IN THE MAGAZINE OPINION

HOW THE EPA'S SCOTT PRUITT BECAME THE MOST DANGEROUS MEMBER OF TRUMP'S CABINET

BY **ALEXANDER NAZARYAN** ON 2/8/18 AT 8:00 AM

Oklahoma Attorney General Scott Pruitt, President-elect Donald Trump's choice to head the Environmental Protection Agency, arrives for his confirmation hearing before the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works on Capitol Hill January 18, 2017 in Washington, DC. Pruitt is expected to face tough questioning about his stance on climate change and ties to the oil and gas industry.

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OPINION | ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY | SCOTT PRUITT | DONALD TRUMP

For someone whose entire political career has been built on an animosity to Washington, D.C., Scott Pruitt certainly appears to have enjoyed the past 12 months of federal employ. He has been to Morocco, where he shilled American natural gas. There was also a trip to a golf resort in Naples, Florida, for a meeting of the National Mining Association. And to lovely Kiawah Island, off the South Carolina coast, to join a retreat of the American Chemistry Council. Some bureaucrats may be relegated to the sad desk lunch, but Pruitt is not among them. When executives from a coal company were in town, they took Pruitt to BLT Prime, the restaurant at the Trump International Hotel that is the unofficial clubhouse of the Make America Great Again

crowd.

Not bad—and not routine—for an administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency, a post Pruitt has held since last February. Never has the EPA been in custody of a chief who so unabashedly wants to enervate the agency while serving transparent political goals. And, it should be added, the goal of the president who appointed him. Donald Trump promised, during the campaign, to abolish the EPA. That may have been bluster, but Pruitt will get him close.

Detractors know this, and they are furious. “People should be terrified with what Pruitt is trying to do with the EPA,” a scientist who has worked at the agency for several years told me. “If people aren’t terrified, they probably don’t know how important EPA is for public health.”

Making the same case in a *New York Times* op-ed, former Republican New Jersey governor Thomas Kean pleaded with Trump to fire Pruitt. “Our children and grandchildren deserve better,” Kean wrote.

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Trump has not fired Pruitt, and he has little reason to do so, since Pruitt has proved himself a ruthlessly efficient member of the president’s Cabinet amid the administration’s well-documented chaos.

Last February, White House chief political strategist Stephen Bannon promised a “deconstruction of the administrative state,” a drastic diminution of the federal government’s role in both public and private life. But deconstruction turned out to be tricky stuff for which many of Trump’s Cabinet members don’t seem especially well-equipped. Health and Human Services Secretary Tom Price was forced to resign, due to his penchant for private jet travel—at a cost to taxpayers of $400,000. Ryan Zinke, the interior secretary, is fending off similar scrutiny of his travel, not to mention unflattering reports of his self-aggrandizing tendencies (issuing his own challenge coins and insisting on the hoisting of a departmental flag whenever he is at Interior’s headquarters). Secretary of State Rex Tillerson is rumored to be ever on the cusp of dismissal, his corporate diplomatic style painfully out of place amidst Trumpian fire and fury. Steven Mnuchin, the treasury secretary, was irrelevant in last year's tax change efforts. Ben Carson, at Housing and Urban Development, had openly declared he wasn’t suited for a Cabinet position. He got one anyway, even though he appears to know nothing about housing policy and is floating inconsequentially through his workweek. Commerce Secretary Wilbur

Ross, Jr., sleeps through his.

But Pruitt has been Trump's drama-free Energizer bunny of a Cabinet appointee—his "most adept and dangerous hatchet man," *The Los Angeles Times* deemed him—channeling the president's wants without arousing his anger.

White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders told me that Trump and Pruitt "have a good relationship. President Trump is very supportive of Administrator Pruitt's work on deregulation. He regularly recognizes him in group meetings for his work on this front."

EPA officials declined repeated *Newsweek* requests for an interview with Pruitt; their only comment, sent by spokesman Jahan Wilcox, was a statement that read, in part, "We have a great working relationship with career EPA employees." Wilcox then referenced "the faux-outrage," without making clear what he meant: whose outrage it was and what about that outrage was feigned.

