

nation to begin *constructing* a religious ethic of wealth creation. I have learned a great deal over the years from George Weigel the historian, political analyst, and cultural critic. But I have also learned to apply Occam's razor to the theological fortifications that he erects to buttress his positions. I found the first two-thirds of his contribution stimulating, insightful, and informative. But his discussion of the resources available for constructing a Roman Catholic ethic of wealth creation for the United States seemed to transform an illuminating essay into a partisan tract.

Among the contributors to this volume, Michael Novak has labored the longest and most strenuously to construct a religious, more specifically Christian, and still more specifically Roman Catholic, ethic of wealth creation. He is currently scouting for resources in the Scottish Enlightenment. David Hume, Adam Smith, and their colleagues, much like Novak today, were trying to persuade an intellectual culture deeply hostile to the pursuit of wealth that commerce generated moral as well as material benefits. That is a challenging and worthy task. But is it really helped along by all the theologizing that Novak stirs in?

On Page 64, for example, Novak begins recounting "nine distinguishable arguments" advanced by Hume, Smith, and others "in favor of the turn toward a capitalist economy." On Page 78, these become "nine moral arguments in favor of creative economies" with "a profound relationship to Jewish and Christian theology." Must all sound social arguments receive Christian baptism? When Novak criticizes the dubious theology and even more dubious economics of anticapitalist theologians, he does valuable work. When he tries to substitute capitalist theology for socialist theology, however, the arguments become vague, strained, and sometimes pretentious.

Walter Block is the most insistent ideologue in the book. His essay in defense of the libertarian religion may prove edifying for some readers of this magazine, but it will surely not persuade any religious socialists. Block lays out the lib-

ertarian creed with clarity and enthusiasm: self-ownership, private property, and the Great Commandment ("Thou shalt not steal"). He concludes with an altar call. All people of religious persuasion are really libertarians, he assures us, at least insofar as they embrace the Great Commandment, a commandment that provides for no exceptions and that contains in embryo the entire corpus of the libertarian philosophy.

Block will find no converts in the congregation to which he is ostensibly preaching because he has not addressed their principal objection to his religious creed. They will protest that he cannot establish individual property rights claims with both the clarity and the moral legitimacy that are essential to sustain his absolutist claims. But Block has a faith that can move mountains, as shown by his proposal to solve the "conundrum" of "the naked public square" by *privatizing the public square*. (That suggestion appears in endnote 30 on Page 115.)

The final essay in the volume is by the author of *The Naked Public Square*, Richard John Neuhaus, who should have pointed out to his colleague that "the public square" is the forum in which we discuss the values undergirding our com-

mon life, not a parcel of real estate. Neuhaus's essay, titled "Wealth and Whimsy," employs theological arguments about divine grace, drawn largely from St. Paul, to claim that theologians ought to take the production of wealth much less seriously.

Neuhaus objects to the "earnest moralizing of the economic sphere" that can be found in so many theological and ecclesiastical pronouncements on the economy. "Efforts to theologize economics," he astutely observes, "tend to produce dismal theology." The catch, of course, is that Neuhaus himself theologizes economics in an effort to make his case for taking economic life less seriously.

To the reader who protests that I am too hostile toward theological economics, let me confess that I used to produce it myself. And there is no one quite so intolerant toward sin as a reformed sinner. I'll get around soon to reading *Centesimus Annus*, the new social encyclical commemorating the 100th anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, but only because I want to find out whether John Paul II has finally learned a little economics.

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Dousing the Fire

BY JOHN A. BARNES

World on Fire: Saving an Endangered Earth By George Mitchell, New York: Scribner's, 247 pages, \$22.50

The dust jacket of this screaming, hysterical look at our collapsing planetary environment (or "ecosystem," which is the currently favored word) carries a photograph of a smiling, cheerful-looking Sen. George Mitchell (D-Maine). As you read this catalogue of the horrors humanity supposedly faces unless we rapidly adopt Mitchell's draconian solutions, you might ask yourself: Why is this man smiling?

After all, anyone who even browses through this book will find little to laugh



Mitchell: Why is this man smiling?

about. "In 50 years, in Mexico City," Mitchell predicts, "the sun will be obliterated from the sky, and air pollution will make breath an irritating effort." (As a native New Yorker, I can certainly describe to any curious Mexican what his capital is in for.) "The day we began burning fossil fuels," he continues, "we began turning our earth into an uninhabitable hothouse."

