

## Scene on Radio

### Season 5, Episode 4: Up to Heaven and Down to Hell

#### Transcript

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**John Biewen:** Amy, I'm still thinking about this bizarre coincidence of the American oil industry taking off right at the start of the Civil War, and just how, kind of, weirdly well that ties into this series.

**Amy Westervelt:** I know. It's almost too on the nose, right? I have to admit, even though I knew all these dates about the discovery of oil and of course the start of the Civil War, I hadn't really put that together until I heard Darren Dochuk talking about it. He's the religion and oil researcher we heard from last time. And remember, he talked about guys like Lyman Stewart, who fought for the Union at Gettysburg. After a driller discovers oil in western Pennsylvania, Stewart will become a founder of what we now know as Unocal, the big oil company. And Darren Dochuk says oil emerges as a powerful driver of a damaged, post-war nation trying to rebuild itself.

**Darren Dochuk:** So I just think oil, in subsequent decades after the Civil War really assumes a unique quality, more so than, let's say, coal or other natural

resources. And again, the nature of oil—searching for it—is always mysterious. So it just lends itself to this mythical, mythological kind of understanding of a nation reborn.

**John Biewen:** A nation reborn. This brings to mind what the always-brilliant Chenjerai Kumanyika said in our last season about the U.S. after the Civil War. He was summing up the prevailing view among white folks at the time, South and North: “OK, well, we had a spat....”

**Chenjerai Kumanyika, from Scene on Radio Season 4 Episode 4:** Well, we had this spat. 600,000 people lost their lives. But now it’s time to get back to business. Right? Reconciliation for white folks, lynching and Jim Crow for Black folks.

**John Biewen:** In other words, we’ve done enough by outlawing chattel slavery. Time to get on with making money. Now we’re adding to that picture the fresh discovery of *oil* at industrial scale. So yeah, let’s look at what’s happening in that period.

**Amy Westervelt:** I just actually relistened to that season.

**John Biewen:** Oh really?

**Amy Westervelt:** I did. And in that episode on Reconstruction, you got into detail about the violent backlash in the South against abolition, and the pretty quick slide into Jim Crow laws and sharecropping, practices that acted a lot like slavery. And of course the North is not some sort of post-racism utopia, but it's focused on something else: what's called the Second Industrial Revolution, or the Technological Revolution. A new age of mechanization that further industrializes the North and creates some serious new wealth. This is that period when the Carnegies and the Rockefellers start building company towns and donating libraries and opera houses all over the country.

**John Biewen:** The Gilded Age. And oil drives a lot of that. First in Pennsylvania and Ohio, and then in Texas.

**Amy Westervelt:** That's right, and then eventually in California. In his book *Anointed by Oil*, Darren Dochuk draws this distinction, really along religious lines, between the Pennsylvania and Ohio folks like Rockefeller and then the prospectors that you see in Texas and further West. He calls the Rockefeller approach "the civil religion of crude," and the Western approach "wildcat Christianity."

**Darren Dochuk:** Civil religion of crude very much speaks to the kind of Christian philanthropic and corporate ideals of the Rockefeller family, major oil in general. These are large conglomerates stemming out of the Rockefeller family and its operations in Pennsylvania in the late 19th century. John D. Rockefeller, of course, famously or infamously made his way to western Pennsylvania in the 1860s and there, for the next kind of three decades, really built up a monopoly. And while that was, of course, violent in its own way and drove out so many competitors, in his mind, it was his Christian duty to do so, to bring a certain sense of order, law and order, to an early stage of an industry that was absolutely wild. It was governed by a rule of capture that basically allowed all individuals to drill, drill, drill. And so Rockefeller saw that as wasteful and imposed his corporate might very much on the industry itself. So much so that by the 1890s, his company, Standard Oil, controlled over 90 percent of all refining in the country.

**Amy Westervelt:** And Dochuk says Rockefeller saw his aggressive moves to consolidate control of the oil industry through the lens of Christian faith. This is what Darren means by the 'civil religion of crude.' He says Rockefeller, and later his son, were determined to combine a certain kind of protestant Christianity with America's new industrial power, to shape the world—through economic growth and what Dochuk calls “missionary enterprise.”

