

Bush: ‘Human life is precious’—EPA: ‘Less than you might think’

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A human life is infinitely precious, according to the Bush administration—unless, it turns out, keeping an individual alive might cut into corporate profits.

The Associated Press revealed July 10 that the US government’s Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has lowered the “value of a statistical life,” from \$7.8 million five years ago to \$6.9 million today. The “value of a statistical life” refers to the supposed value to society of saving a ‘generic’ life.

Federal agencies, when they consider new regulations, “weigh the costs versus the lifesaving benefits of a proposed rule,” observes AP, so the “less a life is worth to the government, the less the need for a regulation.”

The news service explains the implications: “Consider, for example, a hypothetical regulation that costs \$18 billion to enforce but will prevent 2,500 deaths. At \$7.8 million per person (the old figure), the lifesaving benefits outweigh the costs. But at \$6.9 million per person, the rule costs more than the lives it saves, so it may not be adopted.”

The “benefits” under discussion here are the survival of a given number of human beings; the “costs” are reduced company earnings.

The decreased value of an American life arrived at by the EPA will result in fewer restrictions on pollution, more dangers for consumers and similar corporate-sponsored blights. W. Kip Viscusi of Vanderbilt University, an expert in the field, told the media, “Nobody’s ever lowered it [the value of a statistical life].” He said that most researchers believe the value should generally be increasing.

Unsurprisingly, the EPA didn’t publicly announce the new figure. Seth Borenstein of AP only discovered the change after reviewing government cost-benefit analyses over more than a dozen years.

S. William Becker, executive director of the National Association of Clean Air Agencies, commented, “It appears that they’re cooking the books in regards to the value of life. ... Those decisions are literally a matter of life and death.”

And Dan Esty, a senior EPA policy official in the administration of George H.W. Bush and now director of the Yale Center for Environmental Law and Policy, told the Associated Press: “It’s hard to imagine that it has other than a political motivation.”

The EPA introduced the changes in two stages. In 2004 the agency reduced the value of a human life by 8 percent. “Then,” writes AP, “in a rule governing train and boat air pollution this

May, the agency took away the normal adjustment for one year’s inflation. Between the two changes, the value of a human life fell 11 percent, based on today’s dollar.”

Omb.watch notes that the “Bush White House, for example, is more than happy to reject proposed regulations if the monetized compliance costs exceed monetized benefits,” as it did recently in a case involving the proposed recycling of pesticide containers. In that episode, White House Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs Administrator Susan Dudley wrote the EPA July 3, acknowledging “that illegal and improper disposal of these pesticide containers may create hazards. However, it remains unclear whether providing the proposed recycling program will result in a meaningful reduction in the improper disposal of these containers.

“In addition, EPA’s analysis of the proposed program indicates that the quantified costs imposed by the proposed recycling program will exceed the quantified benefits by more than two orders of magnitude.” X number of people may fall ill or die, but an industry is spared inconvenience and cost—a reasonable trade-off.

The Environmental Protection Agency, established in 1970 during the Nixon administration, has never been in a position to carry out its mandate. American big business spends vast amounts of money, through lobbying and the buying up of politicians from both major parties, to block or vitiate environmental regulations. Moreover, repeated budget cuts have reduced the EPA’s ability to investigate problems, and morale is reportedly at a low point.

Under the Bush administration and its crew of free-market zealots, the agency has become, in the words of one liberal critic, “a scandal-ridden and hopelessly compromised tool of the White House” (www.scienceprogress.org).

In April the Union of Concerned Scientists reported the results of a survey of 1,600 EPA scientists and found “an agency under siege from political pressures.” Sixty percent of respondents said they had personally experienced political interference in their work in the past five years. More than half revealed that they were not allowed to share their findings with the media.

A month earlier, in March 2008, unions representing 10,000 EPA employees sent a letter to Administrator Stephen Johnson, alleging that he retaliates against whistle-blowers and union officers, “abuses our good nature and trust” and ignores the agency’s Principles of Scientific Integrity. The letter followed on Johnson’s December 2007 decision to block California and 16

other states from implementing new restrictions on greenhouse gas emissions on automobiles and trucks.

