The activist writers from TomPaine.com, in one of their bimonthly ads in the New York Times, asserted that President Bush "would rather protect the profits of his political patrons than protect public health or the nation's natural heritage," accused Bush of gutting government program, and said he must hope "voters don't catch on."

But leftists and greens shouldn't think for a moment that there's a real budget-cutter or capitalist in the White House. Instead of finding ways to protect health and the environment without new government spending and regulation, here are some of the things the Bush administration has done so far, little more than a year into its existence:

Sought a $190 billion prescription drug benefit that all by itself will expand discretionary government spending by 7% (while at the same time projecting annual budget deficits of about $50-100 billion over the next three years).

Received recommendations from a White House Commission on Complementary and Alternative Medicine (begun under Clinton) that wants more money spent on researching, promoting, and even teaching to children certain alternative health practices of dubious scientific merit.

Asked a federal judge to uphold the Superfund toxic waste site clean-up law and dismiss a General Electric lawsuit resisting Superfund. GE will be forced to spend at least $500 million dredging up PCBs sitting at the bottom of the Hudson River, despite a lack of scientific evidence that those PCB deposits are harmful to humans and despite strong local opposition to this federal mandate.

Appointed Christine Todd Whitman, who thinks Republicans aren't quick enough to clean up toxins, to head EPA.

Rather than suffering the conservative budget-slashing implied by TomPaine.com, health programs were major beneficiaries of last year's budget, when Bush increased spending on women's health programs and asked for:

A 13.5% increase in spending by the National Institutes of Health ($2.8 billion for biomedical research).

A 10% increase in FDA spending for food safety, mad cow prevention, and stricter enforcement of importation rules for food and healthcare products.

A 7.2% increase in funding for HIV/AIDS research.

A $123 million increase in spending on community health centers.

And September 11 led not only to increased spending for military deployments but to $6 billion for
new biowarfare research and vast national reserves of smallpox vaccine, though admittedly this spending is less a result of the "compassionate" brand of conservatism than the fact that Bush has had what some call "national greatness" conservatism thrust upon him the apparent necessity of pursuing immense national projects.

Bush has proudly proclaimed that on his watch, government is growing faster than inflation. The transition from Clinton to Bush was a move to the right only in relative terms, much as Portugal's recent electoral "swing to the right" meant only that the Social Democrats defeated the Socialists. We're not likely to see a real shift toward market-based health and environmental policies as long as the political debate in most Western countries continues to be a hair-splitting negotiation between neoliberals and neoconservatives (both of whom mix trade with big government).

A truly free-market approach to health and science would involve such sweeping reforms as abolishing restrictions on the right of hospitals to share equipment without being accused of antitrust violations, abolishing the AMA's legal monopoly, allowing people to buy medication from the Internet or overseas as they saw fit, eliminating government agencies in favor of privately-funded research and ratings services (such as Underwriters Laboratory), and eliminating government regulation in favor of the more subtle, nuanced guidelines created by differential insurance premiums and the ever-present threat of lawsuits.

Neither George W. Bush nor TomPaine.com is likely to embrace such a system any time soon, though.


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