**John Biewen:** Hold on a second. “Missionary enterprise.” Can you hear the echoes? The Crusades, colonization, mercantilism, manifest destiny.

**Amy Westervelt:** All of the above. But Dochuk says the other kind of early American oil man, in the southwest, is doing something different. This is what he calls wildcat Christianity.

**Darren Dochuk:** And that is representative of those small oil producers, those independent oilmen who were driven out of the business in Pennsylvania by the Rockefellers. And many of them moved west past the Mississippi to Texas and California and Oklahoma. And many of them were also quite devoutly Christian, Protestant and Catholic and very fervent, independent-minded in both their corporate practice and in their faith. And they saw in Rockefeller, in his civil religion of crude, not just an attack on their business practices, on their livelihood, but also an attack on their view of the church, which stressed the fervency of kind of a libertarian Christianity in which it was about personal commitment to Christ that mattered most. There was a fierce defense of scripture and the abilities of individuals to approach scripture and theological truths on their own terms. All of this was very much wedded to their fiercely independent business practices as well.

**Amy Westervelt:** This bit feels really important to me, John. Because remember, the Protestants who made their way to America were a peculiar group of people. And one of the things that they had rejected about the Catholic church was the idea that you needed a priest or bishop or whatever to interpret scripture for you. So this idea of individual faith is really critical to them, and I think it's one of the things that's unique about the U.S. In good and bad ways.

**John Biewen:** Individualism does loom so large in the American story from the beginning. Sometimes in ways that most of us would approve. But it's tough to see how that fierce individualism can ever really integrate with a strong, active concern for the common good.

**Amy Westervelt:** Exactly. And to me that's one of the big roots at the base of this sprawling problem we call the climate crisis. Because it's not just one characteristic of American identity, it's a *cherished* characteristic. It's held up, over centuries, as the quality that makes America great.

**John Biewen:** It gets conflated with a particular type of democracy and freedom that America will fight a few more wars over. And that is still at the heart of so many of our struggles today.

[Music]

**John Biewen:** From the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University, this is Scene on Radio, Season 5: The Repair, Episode Four. I'm John Biewen.

**Amy Westervelt:** I'm Amy Westervelt. In this series on the climate crisis, we're exploring how and why humanity went wrong in our relationship with the earth and other living beings. And what it would really take to save ourselves.

**John Biewen:** Starting with the next episode, we're gonna visit countries that did not create the climate crisis but are suffering its disastrous consequences. This time, though, you're going to bring us up to the present, more or less, Amy, by looking at the evolution of the U.S., mostly in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Why has *this* country played such an important role in the creation and continuation of the climate crisis? Last time we examined why many Enlightenment ideals withered so quickly in the New World. But capitalism, racism, and patriarchy were not and are not unique to America. So what did this new country and its new ideas about how things should work bring to the party? Tell us what you found, Amy, and then we'll talk more.

**Amy Westervelt:** There's this sense in a lot of U.S. history books that the Civil War happened, it ended, and then industrialization and expansion began. But all of that was happening at the same time. In 1862, just a year into the Civil War, Congress passed the Homestead Act, this bill that gave citizens or future citizens up to 160 acres of "public land" provided they'd live on it, improve it, and pay just a small registration fee. And again, this country distributed "public land" that it had taken from Indigenous tribes. The territory wasn't just sitting there waiting for someone to farm it. But I also want to draw your attention to that "improving it" bit. It originates in the writings of Enlightenment philosopher John Locke, and it ends up being really critical to America's unique approach to property rights. Environmental sociologist Colin Jerolmack is a professor at NYU who's studied the evolution of those rights.

**Colin Jerolmack:** John Locke made a strong argument that the government should not be able to retain the fruits of an individual's labor, including on their land. And so that thesis was invoked explicitly to argue that the government ought not be able to get its hands on any of the fruits of industry.

**Amy Westervelt:** Locke formulated that argument partly as a way to keep the Catholic church from trying to seize land in England, as it was doing in other countries at the time. Americans ran with it in a whole new direction. We'll get to that in a minute. But first, the railroads.



**“American Enterprise,” William Shatner, narrator:** America's westward movement was building up steam and needed a commercial carrier that could cut the country down to size. [Sound: train on tracks] The iron horse became the beast of burden for an expanding America. It was big. It was strong. It was fast. [Sound: train whistle] It even sounded as if it was going somewhere.

