

The



LOWDOWN

Edited by Jim Hightower and Phillip Frazer ■ Vol 8 No.09 ■ September 2006

For a photo-op at a New York park, the White House demanded that pavement be laid down for every step Bush would take. The instructions were explicit:

"The president's feet are not to touch dirt."

After promising to save them Bush has abandoned them

Our national parks are being trashed and taken over

IT SEEMS TO ME THAT GEORGE W missed his true calling. I think he has long harbored a secret desire to be a thespian, for he's a man who clearly loves to dress up in costumes.

There's his famous Top Gun outfit, for example, which he strapped on back in 2003, strutting around vampishly to declare "mission accomplished" in Iraq. Also, every few weeks, George likes to reprise his slapstick role as the Cowboy President, appearing on his Crawford ranchette all duded out in boots, jeans, and that cowboy hat to perform his patented "clearing brush" routine.

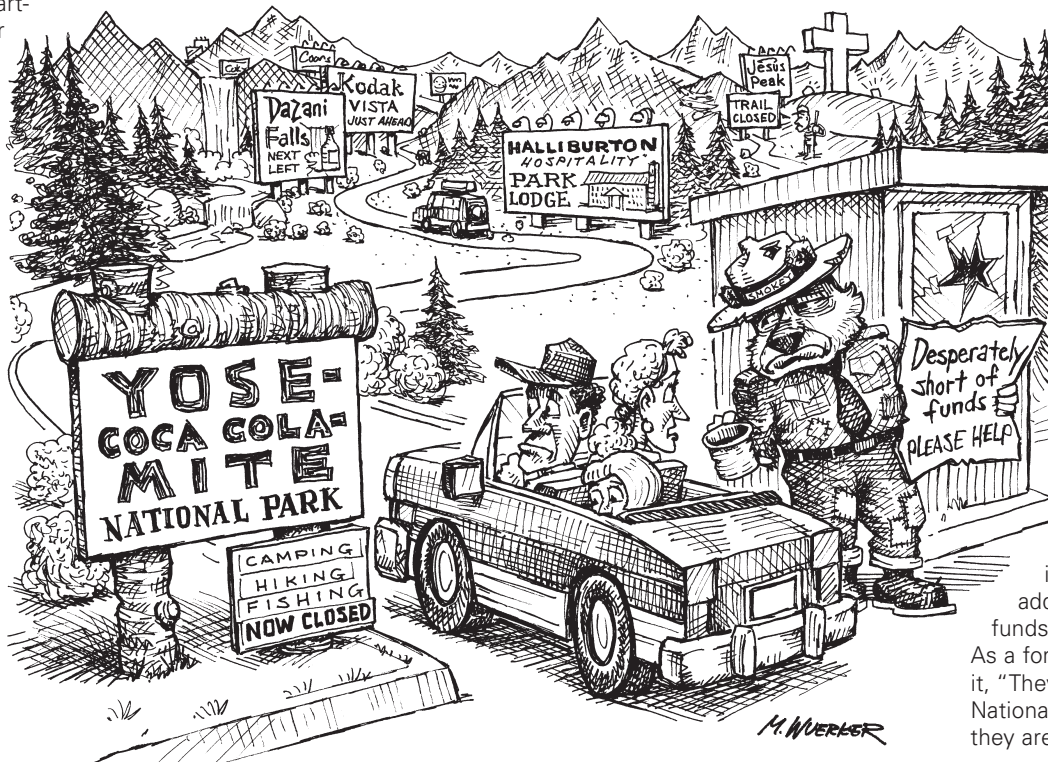
But Bush's most-outstanding performance as a character actor has to be when he plays Ranger George, nature lover and defender of America's treasured national parks. You can catch this shtick at least once every campaign year, plus special dramatizations annually when Earth Day rolls around. Using one of America's spectacular park sites as a backdrop, George dons hiker duds and plays to the cameras, espousing more heart-tugging fealty to our natural wonders than any character since Smokey the Bear.

Bush debuted this act in his first presidential run. On September 13, 2000, he struck a Teddy Roosevelt pose standing on the banks of a roaring river within sight of majestic Mount Rainier in Washington State. He lambasted the Clinton-Gore administration for allowing a \$4.9 billion maintenance backlog to build up in our national park system. "Their failure to make maintenance

a priority has left our parks at risk and at the breaking point," he declaimed. Ranger George, he vowed, would be the guy to eliminate that backlog and to "restore and renew America's national parks."