Even Pruitt's most vociferous critics are awed by his regulatory rollback, "the scope and the magnitude of [which] is really unprecedented," says Thomas Cmar, a lawyer for the environmental organization Earthjustice. Pruitt, Cmar notes, "has no hesitation about acting quickly and acting on his own."

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In early January, the agency published a list of 67 environmental safeguards Pruitt has either fully rolled back or is in the process of undoing. These include the 2015 Waters of the United States rule, which expanded the protections afforded by the Clean Water Act, and the Clean Power Plan, which established nationwide carbon emissions standards for power plants. It's the regulatory equivalent of the German blitzkrieg across Poland: so extensive, and effective, that no front is safe. The ban on chlorpyrifos, an insecticide EPA scientists say may cause neurodevelopmental problems in children, has been lifted, to the delight of Dow Chemical. An Obama administration rule curbed power plant emissions of mercury and arsenic, among the most destructive elements to human health. Despite scientific consensus about how harmful those emissions are, Pruitt has ordered the rule under "review," thus indicating that he intends to weaken it.

Photo Illustration by C.J. Burton for Newsweek; Photo of Pruitt: Mitchell Resnick/Official White House Photo

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY C.J. BURTON/NEWSWEEK

It’s hard to think of another instance in American public life in which the economic interests of corporations were placed so far above the health interests of individuals.

Pruitt was a vocal supporter of Trump’s decision to pull the United States out of the Paris climate agreement to reduce global carbon dioxide emissions; with Syria having joined the accords this past fall, the U.S. is the world’s lone holdout. Climate change has been scrubbed as a topic on the agency’s website at Pruitt’s personal direction. An investigation by Rachel Leven of the Center for Public Integrity published last fall found that the vast majority of Pruitt’s 46 political appointees at the EPA “previously worked for climate change doubters or industry,” including with the powerful lobbying group the American Chemistry Council, as well as energy companies Hess and ExxonMobil. Leven also noted that a dozen undersecretary positions that

would need Senate confirmation remain empty.

Pruitt's primary goal at EPA is, as he has put it, to "refocus the agency back to its core mission." To critics, that means he will curtail the EPA's regulatory reach. Another goal is what he calls "cooperative federalism," which is conservative code for slashing federal oversight of state actions.

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Some liberals loathe Pruitt even more than they do Bannon or Trump, given the potential permanence of environmental degradation. Pruitt certainly seems to feel the animosity, even within his agency. Definers Public Affairs, a Republican opposition research firm, was hired to monitor the email accounts of EPA employees critical of him.

"The mood here is morbid," says Nate James, an information technology specialist at EPA headquarters in Washington, D.C., as well as the chapter head of American Federation of Government Employees, the union that represents EPA workers. "There is an element of fear."

John O'Grady, an engineer in the Chicago regional office of the EPA, says Pruitt "does not meet with the staff" and generally behaves like a "mystery guest" within the agency. Last summer, Pruitt had his spacious office outfitted with a secure communication booth costing nearly $25,000. This was a practice common among intelligence agency chiefs, not EPA administrators. It suggested grandiosity, ambition and more than a little paranoia. Previous to that, he devoted $9,000 of taxpayer money to the installation of biometric locks and ordered an inspection of his office for listening devices. He travels with a security detail of more than a

dozen high-ranking EPA officials who are supposed to be investigating environmental crimes. They are instead guarding Pruitt.

By abolishing advisory committees, making obvious shows of obeisance to his friends in private industry and refusing to take the advice of scientists, Pruitt has also forced a remarkable attrition at the agency. More than 700 employees have left since he took over, more than a quarter of them scientists. Representative Frank Pallone, Jr., Democrat of New Jersey, who sits on the House Energy and Commerce Committee, says that purging of talented scientists will be even more deleterious than the regulatory rollback.