Nature magazine, also in March, editorialized that “The US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is fast losing the few shreds of credibility it has left. The Bush administration has always shown more zeal in protecting business interests than the environment...But the agency’s current administrator, Stephen Johnson, a veteran EPA toxicologist who was promoted to the top slot in 2005, has done so with reckless disregard for law, science or the agency’s own rules—or, it seems, the anguished protests of his own subordinates.”

The decision to lower the “value of a statistical life” occurs within this context.

The notion that a cost can be placed on the value of preserving a human life is repugnant from the outset, although appropriate to a system in which every human attribute and activity is reduced to quantitative, dollars-and-cents terms.

Notoriously, in 2002 (also uncovered by Borenstein of AP), the EPA came to the conclusion that the value of elderly people was 38 percent less than that of people under 70. A public outcry made the agency change its mind.

An EPA official, Al McGartland, defended the agency’s lowered value of life on the grounds that the action reflected “consumer preferences.” McGartland commented, “It’s our best estimate of what consumers are willing to pay to reduce similar risks to their own lives.” Jack Wells, chief economist for the US Department of Transportation, told the *Washington Post* that it was “a weird idea” to weigh lives against other costs, “But, if you think about it, people behave that way all the time ... We could eliminate a lot of the [highway] fatalities by imposing a 10-mile-per-hour speed limit.”

These arguments are specious. Everyday life entails certain risks, which can never be reduced to zero. However, no “consumer” willingly “prefers” the possibility of being made ill by a negligent company. This is a social crime, imposed on the population, which can be entirely eliminated by the proper measures. Under capitalism, which subordinates human well-being to the pursuit of profits, a certain portion of the population is inevitably sacrificed through industrial accidents, contact with toxic materials, the poisoning of the air and water, inadequate or inaccessible health care, and so forth.

The EPA has been conducting risk analyses since the mid-1970s. Lisa Heinzerling, Professor of Law at Georgetown University, argues that “[C]ost-benefit was never unbiased. Low values for human life, monstrously high discount rates, the shunting aside of effects that cannot be counted, a free pass for deregulatory activities—all of these have been with us since the beginning....[T]he biases in cost-benefit analysis are not an oversight. They are the manifestations of an ingrained philosophy that is deeply hostile to environmentalists’ arguments.”

The *Post* provides an example of government officials’ thinking on the matter: “They might know, for instance, that a new cut in air pollution will save 50 lives a year—though they don’t know who those people might be. Still they want to decide whether saving them is worth the cost, officials say, and it helps to assign a dollar value to each life saved.”

It should be remembered this is the administration—when attempting to divert attention from its crimes and generate popular support through appeals to religion and “values”—that proclaims its first priority to be the ‘individual human life.’ The Bush regime has done everything in its power to make obtaining an abortion as difficult as possible and to discourage the use of birth control.

Nauseatingly, Bush, following Ronald Reagan and his own father, has issued proclamations each year declaring the third Sunday in January “National Sanctity of Human Life Day,” meant to mark the anniversary of the *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court case that legalized abortions in the US.

On “National Sanctity of Human Life Day” in 2008, Bush declared, “We recognize that each life has inherent dignity and matchless value, and we reaffirm our steadfast determination to defend the weakest and most vulnerable members of our society.”

This defender of the weakest and most vulnerable presided over 152 executions in Texas, publicly mocking one condemned woman’s pleas for mercy, and has prosecuted an illegal war and occupation responsible for the deaths of one million Iraqis.

Bush has made the sanctity of life an oft-repeated theme in the “global war on terror.”

A few examples:

“We value life; the terrorists ruthlessly destroy it.” (November 2001)

“There is a dividing line in our world, not between nations, and not between religions or cultures, but a dividing line separating two visions of justice and the value of life.” (March 2004)

“I happen to view it as a strength that we value every life, that every person is precious.” (April 2006)

Perhaps a few adjustments could be made in the future to Bush’s comments, in line with the EPA actions. Something like this: “We value every human life, as long as preserving it doesn’t interfere with the operations of the petrochemical, plastics, electric utility, automobile or pulp and paper industries, or generally gum up the workings of the free enterprise system.”



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