**Amy Westervelt:** This is from that series on the American economy that Phillips Petroleum commissioned in the 1970s. The element most historians point to as critical to the industrialization and eventual globalization of America is not land and agriculture, but railroads. Well, first steel, which begat the railroads. Particularly the Transcontinental Railroad, finished in 1869. It began moving coal, oil, steel, and lumber across the country and to various ports.

**“American Enterprise”:** [Sound: train] First, the railroads connected the cities of the east into a single giant market. Then the Union Pacific and the Southern Pacific and the Santa Fe struck out across the Great Plains. When the railroads came through, there were already half a million of us west of the Mississippi. Land was wealth, and the promise of it lured men west.

**Amy Westervelt:** Oil follows a bit after steel, rail, and coal, but it explodes quickly. In part because of that peculiar approach to property rights I mentioned before. In America, and really only in America, land ownership gives you mineral rights. Colin Jerolmack again.

**Colin Jerolmack:** So the title of my book, *Up to Heaven and Down to Hell*, alludes to a feature of common property law that the United States inherited from England. And the phrase is, whoever owns the soil, it is theirs up to heaven and down to hell. [Music] England had the strongest property rights before the United States. And there was a huge caveat, though, to that, you know, owning the soil down to hell part, which was that the crown retained anything valuable underneath the surface. So you technically own the soil but any gold, silver, oil, precious metals, gas that was there, belonged to the crown. And so, you know, the United States inherited property law as it inherited many other forms of law from England. But there was a very conscious decision, when the so-called founding fathers won the Revolutionary War, to get rid of those caveats. And this was explicitly, consciously pulling on John Locke, who exerted incredibly strong force on the American Constitution, who made this argument that it is only through labor that nature becomes valuable and labor belongs to the individual, therefore whatever they transform with the labor should belong to them.

**Amy Westervelt:** Enlightenment philosopher John Locke was, of course, one of the big contributors to social contract theory and a huge influence on the new Americans.

**Colin Jerolmack:** America remains the only country in the world where the most common form of property ownership includes all of the subsurface underneath your land.

**Amy Westervelt:** Up to heaven and down to hell. It's so evocative—and so American—to refer to the afterlife, religion, while codifying the right to extract wealth. This is such a key matter to think about when we're trying to figure out how we ended up with the climate crisis. And not just because the property system in the U.S. generates wealth for individuals.

**Colin Jerolmack:** Pretty early on, this created strong incentives for individual landowners to, to want to lease or sell their land to petroleum or coal companies. And it also created major obstacles for making collective decisions around it, because if it's privately my choice and I don't have to consult with my neighbors and I'm going to make money from it, then that's a disincentive for me to ask my neighbors' permission, right? Or to ask what they think about it. Because they might not want me to do it because they could suffer the consequences of it. And so, but every individual kind of thinks this way and has personal incentives that they get from doing so. And so it really sets in motion these resource dilemmas where every time, from earlier coal booms to fracking and everything in between, every time there's really strong personal incentives for every individual to lease their land. And even people who might be hesitant think, well, if I don't do this and everybody else around me leases, I'm still going to deal with the environmental consequences. And so I might as well lease and make some money from it, right?

**Amy Westervelt:** Property rights end up tying into this very American characteristic, a sort of obsession with individual rights.

**Colin Jerolmack:** We are the most individualistic country, the country that most promotes personal sovereignty and national sovereignty, I think.

[Music]

**Colin Jerolmack:** It's Alexis de Tocqueville, who wrote about American democracy almost 200 years ago, he at that time recognized this to be—of course, every country can have individualist tendencies—but that he worried that America seemed to be the most extreme. And what he hoped was that it would be tempered by our desire for civic association, right? Precisely because there's this anxiety about government, tyranny, then what that leads to is, that leads to civic association, because it's, well, let's form our own community, organize organizations, a school board, right? A local zoning commission. So that we are creating the laws that do that. And so I think de Tocqueville had hope that civic association would temper individualism, but he was very concerned. And I think his concerns turn out to be right, that that level of an allergic reaction to state, let alone federal regulation, was really going to present problems for figuring out ways to act in the public good.