All this makes it easy to caricature Pruitt as a zealous anti-environmentalist, even as his associates insist his approach is guided by both principle and faith. Political ambition plainly guides Pruitt as well. In his first three months at the agency, Pruitt spent 43 days in Oklahoma, flying there at taxpayers' expense, but not on taxpayers' business. Instead, his meetings there, with energy concerns and ranchers, looked like the beginnings of a political campaign. So does his hiring of several staffers from the office of octogenarian Senator James Inhofe, Republican of Oklahoma, whom many believe Pruitt wants to replace.

Judith Enck, a former EPA administrator, says the former colleagues she keeps in touch with are "demoralized. And they are embarrassed to be working at the agency."

They can take solace in constant whispers that Pruitt doesn't intend to stay long. Most recently, he'd reportedly told people he wanted the job of U.S. attorney general Jeff Sessions, who is perennially in Trump's disfavor. Keith Gaby, communications director for the

Environmental Defense Fund, an environmental organization that frequently battles Pruitt in the courts, wondered in The Huffington Post last summer if Pruitt wanted to run for president. “We feel that [Pruitt] is an emergency-level threat,” Gaby reiterated in a subsequent conversation. “His level of ambition is not limited to the Senate.”

About two weeks before Gaby posed the question about Pruitt’s ambition, the EPA administrator traveled to Iowa, where he paid a visit to the studio of conservative radio host Simon Conway. “You must be running for the presidency,” Conway joked in an interview with Pruitt.

Pruitt, who’d once called Trump “an empty vessel” in a similar interview before the presidential election, praised his boss without revealing anything of his own intentions.

Dogmatic Originalism

Short and solid, with closely cropped white hair, the native Kentuckian who has long called Oklahoma home carries himself with a rancher’s confidence; there is nothing scholarly or bureaucratic about Edward Scott Pruitt. At 49, he is the second-youngest member of Trump’s Cabinet—Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley is his junior by four years—and his boyish smile makes him look even younger.

Pruitt grew up in Lexington, Kentucky. His father ran restaurants, while his mother tended to the three Pruitt children. On the strength of his skill as a baseball player, Pruitt entered the University of Kentucky in 1986. “Pruitt ate Little Caesars pizza in his freshman dorm with his teammates and talked constantly about baseball,” Robin Bravender wrote in her profile of him for E & E News, a news outlet focusing on energy and environmental issues. “He wasn’t a drinker or a partier.” His nickname was the Possum, because teammates decided he looked like one. “Baseball is emblematic of what made America successful,” Pruitt later told one interviewer. “We’re a peculiar and unique place where you can become what you dream.… Look at me: I’m 5-foot-9, I could have never played in the NFL, but I was able to play baseball. The game allows you to achieve great things if you persevere.”

Pruitt has never been called lazy, but his work ethic wasn’t sufficient to succeed on Division I team. In 1987, he transferred to Georgetown College, a small Baptist school outside of Lexington. (He was, and still is, a devout Southern Baptist, one of the most conservative Christian affiliations.) Pruitt continued to play baseball, eventually earning a tryout with the Cincinnati Reds. But once it became clear that a career in the major leagues was unlikely, Pruitt turned to law, entering the University of Tulsa in 1990.

One of his professors there was Rex Zedalis, who called Pruitt a “diligent” student in a recent op-ed for the *Santa Fe New Mexican*. This wasn’t exactly praise, as the professor added, “I confess regret for whatever small role I played in unleashing Administrator Pruitt on the unsuspecting public.”

After graduating from law school in 1993, Pruitt started Christian Legal Services Inc., a law practice that represented clients seeking religious liberty protections under the First Amendment. Among these was a state employee who said she had been prevented from holding a Bible study group in her home. Later reporting alleged that Pruitt’s client “had been instructed to avoid proselytizing agency clients,” but the case demonstrated Pruitt’s conviction that Christianity has been wrongly pushed out of the public square, a belief in alignment with the culture warriors then ascendant in the Republican Party.

His political career began in 1998, when he challenged Gerald “Ged” Wright, the 16-year Republican incumbent, for his seat in the Oklahoma state Senate. Although he’d never run for office, Pruitt announced his arrival in electoral politics with bracing self-confidence: “This race has little to do with Ged Wright,” he said as the primary neared. “He simply holds the seat I'm seeking.”