Chlorofluorocarbons are "eating" the ozone layer and will cause skin cancer to reach epidemic levels. Even if we stop all greenhouse-gas emissions "today," the world's temperature will rise 2 to 4 degrees, melting the polar ice caps and causing all kinds of other sticky problems. Mitchell assures us this is not mere fantasy, "but is our grim future." Indeed.

But wait. There's more. In the continental United States, 9 million acres of "precious wetlands have been ruined by farming, urban growth and vacation developments." (Emphasis added.) I wonder if the senator has told his constituents in Maine, who live mainly by farming and by hosting vacationers from other states, that they should close up shop and disappear for the sake of the environment.

You get the idea. Anyone who has read a newspaper or watched TV news in the past couple of years has heard all of this without lightening his wallet by \$22.50. And Mitchell's book is loaded with wailing about "our disappearing forests." How many trees, I wonder, gave their all for the sake of this oleaginous screed?

I don't use the word *screed* lightly, for this book is so poorly argued—if *argued* is even the appropriate term—that you could say it's hardly worth anyone's time.

But the book's author makes it important. If George Mitchell were just another publicity-hungry backbencher in Congress, then these ravings could be conveniently relegated to the remainder pile along with Howard Baker's *No Margin for Error* and Bud Shuster's *Believe in America*. Yet Mitchell is majority leader of the United States Senate, a man who can actually get a serious hearing for, if not enact, some of his proposals. He'd

also like to be president.

Mitchell, whose public persona is more that of a pedantic nanny than that of a ranter, is here completely in the hands of his ghost-writer, Jack Waugh, described as an "impassioned expert" on the environment. Experts are often wrong, but when they get "impassioned," watch out.

For instance, *World on Fire* labels global warming and the greenhouse effect as one of the "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse." (The others are deforestation, acid rain, and the hole in the ozone layer.) Now no one disputes the existence of a greenhouse effect. After all, that's how we stay alive. If the earth's atmosphere did not trap more heat than it radiated back into space, the planet would be a frozen chunk of rock like the moon.

The real question is whether the at-

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mosphere traps too much heat. Mitchell seems to have had his revelation during the blazing summer of 1988. He duly cites NASA scientist James Hansen's Senate testimony of that year stating that global warming was no longer a threat, it was a fact, and it was increasing. Mitchell lets this argument stand, as if no one had disputed Hansen's statement in the last three years and as if the testimony were undisputed among scientists.

But to this day, Hansen remains almost alone in his assertions. Even the paid-up eco-alarmist Stephen Schneider of the U.S. Center for Atmospheric Research has carefully put some distance between himself and Hansen. Among the reasons: Nineteenths of the planet is covered by water, where it's difficult to get consistent readings; many of the temperatures are recorded in expanding urban areas, which tend to be warmer than the surrounding

countryside; while 1988 was indeed a hot summer, the winter of 1987-88 was one of the coldest recorded in the Northern Hemisphere.

Nowhere does Mitchell mention that the vast majority of climatologists don't believe a dangerous global warming trend is taking place. There are even those who contend that a slight warming could lengthen the growing season and produce more food for the millions Mitchell claims are about to starve.

Mitchell's no better on acid rain. He's also eager to require businesses to spend massive amounts on new scrubbers to clean acid-forming substances out of the air that he doesn't mention the study by the National Acid Precipitation Assessment Project (NAPAP). This 10-year, \$500-million project, commissioned by Congress in 1980 after the Environmental Protection Agency issued an apocalyptic report about an "aquatic silent spring" in the Northeast, showed that acid rain was no big problem. The acidity in Northeastern lakes was more likely caused by soil runoff than by industrial pollution. In fact, the study concluded that putting lime in a few lakes would probably take care of acid rain.

But George Mitchell isn't interested in facts. He devotes the entire second half of this tome to proposed "solutions." They're everything you expect. Heavy taxes on oil, gas, and coal use. New regulations on industry, and particularly on the filthy, disgusting automobile.