Where'd that guy go? Having used Mount Rainier for a political photo op, Bush-the-president then coldly proceeded to cut the maintenance budget for Mount Rainier National Park by 40%! Indeed, six

years after George's statuesque TR pose in the Cascades, conditions in our parks have deteriorated to an embarrassing level, the maintenance backlog has swollen to an estimated \$7.1 billion, the system's annual operating budget falls some \$600 million short of what's needed for even adequate management of the parks, and Bush is now calling for an additional 20-30% cut in funds for the park service. As a former parks chief puts it, "They are treating the National Park Service as if they are custodians of parking



RALPH AND MARY'S PARK

Looking for a present for that special someone? Here's a unique gift that literally keeps on giving: a national park!

That's what Ralph Regula bought for his wife, Mary. What did it cost him? Nothing. He didn't buy it with his money, silly—he used yours. Ralph, you see, is a Republican congress critter and a powerful member of the House Appropriations Committee.

A few years ago, Mary founded an outfit called the National First Ladies' Library, and she wanted a proper home for it. So, in 2000, the subcommittee that Ralph just happens to chair created and funded the First Ladies' National Historic Site, making it part of our National Park Service. Where is it located? Why, in Ralph's district, of course.

Ralph's gift just keeps giving. In addition to providing annual operating funds for Mary's little historic site, Ralph has also used "earmarks" to slip more than \$2 million in extra money to her project—all done with no public debate or vote. Plus, his subcommittee has provided a \$2.5 million federal matching grant to renovate a bank building that Mary's library group owns. In Washington, this is known as "pillow-talk pork."

While Mary's project officially is part of our park system and gets 70 percent of its operating funds through the park service, the site is not operated by park professionals. Instead, Mary and her group run it. Also, in keeping with the family theme, the Regula's daughter, Martha, works for the historic site as a librarian.

Managers of America's other parks have seen their budgets slashed, but Mary's miraculously seems to prosper. This is

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lots...not as custodians of our most precious places."

In the parks

This is not solely a Bush failure. Clinton also let conditions slide during his eight-year stewardship (though less drastically and less cynically). Congress, while not capitulating to all of Bush's proposed cuts, still has failed its responsibility to maintain these jewels. Nor is the failure all federal—governors, too, have performed disgracefully, using their budget axes to whack our state parks.

These political powers are not simply failing to maintain expanses of land, bodies of water, and a collection of buildings—they're failing you and me, failing past generations who fought to establish this magnificent system, and failing our children and all future generations who should receive America's public-park heritage in even better shape than it came to us. They diminish our country by shortchanging the rich culture, history, science, and natural life that spring from these unique places. For a nation of incredible wealth, this political failure is a damning stain on our professed ideals of the common good and of good stewardship.

The politicians don't seem to get it that parks are beloved, even by people who don't like much of anything else that government does. In a Harris Poll last December, people ranked the Park Service as the most popular government program of all. With 85% support (including 83% of Republicans!), parks even outpaced such programs as crime fighting, Medicare and Social Security.

There are 388 of these public spaces, and they are widely used, especially by middle-class and lower-income families who count on them for recreation, vacation, education, and more. An astonishing 280 million visitors a year find

their way to these forests, scenic rivers, historic sites, mountains, seashores, canyons, volcanos, monuments, islands, artifacts, glaciers, and other wonders—more people than attend all football, baseball, and other professional sports events combined. For these millions, the park system is a tangible and highly valued benefit, firsthand evidence of what government is doing for ordinary folks.

The problem for park whackers is that this is one place where their whacks show. The years of budget shortfalls have taken an obvious toll on a park system that the general public considers its own. Visitors arrive to find such unpleasant surprises as reduced hours, discontinued tours and talks, closed trails, unrepaired storm damage, boarded-up historic structures, leaky lodges, shuttered visitor centers, curtailed education programs, crumbling boardwalks, neglected campgrounds, dilapidated bridges, eroded roads—and, of course, ever-rising fees. Here is a sampling of the deterioration, as documented in reports by such watchdog groups as The Coalition of National Park Service Retirees (motto: "Green Blood Still Runs Deep"), National Parks Conservation Association, and Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER):