Pruitt won 48.9 percent of the vote, to Wright’s 45.5 percent, forcing a runoff. He won that race, and the general election that followed.

Activists gather outside Sen. Michael Bennet's office, in Denver, to oppose, "Trumps nominee for EPA Administrator, Oklahoma Attorney General Scott Pruitt, January 23, 2017. About 40 activist handed rejection letters to workers in Bennet's office.

RJ SANGOSTI/THE DENVER POST/GETTY

Just five days into the 1999 legislative session, Pruitt introduced his first bill, SB 804, which would mandate that women seeking to terminate a pregnancy first notify the fathers-to-be. Oklahoma was then a Democratic state, so the bill stood little chance of passage. Nevertheless, its introduction signaled the arrival of a dogged conservative voice in Oklahoma City. Tyler Laughlin, a deputy commissioner at the Oklahoma Insurance Department, got to know Pruitt during his ’98 state Senate campaign and became a close political adviser in later years. He describes Pruitt’s governing philosophy as “a love affair with the Constitution”—dogmatic originalism with little tolerance for expanded federal powers or updated interpretations. The man Laughlin described to me is no malicious executor of malevolent ideas. The Pruitt he knows is independent, pious and capable.

“Anything he touches, turns to gold,” Laughlin says.

Pruitt’s brand of alchemy may have attracted voters who see politics as ideological warfare,

but not those who want politicians to promise that their roads will be paved and then pave those roads. And while he had plenty of support in conservative Broken Arrow, efforts at greater prominence came to naught: Pruitt lost a race for a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives in 2001 and another, for lieutenant governor of Oklahoma, in 2006.

Pruitt's religious views earned him the nickname "Pastor Pruitt" in a 2003 *Tulsa World* newspaper editorial occasioned by a seemingly innocuous bill that would offer teachers insulation from lawsuits. Tucked into the bill was a disclaimer for science textbooks that called Darwinian evolution a "theory," effectively putting it on par with the creationist belief held by some evangelicals and Baptists that God created the universe and all its inhabitants in six days.

Pruitt's faith may also explain his approach regarding the effects of human industry on the environment. Randall Balmer, a professor of religion at Dartmouth College who was raised in the evangelical tradition, which is similar to the Baptism practiced by Pruitt, says Pruitt reminds him of James Watt, who headed the Department of the Interior during the Reagan administration. Watt once answered a question about the custodianship of the nation's natural resources by telling a congressional committee, "I do not know how many future generations we can count on before the Lord returns."

Southern Baptists are attracted to premillennialism, the notion that "Jesus is going to return at any moment," Balmer says. "If you believe Jesus is coming back at any moment, why bother with social reform, why bother with environmental protection?"

The *Tulsa World* editorial described how, after Pruitt's amendment failed to pass, he tried—without success—to claim he wasn't its author. The affair had one of Pruitt's fellow legislators, Democratic state Senator Bernest Cain, worried that Oklahoma would turn into "the laughingstock of the country."

In 2010, Pruitt was running again, this time for state attorney general. He did so by challenging the very notion of what an attorney general should be—not a legal officer adjudicating local matters, but a defender of abstract legal principles. Pruitt was not going to merely prosecute malefactors in Oklahoma; he was going to go after those he saw as threatening the state's sovereignty. This was in keeping with the rise of the Tea Party movement, which saw in President Obama the first signs of incipient socialism. Pruitt's platform was less law enforcement than constitutional defense. "As attorney general," Pruitt promised in a 2010 campaign advertisement, "day one, I would file a lawsuit against President Obama to stop the application of health care in the state of Oklahoma," a reference to the Affordable Care Act.

Just as he would seven years later, he vowed to institute an “office of federalism,” whose staff lawyers would “wake up each day, and go to bed each night, thinking about the ways they can push back against Washington.”

U.S. President Donald Trump looks on as EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt adds his signature to the Waters of the United States Executive Order in the Oval Office of the White House February 28, 2017 in Washington, D.C. The order seeks to roll back a controversial water rule opposed by farmer, rancher and homebuilder groups.