If Mitchell were at least honest about the implications of his plans, his book might be a little easier to swallow. But the potential costs of his proposals are only hinted at or glossed over. At one point, he admits that uncompromising pollution controls might cost a few jobs but brushes this off as a "problem" and then moves on. Elsewhere, he says the United States, because it is the filthiest nation of all, must reduce its carbon-dioxide emissions by 50 percent in 30 years. He insists that "no one is advocating extreme measures," but a 50-percent (or even a 20-percent) reduction in 30 years is extreme by any standard. If policy makers follow Mitchell's prescriptions, the days of pros-

perity in this country are surely numbered. Mitchell's proposals would shut down vast amounts of economic activity.

But quibbling with Mitchell on specifics may be beside the point. Anyone who really believed all the gloom and doom this book contains would simply write a suicide note. George Mitchell may not buy into all the hysterics published under

his name. For left-liberals like him, the environmental bugaboo may provide a convenient excuse to justify vastly higher taxes and more statist policies.

Why is this man smiling? That's not hard to figure out.

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ing money to offer them material goods. As one woman put it, "I want to be there for them yet I want them to have what's good, too." And since parenthood, along with childhood, has been devalued, parents often choose to offer their children "what's good," which has profound consequences. The lack of parental time manifests itself in the disappearance of family rituals, dinners together, and even after-school time together, since most parents work away from home all day.

Estimates of the number of children who care for themselves during some part of the day range as high as 7 million to 15 million. In extreme cases, children as young as 3 are being left to fend for themselves and their younger siblings. They feel neglected and abandoned, and as they get older, Louv writes, many turn "to peers, to gangs, to early sex partners, to the new electronic bubble of computers and video."

Louv is a good reporter, but his analysis is faulty and his solutions are misguided. Part of the problem is that his vision is clouded by milk-and-cookies memories of growing up in Missouri. Childhood today certainly is different from Louv's idyllic recollections of the 1950s, but that is not necessarily all bad. For example, while children may not get as much time as they'd like with their parents, both parents can now be strong role models. Children no longer have the skewed view of gender that prevailed in the '50s, reflected in "Father Knows Best" and "Leave It To Beaver."

Sometimes it's not clear whether Louv is trying to make a policy statement or simply wants to give parents self-help advice. He often slips into the latter, with tips, for example, on how to make the most of time with your children. When he does offer broader prescriptions, however, he is quick to resort to government.

Other institutions are gradually taking over childhood, Louv says, but they are not doing a very good job of it. Poor television, inadequate day care, lousy schools, and stingy public policies that restrict what libraries can offer have all contributed to what he calls "the vanishing web." He notes that the United States

You Can't Go Home Again

BY FERN SCHUMER CHAPMAN

Listening to the American Family: New Hope for the Next Generation
By Richard Louv, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 420 pages, \$21.95

George Eliot captured the essence of childhood in *The Mill on the Floss*: "We could never have loved the earth so well if we had had no childhood in it, if it were not the earth where the same flowers come up again every spring that we used to gather with our tiny fingers as we sat lipping to ourselves on the grass, the same hips and haws on the autumn hedgerows, the same redbreasts that we used to call 'God's birds' because they did no harm to the precious crops. What novelty is worth that sweet monotony where everything is known and loved because it is known?"

Had she written that passage today, she might have described how children lisp to themselves (often in unprintable language) between beeps from the Nintendo game as their tiny fingers grasp the controls; she wouldn't mention the hips and haws because they are not found in the sprawling urban areas where most children live. In any case, children are so divorced from nature that they wouldn't notice them, or God's birds, unless they appeared on the television screen. Monotony exists in the fast-paced, scheduled living of the 1990s, but it is not sweet; everything is known, but that familiarity has produced boredom, not love.

It is against this backdrop that Richard Louv has written his book calling for a rebuilding of community and family life. Louv, a father of two and a columnist for the *San Diego Union*, says he spent three years interviewing more than 3,000



Richard Louv has seen childhood's future, and it isn't pretty.

parents, children, volunteers, teachers, and other professionals nationwide—a staggering pace for a man with his own family obligations.

Louv identifies two themes that stood out in his research: "First, time—the sense that time is a decreasing natural resource for both children and parents; and second, the lessening of trust. Powerful, often subliminal fear burns slowly beneath the surface of American culture. One mother summed up her most intense feelings this way: 'Childhood today scares me. But I don't have time to do anything about the fear.'"

Parents, he writes, are torn between investing time in their children and earn-