**Amy Westervelt:** So, no surprise, as soon as people realize oil is valuable, wells spring up all over the place. And pretty quickly after that, you have folks like Rockefeller coming in and trying to impose order, buying up all the land rights and trying to create a respectable industry. In Rockefeller's case that meant really owning every link in the chain between the crude in the ground and the oil in a barrel. His company, Standard Oil, starts pretty quickly to monopolize the industry, pushing prospectors and independent oil men further and further West. But *they* keep making discoveries too, and by 1880, the U.S. dominates this new and growing global oil market—controls almost 90 percent of it. And there's this explosion of other industries happening at the same time. Edison patents the lightbulb in 1879, Carnegie's steel empire is expanding, Henry Ford is coming out with various prototype automobiles. Harvey Firestone, who's been working at a company that makes tires for carriages, sees the car boom coming. In 1900 he starts his own company making rubber tires for those vehicles. Just a few years later, Ford gets the chance to meet his idol Thomas Edison. As legend has it, Ford's about to throw in the towel on the whole car thing, but Edison encourages him to keep at it. A year later, in 1908, the Model T rolls off the assembly line and massively expands the world market for petroleum and rubber. In just a couple of decades, Ford is producing millions of cars.

**Archival audio:** [Instrumental music] And when Henry Ford turned out his 15<sup>th</sup> million car, we knew the automobile industry had really arrived.

**Amy Westervelt:** Of course, all that ingenuity and invention requires some key ingredients to work. Not just the ideas and elbow grease of a few dudes, although that is one hundred percent the way they talked about it then, and the way a lot of people still talk about it today. Those ingredients? Natural resources and cheap labor. The building blocks of capitalism. Pretty quickly a divide emerges between the captains of industry and the people who work for them. There's this amazing old interview between Firestone, Ford, and Edison where they're basically saying if these young people today weren't so allergic to work, they could really make something of themselves.

**Archival audio: Thomas Edison:** There's a real shortage of high-grade men....

[unintelligible]

**Harvey Firestone:** Yes, if we could just get better men, we could make better developments, and then....

**Amy Westervelt:** This is a recording from the 1920s, so it's not real easy to hear, but Edison says, "There's a real shortage of high-grade men" and then Firestone chimes in with, "Yes, if we could just get better men, we could make even more developments, if they would just WORK!" Of course, by this time, workers had gotten wise to these industrialists and had started asking for safer working conditions and higher wages. And industrialists didn't much care for it. Especially because the media and the government

also seemed to agree that this country needed to rein in the excesses of industry. In the last couple decades of the 19th century, the federal government passed its first regulations on industry, in large part driven by the oil boom and, in particular, by Rockefeller's monopoly on the industry. As the 20th century dawned, journalists like Ida Tarbell, Upton Sinclair, and Ida B. Wells began writing about abuses of power in the country. Tarbell and Sinclair focused on the industrialists and Wells laid bare just how little had changed for Black people in the U.S. since the end of slavery. The Northern industrialists were shocked to find the press criticizing instead of praising them for their endeavors. Here's Darren Dochuk again, talking about Ida Tarbell's impact.

**Darren Dochuk:** She is the one who will be part of this team of muckrakers of kind of the new style of journalism at the turn of the 20th century, that is geared to a certain type of sensational writing but with social purpose, and they are going to attack some of the meanest, nastiest forms of oppression in American society through the page, through their pen, through journalism. She started to see the damage done to her local environment, done by industrialization, done by the pursuit of oil, and starts to become much more animated in kind of her environmental sensitivities. She goes to Paris, where she hones her skills as a journalist, comes back to the United States and Pennsylvania. There, she, I think, becomes more of a Quaker than a Methodist. And much of it is driven not just by an environmental degradation, but also what she sees the business of oil doing to her father. And to me, this was the most kind of poignant, is just, she talks about seeing her father's face just kind of decaying as he stresses about losing

his business because of the Rockefellers, because of Rockefeller senior. And there, decides to write. And she writes with passion and she decides to write about Standard Oil, an exposé that, of course, is going to literally take down the business by 1911.