WHITE HOUSE PHOTO/ALAMY

Pruitt defeated the Democratic candidate by a 2-1 margin, thus becoming the first Republican to hold the attorney general’s seat in Oklahoma since 1971.

One of his first steps was to file suit against Kathleen Sebelius, the Health and Human Services secretary, in an attempt to keep Oklahoma out of the ACA program by refusing federal tax credits. He also shuttered the state’s Environmental Protection Unit, replacing it with a unit devoted to “federalism,” which would presumably protect Oklahoma against Washington. It was, essentially, an anti-government branch of the government. (The office has since been disbanded.)

“I always wondered why he wanted to be attorney general,” says M. Scott Carter, a longtime investigative journalist in Oklahoma who now teaches journalism at Oklahoma City Community College. “Scott Pruitt has always seemed to me a lawmaker who didn't care for government very much.”

His anti-government sentiment was also, whether by design or coincidence, a pro-corporate one. Since 2005, the previous attorney general had been working on a lawsuit against 14 Arkansas-based poultry producers who, he alleged, had polluted the Illinois River. Pruitt, who had taken more than $40,000 from the chicken farmers, according to reporting by StateImpact Oklahoma, the NPR-affiliated state-government reporting project, halted the lawsuit. Even if he claimed to be acting on principle, that principle frequently aligned with the desires of his political benefactors: Koch Industries, Chevron, Pfizer, Altria.

Nancy MacLean, a Duke University historian who recently published *Democracy in Chains: The Deep History of the Radical Right's Stealth Plan for America*, says conservative donors like Charles and David Koch and “allied elected officials” like Pruitt intend to “achieve radical change by stealth means,” without the input of a populace they’ve decided is too fickle and untutored to trust. “They rely on extensive rules changes, voter suppression, aggressive use of state government power, misinforming the public (as with voter fraud claims and climate science denial) and extreme secrecy to achieve their ends,” MacLean says.

I raised this notion with Laughlin, and he replies indignantly that Pruitt “leads people; he does not get lead."

“That’s trash,” says Kenneth Cuccinelli II, a former Virginia attorney general who knows Pruitt well and has relied on many of the same conservative donors. Donations from the Koch brothers were a sign of intellectual kinship, he says, not evidence of the puppetry liberals suspect. “That is the argument of the weak-minded. It's really pretty pathetic."

As it became clear that the Affordable Care Act was going to survive legal challenge, Pruitt shifted his focus to fighting the EPA. He sued the agency 14 times during his nearly two terms in office, often in concert with other Republican state attorneys general. In 2012, Pruitt was elected the head of the Republican Attorneys General Association (RAGA), which coordinated anti-Obama legal actions on a variety of fronts. “These days, whenever states go to court against the Obama administration, the chances are that Pruitt is somehow involved,” *Governing* magazine said in a 2015 profile of Pruitt. Even “when Oklahoma isn’t an actual party in litigation, the state often submits a legal brief against the federal government.”

He challenged federal rules and regulations on air pollution across state lines, mercury emissions, ozone levels, clean-air standards relating to energy extraction, greenhouse gases. He filed four suits challenging Obama's Clean Power Plan, as well as suits challenging the Clean Water Rule and the Regional Haze Program, which sought to reduce smog on federal lands. In some instances, *The New York Times* found, Pruitt simply cut-and-pasted language provided to him by energy companies into his correspondence with the EPA.

While those suits made Pruitt popular with conservatives, casting him as an anti-Obama crusader, not one of Pruitt's 14 challenges to the EPA has been successful in fully getting rid of an EPA rule. According to an analysis of Pruitt's lawsuits by the Environmental Defense Fund, various federal courts tossed six of the challenges, while seven others remain in litigation. His one partial victory, on a procedural matter, remains the subject of a legal dispute.

Pruitt was not up for re-election in 2016. But the governorship would be open in 2018, while Senator Inhofe, in his 80s, would likely retire in the next several years.

Then came November 8, 2016.

