

## "Earth In The Balance: Ecology And The Human Spirit"

by Senator Al Gore; publisher: Houghton Mifflin.

A critique by C.R. Nixon

United States Senator (Vice-President aspirant) Al Gore has produced a masterly work in *Earth In The Balance*.

Gore has provided a most readable rendition of the mess that humans have created on this planet. He discusses the linkage between the components of that mess, why it has occurred and the actions required to correct it. He notes the problems of mentally denying the reality of this mess and of taking the required corrective action. He performs an impressive juxtaposition of major historical events with corresponding climate and crop conditions. He also recognizes the necessity for there to be a world-wide effort of common purpose to redress the ecological imbalance. Most importantly, he calls for a grand strategy, not just in conceptual terms but with specific programs, for redressing the environmental mess so as to achieve an "Earth In The Balance".

Gore has raised to an intellectual, holistic, comprehensive level the rhetoric of the causes, the effects (both actual and apprehended) and the corrections required for the earth's ecological imbalance. The text gives every evidence that Gore is well versed in the multitude of different issues that contribute to the ecological imbalance. He has not stinted himself on research to ensure that his appreciation is well founded, and that he is able to pull together all the different aspects of this ecological imbalance so as to form an overall appreciation. Gore has drawn on his very extensive experience as a member of various Senate Committees which have studied issues directly and indirectly concerning the environment.

His thought-provoking analysis juxtaposes several historical catastrophes with the then prevailing climate and crop conditions. While there is no proof of causality, the correlation is most striking between atmospheric disturbances (such as produced by massive dust from volcanic eruptions), adverse climate conditions, and severe social disturbances or pandemics (such as the black plague). This correlation suggests that, as well as severe physical effects, there could be serious social disruptions associated with global warming due to the greenhouse effect.

While acknowledging that not all the secondary factors relating to the greenhouse effect are fully understood, Gore makes several points. He notes that the primary relationship in greenhouse theory enjoys almost universal acceptance. He shows that global circulation models, starting with previous data, have tracked actual global climate variations; and that ice-core research has conclusively demonstrated an extremely strong correlation (with no indication of causality) over thousands of years

between average global temperature and atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> content. These three considerations certainly place on the skeptics the burden of demonstrating why the world should not be proceeding on the prudent basis of immediately reducing the release of greenhouse gases. He believes this should be done in an effort to stave off the otherwise inevitable increase in the average world temperature, the particularly strong rises in polar regions, and all the adverse effects that such temperature increase could have on ecological balance and social stability.

In presenting his argument for a grand strategy to redress planetary ecological imbalance, Gore makes a strong case that the threat of the potential effects of the already bad and deteriorating ecological imbalance is comparable to or worse than the effects that could have occurred after W.W.II had the Soviet Union with its brand of communism been successful in overthrowing the devastated western European countries. The response of the United States to that post-war threat was to launch the Marshall Plan to assist the western European countries to recover economically under democratic conditions. Gore argues that the threat from the ecological imbalance warrants a similar response from the United States. He notes that the only the United States has enough political leadership, financial resources, technological capability, moral and spiritual drive, and the organizational ability to bring about the required redressment of the global ecological imbalance. Without the United States taking a firm leadership role, Gore does not see how it could be expected that the required changes could be achieved to create an "Earth In The Balance".

The holistic program that Gore sees as being supported by his "Global Marshall Plan" consists of five main elements, each of which Gore spells out in substantial detail:

- "stabilizing of world population",
- "the rapid creation and development of environmentally appropriate technologies",
- "a comprehensive and ubiquitous change in the economic "rules of the road" by which we measure the impact of our decisions on the environment",
- "the negotiation and approval of a new generation of international agreements", and,
- "the establishment of a cooperative plan for educating the world's citizens about our global environment",

all within the general integrating goal of "the establishment, especially in the developing world, of the social and political conditions most conducive to the emergence of sustainable societies."



These conceptual headings are then spelled out in the form of detailed programs, with a clear description of the action that the United States should take to give effect to each program. The whole adds up to a most impressive proposal that, if implemented without delay, appears to have the promise (if anything does) of redressing the world ecological imbalance.

A major deficiency with the programs that Gore proposes is that he gives no assessment of how long it will take to bring the whole plan into operation; that is to say of whether there is time for the Global Marshall Plan to take effect before the global ecological imbalance deteriorates to an apocalypse. When the totality and scope of the Global Marshall Plan is appreciated, there certainly are grounds for doubt on this question.

A second point of concern is that Gore has presented his Global Marshall Plan and its specific programs as though they can be implemented within the prevailing behavioral patterns of world's social systems. When all of the issues covered by the noted conceptual headings and all of the detailed programs described are added together they amount to a revolutionary change in primary aspects of operation of the contemporary industrialized democratic societies. Consequently, their implementation may require major changes: in the methods and mechanisms for allocation of goods and services; in the use of precedence in jurisprudence and in the balance between the rights and responsibilities of the individual versus those of the collective. Changes will also be required in international relations with respect to sovereignty and the rights and responsibilities of individual nations vis-a-vis the world at large. While such revolutionary changes may indeed be

required to achieve an "Earth In The Balance", they are not likely to be achieved either quickly or easily as they amount to a recasting, not just minor adjusting, of the whole behaviour, values and attitudes of individuals and societies. That really would be revolutionary.

The book is rather anthropocentric. That is, the peril of the ecological imbalance is stressed in terms of what it means to humanity, rather than what it means to the flora, the fauna and the life supporting capability of this planet. This anthropocentrism contradicts Gore's assertion that we humans **must** see ourselves as, and act as though we humans are part of a larger total ecosystem.

Another slight contradiction occurs with Gore's stress on the message and spirit in the Bible concerning the responsibility of humans for the stewardship of the global ecology. This contrasts with the actual practices and behaviour *vis-a-vis* the environment of not only Judaeo-Christians, but the followers of almost all of the other principal religions. Moreover, as is so often the case, both sides of an argument can be defended by citing Biblical passages and the various interpretations of them.

Despite the shortcomings and minor contradictions that have been noted, *Earth In The Balance* is an outstanding book. It deserves to be read by all concerned with the future of life on earth. It also leaves a large question as to what the writer of this book might try to do from the position of Vice-President of the United States, keeping in mind that Gore was selected by Clinton as his running-mate after Gore's views on the environment were widely recognized, and after this book had been released.