaties on endangered species protection, sending a strong delegation to the UN Conference on the Human Environment, creating the Environmental Protection Agency, and implementing the critical National Environmental Policy Act, among other things. Most of the important environmental policies of the post-1945 period came about in Nixon’s Administration.

That the wing-tipped beach-comber seemed to ally himself with the tree-hugging hippies is still a cause of surprise. In his recent article, Stephen Macekura argues that Nixon saw environmental activism as both a gambit to win moderate voters and a strategy to help rebuild institutions in the wake of the turmoil of the late 1960s. In the former argument, Macekura echoes the work of Brooks Flippen, who has written the most thorough analysis of Nixon’s environmental policies. His most fascinating and original contribution comes from his focus on institution building at a time when the post-war international structure championed by the United States was coming unraveled. Using recently released volumes of the *Foreign Relations of the United States* series and the archival papers of Russell Train and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, two of Nixon’s aides who had a strong interest in the environment, Macekura makes a case that the Nixon Administration had complex motivations for its environmental diplomacy. Macekura also briefly touches on regime theory, although it does not play a central part in his analysis. Using the Train and Moynihan papers was a shrewd way to get into the minds of the most active members of the administration’s environmental diplomacy team, but it
also leaves the reader hoping for something direct from President Nixon or Henry Kissinger about what they hoped to accomplish.

Macekura emphasizes three particular moments of Nixon’s foreign policy. In the spring of 1969, just three months after his inauguration, Nixon spoke on the twentieth anniversary of NATO’s founding. At the end of his speech, Nixon called for a new element of NATO, one that would address the challenges of modern society, including environmental issues. Nearly three years later, Nixon pushed for a treaty with the Soviet Union on environmental cooperation as part of his détente policy. And finally, Nixon promised that the United States would play a leadership role at the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm (although Macekura argues that the U.S. delegation was in fact hamstrung by a tight set of instructions). In each case, Nixon and his aides concluded that environmental leadership was a means to restoring U.S. prestige among people who had given up on global institutions. NATO would become more than just a military alliance, the U.S.-Soviet rivalry could yield important scientific gains for humanity, and the Stockholm meeting would lead to the creation of an international environmental organization with real influence, the UN Environment Programme (with a major cash infusion from the United States).

In Macekura’s view, Nixon Administration members were as worried about the turmoil abroad as they were about the unraveling of civil society at home. Like other leaders in NATO, they concluded that a military alliance alone was insufficient to meet the most pressing problems of the end of the twentieth century, and the threat from the Soviet Union was not on the list. Instead, one of the biggest problems was disaffected youth losing faith in Western society. The administration argued that environmental issues were essentially non-political and hence could unite peoples across the various divides in the world.

And yet the Stockholm Conference showed that the world was not about to unite. A predictable dispute about allowing Communist East Germany to join the meeting threatened to unravel the conference before it even began. That expected threat was overcome with some artful diplomacy. The unexpected threat to unifying the globe was a split between the industrialized and non-industrialized worlds, which Macekura describes as a North-South split. The U.S. government struggled to come up with a policy on economic development that also protected the environment, while the global South emphasized the need for economic development over environmental protection. Macekura argues, in fact, that the Administration was “unable and unwilling” to respond to criticism from the South about development policy (492).

The Group of 77 developing countries challenged the idea that environmental protection was their responsibility, and they were assisted by prominent Americans, like the ecologist Barry Commoner. U.S. Ambassador to the UN George H. W. Bush tried to sell the idea of “eco-development,” with little success, echoing the U.S. inability to convince the South that the environment really was a non-political issue. Leaders like Indira
Gandhi pushed back against U.S. definitions of environmental solutions by stressing the need for poverty eradication first, even as Nixon himself, facing budgetary and political crises, began to back away from his commitments to foreign aid programs that might have shown a way to bridge the perception gap between development and protection.

Ultimately, Macekura argues that Nixon’s commitment to a strong presence at Stockholm helped to create that meeting’s most important legacy, a network of agencies and NGOs that built their own architecture for international environmental protection. Here is where he might have developed the article further. Did Nixon meet his goal of strengthening international institutions, even as he reduced support for them? And to what extent was Nixon reacting to the spectacle of counterculture marches and protests that took place in Stockholm alongside the formal diplomatic meeting? If he dove into the issue hoping, in part, for a domestic political benefit, did he wade back out because he understood that the Silent Majority was uneasy with what it saw? The article’s implication appears to be that Nixon backed away, but he had already set in motion a chain of events that he would regret later (given the volume of Nixon’s own writings, perhaps Nixon had something to say on the matter later in life).

Macekura entitled his article “The Limits of the Global Community,” and it is evident that the global community was defined more by its limits than its connections during the Nixon Administration. Nixon’s shifting position is of more than passing interest because it appears to be the starting point of a general Republican ambivalence about international environmental efforts. Since Nixon left office, Republican presidents and prominent presidential candidates, with a few notable exceptions, have opposed diplomacy to protect the environment. Most candidates in the current Republican presidential primary cycle are either declaring anthropogenic climate change (not to mention Darwinian evolutionary theory) to be a hoax, or they are disavowing earlier comments that they believed it was real. It seems evident that such opposition is driven at least as much by cultural disagreement as by analysis of the science involved, and in that sense we might see the inevitable consequences of Nixon’s uneasy walk on the beach—the suit could not co-exist with the sand. Nixon’s desire to expand the community and his decision not to support its further expansion are a bit clearer now, but explaining the larger enigma that was Richard Nixon is still a work in progress, with important policy implications.

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