'Modern Air Is a Little Too Clean'

In early December, there was an unlikely sign of hope when President-elect Trump met in New York with Al Gore, the former vice president and environmental activist. Gore told reporters the meeting was "a sincere search for areas of common ground." Two days later, Pruitt walked through the same Trump Tower lobby, in anticipation of being nominated to lead the EPA.

Those who knew of his record in Oklahoma understood just how dangerous Pruitt was going to be. An anonymous EPA employee told *New York* magazine, "We were terrified when Scott Pruitt was nominated. He seemed to be somebody who understood the legal underpinnings of our work and the ways to legally unbind it. He's competent in the wrong ways." Despite the predictable hostility of Democrats, Pruitt was easily confirmed by the Senate.

Pruitt can't do much about the nation's environmental laws, but he has great say in how and when those laws are applied—if at all. Using the complexity (and obscurity) of the federal rulemaking process, Pruitt has proposed to either overturn or arrest the implementation of Obama-era rules with remarkable efficiency. Last April, for example, he wrote a letter to energy executives announcing an administrative stay on a rule regarding air pollution by energy producers. As attorney Martha Roberts of the Environmental Defense Fund later wrote, he did so "abruptly…with no formal notice given to the public until well afterwards—and no opportunity provided for public input." He made other such decisions regarding rules about

toxic wastewater effluents from energy plants, as well as a program designed to address chemical accidents and air quality standards for ground-level ozone, or smog.

“This guy is unprecedented in that he is repealing rules that have long since been final,” says Betsy Southerland, who spent 30 years as a scientist at the EPA but chose to retire shortly after Pruitt’s arrival. In addition to his clean water and clean power rollbacks, Southerland points to Pruitt’s revision of the 2015 of the Certification of Pesticide Applicators rule, which will allow younger workers (virtually all of them migrants from Latin America) to handle pesticides. She notes that "none of these rules have technical or procedural errors" that would merit a stay, further review or complete rollback.

That assertion is supported by Pruitt’s hiring of many lobbyists and lawyers who’ve worked to undermine the EPA. Samantha Dravis, “widely seen as Pruitt’s closest adviser,” according to Rachel Leven, had worked at RAGA, the national group Pruitt headed when he was attorney general of Oklahoma. William Wehrum, confirmed late last year to head the Office of Air and Radiation, sued the EPA 31 times on behalf of private industry. Robert Phalen, who will head the EPA’s new science board, once said “modern air is a little too clean for optimum health.”

Several of Pruitt’s top deputies are former aides to Inhofe, who is generally regarded as the most vociferous denier of human-caused climate change in Congress: energy-industry lawyer Andrew Wheeler, who has been nominated as the EPA’s deputy administrator, and who was Inhofe’s chief counsel; senior Inhofe aide Ryan Jackson, now Pruitt’s chief of staff; Daisy Letendre, who worked as Inhofe’s communications director and is now overseeing the Smart Sectors program, which will allow industries to tell the EPA how they would like to be regulated.

The John E. Amos coal-fired power plant operates on the banks of the Kanawha River. The plant was upgraded to meet new environmental regulation standards by 2015. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency under President Donald Trump is attempting to roll back the Obama administration's Clean Power Plan, which seeks to reduce carbon emissions that contribute to climate change.

ROBB KENDRICK/NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC/GETTY

One of Obama's main regulatory achievements was the Frank Lautenberg Chemical Safety for the 21st Century Act, which was an update of the Toxic Substances Control Act, passed in 1976. In a House of Representatives that could barely come to consensus on anything, the measured passed with a 403–12 margin in the spring of 2016. Pruitt, however, has issued rules that greatly vitiate TSCA's ability to monitor and regulate the use of chemicals. The new guidelines were written by scientist Nancy Beck, formerly of the American Chemistry Council.

Given the complexity of the issues involved, and Pruitt's apparent immunity to public outrage, courts have been the most effective means of stopping Pruitt. This is ironic, given how Pruitt pioneered the use of courts to stop his predecessors at the EPA. For example, when faced with a lawsuit by 15 states, Pruitt dropped his objection to the ozone rule. And a United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit ruled that he could not stay the rule on air

pollution by oil and gas companies.