- **When Bush held** his 2000 photo op to castigate Clinton for the system's maintenance backlog, he singled out a leaky roof at Gettysburg National Military Park. Six years later, that roof still leaked.
- **The visitor center** at the U.S.S. Arizona Memorial in Hawaii is sinking.
- **Bridges in Mount Rainier** National Park are in such disrepair that they are unsafe, so hikers cannot get to the park's back-country cabins.
- **Traffic jams** are notorious in

many parks because there has been inadequate expansion of roads and parking lots to keep up with the increase in visitors. For example, an 11 mile ride on the single-lane road to the peaks of Great Smoky Mountains National Park takes up to four hours in the summer and fall leaf season, and an average of 6,000 cars a day try to enter the main visitors' area of the Grand Canyon, which has only 2,400 parking spaces.

- **Staff cuts** at Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore mean that a fourth of the school kids who want to participate in the park's education program must be turned away.
- **The 3.4 million acre** Death Valley National Park has 15 rangers to watch visitors where temperatures can exceed 120 degrees—it says it needs 45.

Of course, there's no unpleasant reality that the Bushites won't try to deny or paper over. During the 2004 election battle, for example, each of the park superintendents received an internal memo dictated by Bush political appointees. It instructed these civil servants to teach their park rangers and other staffers to use politically correct language for the '04 season. Employees were forbidden to use the term "budget cuts" to explain to visitors why the parks were in such bad shape—instead, they were to refer gaily to "service level adjustments." In addition, they were told to assure all visitors, "This administration is very committed to preserving the resources of the national parks."

This year, the superintendents got yet another memo from on high. Labeled "talking points," it told NPS professionals to answer questions about Bush's proposed 30% budget cut with this soothing line: "The National Park Service,

Do Something!

For more information, agitation, and legislation concerning conditions in our national parks system, here are some of the vigilant groups doing excellent work:

■ **Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER)**
2000 P Street, NW, Suite 240
Washington, DC 20036
202-265-7337
www.peer.org
info@peer.org
www.aclu.org

■ **National Parks Conservation Association**
1300 19th Street, NW Suite 300
Washington, DC 20036
1-800-NAT-PARK
www.npca.org
npca@npca.org

■ **The Coalition of National Park Service Retirees**
5625 North Wilmot
Tucson, AZ 85750
www.npsretirees.org

like most agencies, is tightening its belt as our nation rebuilds from Katrina, continues the war on terrorism, and strives to reduce the deficit." This from the White House gang that totally botched the response to Katrina, that has America mired in a \$300 billion war of lies, and that is the worst deficit bloater in history!

The Bush agenda

In fairness, it should be noted that the Bushites have added to the park system as well as subtracted. While visitors find poorer conditions and reduced services, they are just as amazed to find that Bush & Company has brought its own particular agenda into our public parks, adding three new dimensions that Teddy Roosevelt probably never thought of: commercialization, privatization, and Christianization.

COMMERCIALIZATION. For the laissez-faire extremists around Bush (and for many of his corporate backers), having millions of acres of natural splendor and quietude in the public domain is not a blessing, but an unmitigated waste—a missed opportunity for commercial exploitation. So, Bush has filled key government positions with ideologues and corporate servants.

Their major effort was an attempt literally to rewrite the historic mission of NPS. They proposed to weaken the original purpose—the preservation of America's natural wonders for future generations—by coupling it with a new purpose of equal weight—providing access to interests that want to use the parks for their own gain. The good news is that park employee groups and conservation activists, along with allies in Congress, have just recently defeated this grand plan.

The bad news is that many elements of their plan have already been implemented.

One backward step has been the acceptance of corporate advertising in these public areas. This is being rationalized as a necessary step to "help" the parks by getting corporate ad money to cover some of their budget shortfalls. You can see the cynical game they're playing—intentionally slash public funding (Bush proposes a cut of \$100 million from the NPS's 2007 annual budget), then call in corporations to be white-hat rescuers.

Their initial ads-in-the-park plan would've sold naming rights to rooms and other park facilities, let corporate donors put their logos on park vehicles, and generally would've Disneyfied the places. However, another howl of public protest forced the NPS brass to back off, so the latest "donations and fundraising" policy leaves the Park Service merely a little bit pregnant. Donor plaques in the park, web and video links, ad tie-ins, and such will be available to what they call "Proud Partner" arrangements, which already include Coca Cola and Ford.

