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An Opportunity for Greener Politics : Environment: The end of the Cold War also ends the rationale for tolerating toxic pollution by the defense industry.

January 01, 1990 | ROBERT GOTTLIEB | *Robert Gottlieb is the coordinator of the Environmental Analysis and Policy area at the UCLA Urban Planning Program. He co-authored War on Waste: Can America Win Its Battle With Garbage? (Island Press)*

The environmental problems and politics of the United States have been shaped by the Cold War, from the kinds of hazards we face and the technologies we use to our budget priorities and controls on information. The political discourse framed the agendas and set the policies that strongly affected the kind of environmental politics that emerged here.

There is no doubt that an end to the Cold War will mean a change in the military and ideological posture that this country has assumed for more than 40 years, a transformation with extraordinary political and policy consequences. Nowhere is that potential transformation more apparent than in environmental politics.

In Europe, where the eroding of the Cold War has been more pronounced, breakdown of the old order has turned out to be related to the greening of contemporary politics. Western Europe, of course, has seen the rise of the Greens electoral parties, and in the East, environmentalism played a key role in the emergence of both *glasnost* and *perestroika*.

Environmentalism in the United States, perhaps taking a cue from Europe, can benefit significantly from the eroding of the Cold War. Environmental issues and military issues are deeply interrelated. The military has, in fact, always been the country's biggest polluter. There are more Superfund sites, more groundwater contamination, more illegal discharges, and, overall, more non-attainment of EPA regulations than in any other industry. Bomb plants have perhaps been the heaviest offenders, utilizing the crudest kinds of disposal techniques for radioactive and other toxic wastes.

The Portsmouth, Ohio, uranium enrichment plant dumped oil containing hazardous solvents on soil that was then plowed under, subsequently contaminating the underground water supply; the Savannah River Plant in South Carolina dumped wastes laden with radioactive and chemical pollutants into nearby seepage lagoons; the Pinellas, Fla., nuclear weapons production plant discharged toxic substances into the Pinellas County sewer system. One 1988 Department of Energy survey indicated that at least 155 separate contamination sites needed to be addressed, with clean-up, disposal and facility redesign costs expected to exceed \$150 billion.

Demilitarization automatically means reductions in the amount of high- and low-level nuclear wastes produced by the defense industry, and has significance as well for the control of and access to information about environmental hazards. Of all the polluting industries, the military has been the most secretive and most resistant to existing federal and state regulations, particularly in providing basic information about the pollution being generated. Environmentalism inherently requires the right of communities, employees and the public in general to be aware not only of how they are being affected but whether a particular industrial process or discharge system needs to be changed. *Glasnost* is a *sine qua non* of environmental politics.

Similarly, the big Cold War-related military budgets influenced the selection of certain technologies over other, less polluting, industrial choices. In 1953, a national commission headed by then-CBS chairman William Paley concluded that the nation, to deal with future energy demands, had to choose between nuclear and solar-based systems, given the equivalent technical sophistication of the two industries at that time. The choice to go nuclear, with the huge government subsidies that decision entailed, was a Cold War decision. To demilitarize means reworking these kinds of priorities. Environmental *perestroika*, U.S.-style, means restructuring industry to give high priority to reducing pollution.

Finally, the Cold War has hampered the environmental movement's ability to offer and promote its concept of a changing industrial order. Politics in this country has long been defined by a little less or a little more Cold War, not its absence. This precluded a full rethinking of our spending priorities and our industrial decision-making. The relative timidity of the Cold War-influenced environmental movement has led to an approach that addresses the increasing hazards of our system through after-the-fact "pollution control strategies," not by the more direct route of preventing pollution through changes in the production process.

The erosion of the Cold War can now initiate the process that will bring about new industrial strategies. For a post-Cold War environmentalism, these new strategies are the essential first step for creating a more livable planet.