New York Attorney General Eric Schneiderman has led the effort, with nearly 50 legal challenges against Pruitt. “We’re witnessing an all-out assault on public health and our natural resources,” Schneiderman says in a statement for this story provided by his press secretary. “My first job is to protect New Yorkers. Our federalist system puts the power in states’ hands to fight back,” the statement continues, with an obvious jab at Pruitt’s use of “federalism” to obstruct Obama’s regulatory actions.

Southerland believes the courts will ultimately prevent Pruitt from entirely undoing Obama’s legacy. However, she thinks that given all the forthcoming legal challenges, plus the motions and countermotions they will involve, the nation will not return to the environmental regulatory structure that was in place when Obama left office until 2028.

Back When Republicans Protected the Environment

Climate change was nonexistent as a political issue when President Richard Nixon created the EPA in 1970 “to make a coordinated attack on the pollutants which debase the air we breathe, the water we drink, and the land that grows our food.” To critics of the agency, the EPA has deviated from this mission and become a liberal activist organization advocating global warming science. Pruitt has called himself an “EPA originalist,” a phrase that alludes to the conservative originalists on the Supreme Court who believe that the U.S. Constitution should be interpreted in its literal, 18th-century context. In keeping with his views as Oklahoma’s attorney general, Pruitt believes environmental protection is better left to the states, which can mean no protection at all.

Pruitt’s allies say this slimming down is necessary, especially after what they see as the excesses of the Obama era. The coal miner has come to occupy a mythic—if discordant—place in Pruitt’s EPA. That tracks closely with Trump’s campaign rhetoric, with its romantic evocations of churning factories and bustling mines, an America whose return to greatness would be announced with the clang of machinery, the spewing of soot. “We are going to get those mines open,” he promised. “Oh, coal country. What they have done?”

In late March 2017, Pruitt stood grinning in the EPA headquarters auditorium as Trump, surrounded by coal miners and their bosses, signed an executive order that directed Pruitt to cancel the Clean Power Plan. “You’re going back to work,” Trump said to the people in the room. And while Pruitt virtually never mentions climate change, he talks about job creation so often one might think he’s the labor secretary…or in the midst of an electoral campaign.

To supporters, this is how it should be. Cuccinelli describes with outrage the economic conditions in southwestern Virginia, where many mountaintop strip mines have closed. Environmentalists “don’t give a flying rat’s ass about ordinary people," he says. “I’ll be a lot more open to what these people say when they show me they care as much about the bottom of the mountain as the top of the mountain."

“That’s a pretty arresting metaphor,” says Eric Schaeffer, who resigned from the EPA in 2002 and now runs Environmental Integrity Project, a nonprofit that has been critical of Pruitt. It is also a delusive one, he warns, with its corollary: a “worker’s paradise” in which Pittsburgh is a steel town again, while the mines of West Virginia have churned back to life.

A report published by Schaeffer’s organization earlier this year found that “only 0.2% of ‘mass’ layoffs— layoffs of 50 or more workers—are caused by government intervention or regulations” and that for “every job lost due to regulations, 15 are lost due to ‘cost cutting’ and 30 are lost due to ‘organizational changes.’”

Last summer, Pruitt asserted that the “coal sector” had created 50,000 jobs in the first five months of the Trump administration. In fact, fewer than 2,000 such jobs have been created, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Automation will diminish fossil fuel sector more than any regulator could. “Pretty soon, it’s gonna be three guys at a console,” Schaeffer says of mining jobs. Despite that, he worries the EPA is being used as a scapegoat. As long as any regulatory structure exists, Trump and Pruitt can blame the agency for lack of growth in the industries they’ve promised to bolster. They can also justify further regulatory rollbacks by continuing to misrepresent the effects of regulation on industry. Either way, they can fuel the very kind of resentment that animates the right.

Superfund Me

In late January 1977, a severe blizzard brought 40-foot drifts of snow to Buffalo and its surroundings. When the snow melted that spring, the runoff significantly raised the water table. That was when residents in a community in Niagara Falls, New York, noticed something strange. Dirty liquid was seeping out of the ground, into their backyards.

