

Environment**Gaylord Nelson****Harold Jackson**

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With leaders of the major industrial nations hoping to persuade George Bush to change his view of global warming, one of the US president's harshest critics - the man regarded as the father of the American environmental movement - has died at the age of 89.

To the last, Senator Gaylord Nelson of Wisconsin raised his influential voice against Bush's record. At the peak of last year's election, he declared that the president had "failed to lead, and actually sabotaged progress on crucial environmental problems. [A second Bush term] could upset 40 years of progress toward cleaner air, cleaner water, resource protection and a new environmental ethic."

Underpinning this denunciation was Nelson's long record of action to preserve America's habitat and mobilise public opinion on the issue. His most resounding success came in 1970, when he copied the tactics of Vietnam war opponents - of whom he had been one - by organising a series of teach-ins across the US to inform a seemingly passive electorate about the environmental threat. He then declared April 22 1970 as Earth Day, and was stunned by the response.

An estimated 10,000 schools, 2,000 colleges and innumerable local communities organised projects to tackle the despoliation of their own districts. The turnout of some 20m people had an electrifying political impact. Up to that point, Nelson had counted himself lucky to get 17 of the 100 senators to back his frequent attempts at environmental protection; after the demonstration, Congress and the White House fell over themselves to climb on an accelerating political bandwagon.

Nelson's initiative had been beautifully timed. It harnessed the impact of Rachel Carson's 1962 book *Silent Spring*, in which she had documented the catastrophic effect of excessive DDT, along with that of several other man-made environmental disasters in the US. In Ohio, for example, the Cuyahoga river had been so polluted by industrial residues that it spontaneously burst into flame. In California, a spectacular coastal stretch had been devastated by an oil rig blow-out, which had generated an 800-square-mile slick of heavy oil.

It had been while flying home from visiting this horror - with dolphins, seals and thousands of sea birds sprawled dead across the Santa Barbara beaches - that Nelson decided on his national teach-in. But it was far from his first tussle with an environmental issue.

As governor of Wisconsin in the early 1960s, he had faced considerable unpopularity by taxing cigarettes to fund the acquisition of land for public recreation. He also persuaded President Kennedy to bring the prestige of his office to the conservationist cause by making it the centrepiece of a nationwide tour, shortly before his fatal trip to Dallas, in November 1963.

But Nelson's relations with the White House turned sour after Kennedy's assassination, when he was one of only three senators to vote against Lyndon Johnson's request for increased military funds to build up US forces in Vietnam.

Nelson was uncompromising in his opposition. "At a time in history," he told his colleagues, "when the senate should be vindicating its historic reputation as the greatest deliberative body in the world, we are stumbling over each other to see who can say 'yea' the quickest and loudest ... I express my opposition here by voting 'nay'. The support in Congress for this measure is clearly overwhelming. Obviously, you need my vote less than I need my conscience."

Six years later, when Nelson demonstrated his political muscle on Earth Day, President Richard Nixon knew the time had come to bow to superior force: within months, he set up the environment protection agency, a federal body which started well, but which was then turned into a political football by Ronald Reagan and George W Bush.

Nelson was born into a doctor's family in rural Wisconsin and raised in the Progressive party tradition peculiar to that state. Its ideology was the brainchild of an earlier governor, Robert La Follette, and stemmed from the initial demography of the region.

German immigrants had comprised the bulk of Wisconsin's settlers, and La Follette drew on the German statesman Bismarck's later domestic policies, which favoured the extensive use of government funds to improve the lot of ordinary families - an idea seen as deeply hostile to America's free enterprise tradition. Though the philosophy lives on in Wisconsin, the Progressive party itself faltered and Nelson joined the Democrats to run for the state legislature.

He had trained as a lawyer and practised for a short time after returning home from wartime military service. But politics was in his blood and, within months of

demobilisation, he ran unsuccessfully for the state assembly. Two years later, he was elected to the state senate.

In 1958, he started two, two-year terms as Wisconsin's governor, and was then elected to the US senate, where he sat until 1980, acquiring a formidable reputation as a

backroom wheeler-dealer. After his electoral defeat, he became chairman of the Wilderness Society, an environmental pressure group.

He is survived by his wife Carrie, their daughter and two sons.

· Gaylord Anton Nelson, politician and environmentalist, born June 4 1916; died July 3 2005

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