

Essay

Lance Morrow

Forest of Dreams

With the names of trees you can make a fine pagan bouquet of words: hornbeam, ginkgo, quickbeam, oak, white willow, tamarind, Lombardy poplar, false cypress, elder, laburnum, larch, baobab, black gum, rowan, hazel, whitebeam, tree of heaven, ash...

At one time trees were sacred. Gods inhabited them and took their forms. Trees were druidic. They rose out of the earth, gesticulating, tossing their hair. They were the tenderest life-form: cooling, sheltering, calming, enigmatic. Or else they might harbor terrors: beasts and devils in the dark forest. They were, in either case, magic. Still are, of course, although they have also evolved into mere lumber.

The spiritual descendants of those who worshiped trees may sentimentalize them now as some green sermon. Ronald Reagan did not. Once during the 1980 campaign, in a nuke-the-wimps frame of mind, Reagan claimed that no matter what environmentalists say, trees are a source of deadly pollution. On the campaign plane later, Reagan's press secretary James Brady sighted forests below and shouted, "Killer trees! Killer trees!" It seems that Reagan was confusing nitrous oxide with deadlier oxides of nitrogen. Never mind.

The Republican President in the White House now may not poeticize trees—he takes a certain pride in not poeticizing anything—but he does have a fine secular appreciation of what trees do. They hold the earth and scrub the air. Chop them down, and the world becomes a moonscape in a greenhouse. Egypt's eastern desert is a cautionary text: each tree in the sparse landscape is under the protection of a Bedouin family. Sometimes the people build a wall around each tree to guard the leaves from goats.

George Bush, who said he wanted to be an environmental President, is making trees a kind of fetish of his Administration. In his budget submitted last week, Bush allotted \$175 million to plant 1 billion trees this year. By the year 2000 there should be 10 billion new trees that eventually should absorb 13 million tons of carbon dioxide a year, or 5% of the nation's annual emissions of the gas.

The news is that a larger environmental ambition is in harness. John Kennedy launched the Peace Corps. There may be some symmetry in the fact that a man in the Bush White House has hatched the idea for something called the Earth Corps, which will try to enact the spirit of the last line of Kennedy's Inaugural Address in 1961: "Here on earth God's work must truly be our own."

The Earth Corps is the inspiration of James Pinkerton, the 31-year-old Deputy Assistant to the President for Policy Planning. Pinkerton did not begin by thinking about trees, but rather about the wreckage of America's inner cities and the prospects that face young black males. Looking for an approach to the problem, he considered the way that the Army, at its best, trains people—teaches them discipline, teamwork and such values as courage, honor, strength, loyalty, pride. The experience, when all goes well, can transform lives. The welfare system institutionalizes an abject status quo and produces generations of angry, mired victims.

Pinkerton made a triangular connection among these

points: the unused energy and gifts of young blacks, the real needs of the environment, and the motivating focus of some parts of military life. Pinkerton wanted to remove the Earth Corps from direct Government (and therefore congressional/political) control and from the sort of bureaucratic and ideological overelaboration that came with the Great Society. Unlike Franklin Roosevelt's Civilian Conservation Corps, which was run by the U.S. Army, the Earth Corps is to be not a Government agency but a nonprofit corporation funded by private donations and perhaps eventually some Government grants. Its director and chief executive officer is John Wheeler, 45, an intense, effective idealist who graduated from West Point in 1966, served in Viet Nam, took degrees from Harvard Business School and Yale Law School and among other things headed the foundation that got the Viet Nam Veterans Memorial installed on the Mall in Washington.

With a grant of \$300,000 in seed money from the Annie

E. Casey Foundation and office space near the White House donated by lawyer Allan Fox, Wheeler is developing plans to establish an Earth Corps Academy, probably in Virginia, by next year. The corps will recruit 500 cadets for a two-year tour of service that will start with three months of forestry, academic and environmental training at the academy. The recruits will be young men—and women—ages 16 to 21, with preference given to attracting the poor. Recruits will have to pass a qualifying examination and must be drug free. Their main work will be reforesting the nation, starting with some 1.3 million acres of South Carolina that were torn apart by Hurricane Hugo. Eventually, Wheeler hopes, the corps will attract 4,000 recruits a year. By encouraging local and state conservation corps as well, the Earth Corps may be able to double Bush's 10 billion trees by the year 2000.

Cadets will wear uniforms with the Earth Corps insignia (the earth seen from space and the words TRUTH, DUTY, ONE EARTH.) They will receive food, shelter and the minimum wage, a portion to be set aside in savings. When a cadet leaves the corps, he will have technical skills and environmental training. The corps will work to find him a job or a path to higher education.

Pinkerton and Wheeler are concerned that the military image might deter recruits. It is the military esprit they want, not military coercion or rigidity. Wheeler is also steering 10,000 miles clear of the welfare mentality. The corps will not be remedial, not mandatory, not a punishment, not an entitlement, not cushy and not trivial. Excellence and dignity are words that recur in Wheeler's conversation. Cadets will do hard, necessary work—reforestation, fire fighting, fire prevention, wetland protection, cleaning up oil spills and protecting habitats for endangered species.

The Earth Corps is still a seedling. But it is a daring idea. From the first landfill, the logic of the American enterprise was the ax, clearing the way west through wilderness. That was a way to make a civilization, as Brazil is now making a civilization by burning itself down. The idea of the Earth Corps draws a line that circles back to the sacred. ■



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