The working-class community was called Love Canal, between faded Buffalo and the magnificent waterfall on the border with Canada. Today, most of the houses are gone, and the center of Love Canal is a fenced-in toxic dump, capped to prevent chemicals from leaching into the ground.

The people who lived here in 1977 had little conception of what festered beneath their feet. They did not know that they were living on the remnants of the Hooker Chemical Co., which had for years used the land as a dumping ground. And later, when the land was sold to developers, nobody was mandated to disclose what had been there before—and what remained in the ground.

These are some of the chemicals that, in 1977 and ’78, the residents of Love Canal learned they were breathing and ingesting: benzene hexachloride, carbon tetrachloride, toluene, dioxin, 1,2-dichloroethylene. All are known carcinogens. It was a bad scene, and these innocents were living through it: 21,000 tons of waste composed of 82 chemical compounds, 11 of which had the capacity to cause cancer.

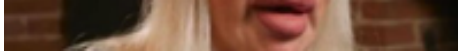
There were mothers here, and children. The people of Love Canal needed help, and they weren’t going to be polite about it. At one demonstration, a young girl held a sign: “Please don’t let me die.”

In response to Love Canal, President Jimmy Carter and Congress created the Superfund program three years later — the name comes from the trust fund Congress set up to pay for protracted cleanups of the most seriously polluted places in America—which uses both public funds and a tax on industry (the latter was allowed to expire during the Clinton administration) to pay for the remediation of toxic wastelands across the nation.

Pruitt has vowed to speed clean-up of the Superfund sites, leading his critics to wonder what, exactly, he has in mind. The man he has hired to head the program is Oklahoma banker Albert Kelly, whom the Federal Deposit Insurance Corp. has banned from the banking industry for life for making improper loans. Kelly is friend and political contributor to Pruitt, as well as a three-time mortgage lender.

In the United States envisioned by Pruitt and his funders, personal liberty is everywhere. So is trichloroethylene.

“With Scott Pruitt at the helm at the EPA,” says former EPA official Enck, “there will be more Love Canals.”



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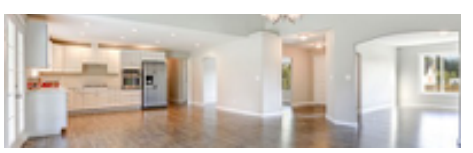

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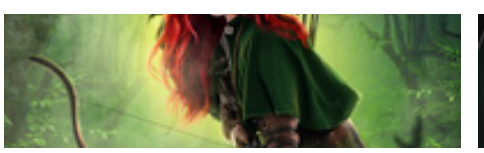

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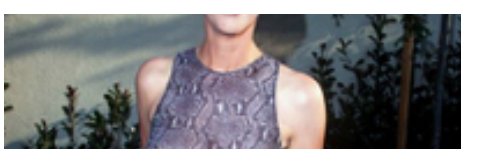

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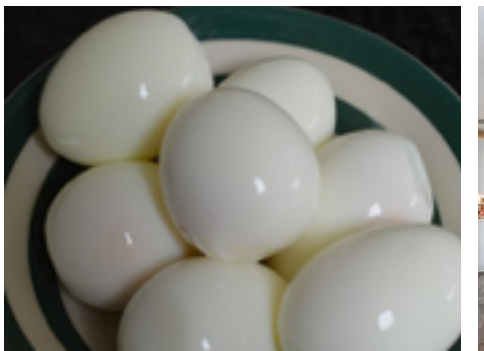

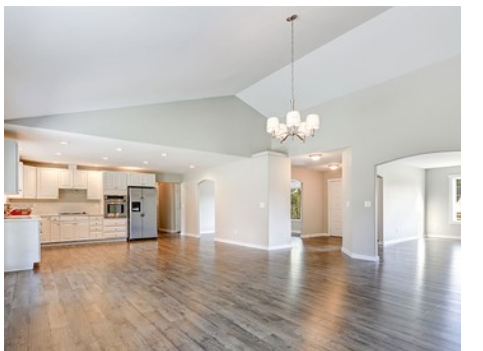

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