Lest you think they'll stop there, look at NPS's sister agency, the Forest Service. This keeper of America's magnificent national forests acted in March to liberalize "sponsor recognition rules." For the first time, corporations can sponsor special events on forest lands, allowing them to plaster their ads on trails and roads, inside lodges, on ski gondolas, and elsewhere. Moreover, the FS's new rule pre-empts state restrictions governing ads for tobacco, alcohol, and gambling. Jeff Ruch of PEER says, "Under this plan, every tacky commercial promotion will be welcomed. Vistas of our

national forests may soon include giant inflatable beer bottles, banners for chewing tobacco, and snack food kiosks."

While the Park Service has not yet succumbed to full-tilt, eyesore ad fever, it has quietly saturated even the nation's most isolated and serene parks with something quite noisy: cell phones. They have blanketed some of our country's oldest and wildest parks, including Yellowstone, Grand Canyon, Yosemite, Everglades, Mojave, Big Cypress, Mammoth Cave, and many more. This is, as one observer said in dismay, "the death of solitude." The ring of the cell phone intrudes even in remote backcountry, and the new call of the wild is a human voice shouting, "Can you hear me now?"

Thanks to Bush and Congress, Mother Nature must also compete with the ubiquitous, metallic towers of telecom giants. Take the cell phone tower at Old Faithful... please! Yes, nothing is sacred to these commercializers. A stark, 80-foot tower, topped with three antennas, now looms over this famous geyser (an American icon in Yellowstone National Park). In all, five towers have invaded Yellowstone, with more in the works. There are so many towers in the national system that NPS doesn't know the total number or where they are. That's because the policy—written behind closed doors by park officials and such corporations as Verizon, Sprint, Alltel, and Quest—essentially allows the corporations to work out deals with individual parks on the number of towers, their location, and size.

All of this has been done without the required public notice and with no national debate. It's the telecom takeover not only of our parks, but

all the more amazing when you consider that it draws under 10,000 visitors a year. As one watchdog group has calculated, taxpayers shell out about \$1000 for every visitor who comes to Mary's park.

Did I mention that hubby Ralph is in line to be the next chairman of the full appropriations committee?

PROTECTING AMERICA FROM FAIR DRUG PRICES

Isn't it great to know that our Homeland Security officials are on the job to protect you and me?

Last November a Homeland tentacle called the U.S. Customs and Border Protection Agency quietly began confiscating mailings of prescription drugs that senior citizens and others in our country had ordered from pharmacies in Canada. Are these dangerous drugs? Nope, they're the same medicines that doctors here prescribe—but they cost only half as much...or less. That's because the U.S. is practically the only nation in the whole world that doesn't stop the drug giants from price gouging, so shopping for the exact same medicines outside the country is a way for consumers to avoid being ripped off.

But now George W's border-protection police are stepping in to...well, to protect the rip-off prices of the drug giants, which get the bulk of their global profits by gouging American consumers.

The good news is that the public has rebelled, forcing both the House and Senate to pass an amendment prohibiting border agents from seizing medicines imported from Canada. However, the bad news is that the drug corporations are major GOP campaign donors and employ more Washington lobbyists than there are members of Congress. As a

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The **LOWDOWN**

<http://www.hightowerlowdown.org>

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result, the Bush White House and Republican congressional leaders are gathering behind closed doors to kill this pro-consumer amendment.

AMERICA BUILDS A PALACE IN IRAQ

To those critics who keep yammering that the Bushites have spent billions of our tax dollars for the reconstruction of Iraq but have built practically nothing, I say, "Ha!"

If you went to Iraq today, you'd see a marvelous new complex rising right in the heart of Baghdad. This 104-acre shining oasis will include more than 600 apartments, two major office buildings, its own electricity plant and water system, air conditioning, a swimming pool, a gym, a movie theater, a food court, a beauty salon, a car-repair shop, and even a night club.

This sprawling new town, which will have 8,000 people working in it when completed next year, must be a welcome sign of progress and a symbol of democratic pride for the long-suffering people of Iraq—right? Well...not exactly. You see, this palace is not for them. This is to be the new U.S. embassy.

