

SILENT SPRING

BY
RACHEL
CARSON

Introduction

by Vice President Al Gore

WRITING ABOUT *Silent Spring* is a humbling experience for an elected official, because Rachel Carson's landmark book offers undeniable proof that the power of an idea can be far greater than the power of politicians. In 1962, when *Silent Spring* was first published, "environment" was not even an entry in the vocabulary of public policy. In a few cities, especially Los Angeles, smog had become a cause of concern, albeit more because of its appearance than because of its threat to public health. Conservation — the precursor of environmentalism — had been mentioned during the 1960 Democratic and Republican conventions, but only in passing and almost entirely in the context of national parks and natural resources. And except for a few scattered entries in largely inaccessible scientific journals, there was virtually no public dialogue about the growing, invisible dangers of DDT and other pesticides and chemicals. *Silent Spring* came as a cry in the wilderness, a deeply felt, thoroughly researched, and brilliantly written argument that changed the course of history. Without this book, the environmental movement might have been long delayed or never have developed at all.

Not surprisingly, both the book and its author, who had once worked as a marine biologist for the Fish and Wildlife Service, met with considerable resistance from those who were profiting from pollution. Major chemical companies tried to suppress *Silent Spring*, and when excerpts appeared in *The New Yorker*, a chorus of voices immediately accused Carson of being hysterical and extremist — charges still heard today whenever anyone questions

those whose financial well-being depends on maintaining the environmental status quo. (Having been labeled "Ozone Man" during the 1992 campaign, a name that was probably not intended as a compliment but that I wore as a badge of honor, I am aware that raising these issues invariably inspires a fierce — and sometimes foolish — reaction.) By the time the book became widely available, the forces arrayed against its author were formidable.

The attack on Rachel Carson has been compared to the bitter assault on Charles Darwin when he published *The Origin of Species*. Moreover, because Carson was a woman, much of the criticism directed at her played on stereotypes of her sex. Calling her "hysterical" fit the bill exactly. *Time* magazine added the charge that she had used "emotion-fanning words." She was dismissed by others as "a priestess of nature." Her credibility as a scientist was attacked as well: opponents financed the production of propaganda that supposedly refuted her work. It was all part of an intense, well-financed negative campaign, not against a political candidate but against a book and its author.

Carson brought two decisive strengths to this battle: a scrupulous respect for the truth and a remarkable degree of personal courage. She had checked and rechecked every paragraph in *Silent Spring*, and the passing years have revealed that her warnings were, if anything, understated. And her courage, which matched her vision, went far beyond her willingness to disturb an entrenched and profitable industry. While writing *Silent Spring*, she endured a radical mastectomy and then radiation treatment. Two years after the book's publication, she died, of breast cancer. Ironically, new research points strongly to a link between this disease and exposure to toxic chemicals. So in a sense, Carson was literally writing for her life.

She was also writing against the grain of an orthodoxy rooted in the earliest days of the scientific revolution: that man (and of course this meant the male of our species) was properly the center and the master of all things, and that scientific history was primar-

ily the story of his dominion — ultimately, it was hoped, to a nearly absolute state. When a woman dared to challenge this orthodoxy, one of its prominent defenders, Robert White Stevens, replied in terms that now sound not only arrogant but as quaint as the flat-earth theory: “The crux, the fulcrum over which the argument chiefly rests, is that Miss Carson maintains that the balance of nature is a major force in the survival of man, whereas the modern chemist, the modern biologist and scientist, believes that man is steadily controlling nature.”

The very absurdity of that world view from today’s perspective indicates how revolutionary Rachel Carson was. Assaults from corporate interests were to be expected, but even the American Medical Association weighed in on the chemical companies’ side. The man who discovered the insecticidal properties of DDT had, after all, been awarded the Nobel Prize.

But *Silent Spring* could not be stifled. Solutions to the problems it raised weren’t immediate, but the book itself achieved enormous popularity and broad public support. In addition to presenting a convincing case, Carson had won both financial independence and public credibility with two previous bestsellers, *The Sea Around Us* and *The Edge of the Sea*. Also, *Silent Spring* was published in the early years of a decade that was anything but silent, a decade when Americans were perhaps far readier than they had been to hear and heed the book’s message. In a sense, the woman and the moment came together.

Eventually, both the government and the public became involved — not just those who read the book, but those who read the news or watched television. As sales of *Silent Spring* passed the half-million mark, *CBS Reports* scheduled an hour-long program about it, and the network went ahead with the broadcast even when two major corporate sponsors withdrew their support. President Kennedy discussed the book at a press conference and appointed a special panel to examine its conclusions. When the panel reported its findings, its paper was an indictment of corporate and

bureaucratic indifference and a validation of Carson’s warnings about the potential hazards of pesticides. Soon thereafter, Congress began holding hearings and the first grassroots environmental organizations were formed.

Silent Spring planted the seeds of a new activism that has grown into one of the great popular forces of all time. When Rachel Carson died, in the spring of 1964, it was becoming clear that her voice would never be silenced. She had awakened not only our nation but the world. The publication of *Silent Spring* can properly be seen as the beginning of the modern environmental movement.