Being built by an affiliate of—guess who?—Halliburton, this half-billion-dollar, self-contained complex will be by far the largest embassy in the world. But this is no mere house of diplomacy—it's a mini-state inside Iraq's capitol, establishing a permanent American base that literally ripples with negative symbolism. Surrounded by 15-foot-walls, guarded by Marines, and overlooking the chambers housing the Iraqi government, this fortress is viewed by the people as a palace of occupation, an infuriating reminder of who really holds the reins of power.

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of our democratic process.

PRIVATIZATION. Let's hear from Dick Cheney, speaking in April 2001: "We believe in the [NPS] and its values—values which are, of course, all gathered together in the person of the park ranger."

Who doesn't love park rangers, probably the most admired of all federal employees? Well, Bush and Cheney, to name two nonfans of these public employees. Sweet rhetoric aside, the Bushites have been working steadily behind the scenes to replace real rangers with low-wage rent-a-rangers employed by private subcontractors.

A White House privatization plan in 2003 called for transferring more than half of NPS's jobs (rangers, firefighters, archeologists, curators, biologists, and others) to low-bid contractors (I think I smell Halliburton here!). Congress temporarily stalled this, but Bush continues to push, requiring the parks to study and test his privatization scheme. In an agency that already is cash strapped and understaffed, NPS must hire a bevy of consultants, frittering away millions of dollars that it needs for real work.

Meanwhile, the Bush administration is compelling the Forest Service to consider privatizing more than two-thirds of its employees. Its fire-fighting jobs are being reviewed for outplacement, along with half of its law-enforcement officers and rangers, all of its geologists, and 3,000 foresters and conservationists. In 2003, the service spent some \$100 million on privatization studies, but found no identifiable savings.

On the other side of the ledger, not only are both of these park agencies wasting scarce funds on useless studies, but you can also

imagine how much good this is doing for employee morale. Working with either the NPS or FS has long been considered more than a job—it's a calling. The low bidder is never going to bring this invaluable intangible to the task.

CHRISTIANIZATION. People think of many of America's parks as awesome "cathedrals" of solitude. But the Bushites are saying, hey, let's bring some real "church" to Momma Nature—in particular, let's toss a sop to our extremist Christian constituency by converting to a system of faith-based park management (non-Christians need not apply).

Thus, while taking in the grandeur of the Grand Canyon from the popular viewing area on the south rim, your eyes can also behold three bronze plaques bearing Bible verses, put there by the Evangelical Sisterhood of Mary. When the park superintendent had them removed on constitutional grounds, a top Bush appointee at NPS headquarters overruled him, and the plaques are still there.

In 2003, this same park began selling *Grand Canyon: A Different View*. It is a Christian creationist tome asserting that the canyon is not the product of geological forces but instead was created by Noah's flood and is only 6,000 years old. Again, the park superintendent balked, and again he was overruled by Bush political appointees, who ordered hundreds more copies of the book to sell. An NPS spokeswoman said flatly, "We don't want to remove it"—and they haven't.

The Bush regime also gave rapid response to a right-wing Christian demand that history be rewritten at the Lincoln Memorial. An eight-minute video shown there portrays many of the historic marches and

events that have taken place at the memorial. Christian "purists," however, screeched that the video's showing of antiwar, pro-choice, and gay-rights demonstrations must be excised, claiming that the inclusion of such footage implied that Lincoln himself embraced these causes.

Bush appointees promptly spent more than \$200,000 to edit the video so it includes footage of such other events as pro-Gulf War demonstrations and the Christian "Promise Keepers" rally—even though these did not take place at the Lincoln Memorial. The Christianized version still has not made its public debut, however, thanks to the vigilance of several groups that have exposed and opposed this political cleansing of history.

The Commons

Our parks are us. The American ideal—and the source of our strength as a people, a society, and a nation—centers on the unifying belief that we truly are "all in this together." This essential democratic notion has taken a severe pounding from the Powers That Be during the past decade or so. For example, on the sharing of America's fabulous economic gains, on the sharing of the horrific price for Bush's war in Iraq, on the sharing of the universal need for good health coverage—we clearly are no longer in it together.

A place to start putting The Commons back together—both symbolically and tangibly—could be in our parks. These gems of shared ground link us spiritually and physically with each other, with our past and future, and with our natural world. By letting them be tarnished, our leaders have tarnished America itself. It's up to us, using our grassroots strength, to make these gems gleam again.

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