**Amy Westervelt:** The U.S. government sued Standard Oil, alleging that it was monopolizing the oil industry through a series of abusive and anti-competitive actions. On the very same day, the Supreme Court broke up the Standard Oil and American Tobacco monopolies. The justices found that the Commerce Clause—the nation’s very first regulation on business—and the Sherman Antitrust Act, passed in 1890, gave courts the power to regulate how these companies ran. In Standard’s case, they broke the company into 34 separate, eventually competing companies. Some of them later combined forces, and they are still America’s major oil companies today: Standard Oil of New Jersey became ExxonMobil, for example. Standard Oil of California is now Chevron.

[Music]

**Amy Westervelt:** So, from the end of the Civil War to the start of the 20th century you’ve got the vote expanding to more non-white, non-male, and non-wealthy groups in society. You’ve got the U.S. government deciding it can and *should* regulate industry. And you’ve got journalists shining a light on abuses of power. And, like we mentioned



last episode, in the midst of all that, another American invention, the modern public relations industry, is born.

**Melissa Aronczyk:** Back in that era and what we call the Progressive Era, Americans were becoming increasingly worried over the size and power of corporations.

**Amy Westervelt:** This is Melissa Aronczyk, media studies scholar at Rutgers University and author of the book *A Strategic Nature*, about the origins of environmental PR. We heard from her last episode, too. Almost immediately, America's early PR guys start to wrestle the narrative back for industrialists. Ivy Ledbetter Lee starts to work with the Rockefellers in 1914 to rehab their image.

**Archival interview, Ivy Lee:** Mr. Rockefeller listened to me patiently, pleasantly, and calmly until I'd finished my eloquent presentation on why he should do what we recommended.

**Amy Westervelt:** This is Lee in the 1920s, recounting his early meetings with John D. Rockefeller Jr. He ends up working for them for the rest of his life. [Music: WW1-era brass band music and singing] Lee and a handful of other early PR greats, plus a wide

range of artists, filmmakers and even journalists like Ida Tarbell, take a break from thinking about Standard Oil for a few years and instead help to sell the American public on the need to join World War I. The first oil-fueled war.

**[Archival audio, song: We'll bing, bang, bing 'em on the Rhine, boys / We'll show the Kaiser too, what a Yankee bunch can do!...]**

**World War I booster speech, unidentified speaker:** A common language is one of the strongest influences for building up a spirit of national solidarity.

**Amy Westervelt:** To ensure a steady fuel supply to the front lines, American oil companies band together and meet regularly. And Ivy Lee gets the idea that this sort of thing would be very useful in peacetime too.

**Bob Brulle:** After the war ended, there was interest in sort of coordinating an industry position for the petroleum industry to represent their interests to the public.

**Amy Westervelt:** Bob Brulle is an environmental sociologist at Brown University. He's studied fossil fuel propaganda for years.

**Bob Brulle:** Out of that comes the American Petroleum Institute. And Ivy Lee draws on his experience in the War Propaganda Board effort to start developing larger institutional public relations efforts. And he works with the head of Standard Oil of New Jersey, which we now know as ExxonMobil, to form the American Petroleum Institute in 1919. And so the American Petroleum Institute is now one hundred years old, and it's considered to be really the first modern, sophisticated, public relations-oriented trade association in the world.

[Music]

**Amy Westervelt:** The Institute faced its first big peacetime challenge almost immediately, when the U.S. Geological Survey sounded the alarm in 1919 that the country was going to run out of oil in just ten years. The federal government starts to open more land to oil drilling, and U.S. companies start to explore for oil outside the country too. Once again, there's a religious component at play. Here's Darren Dochuk.

**Darren Dochuk:** There is evidence of American corporations, those located in the West in particular, in relying on information provided by missionaries for exploration and also lines of potential marketing in places like Peru.

**Amy Westervelt:** Peru was one of the first countries where U.S. oilmen found large oil reserves. And keep in mind that these oil corporations located in the west that Dochuk is talking about are mostly folks who Rockefeller had pushed out of the east. So they're used to moving around to find more oil. One of the first to go beyond U.S. borders is a guy named Lyman Stewart.

**Darren Dochuk:** He moves to Southern California and starts Union Oil company, which we, of course, are still familiar with today. And in the 1890s and early 1900s, he was, of course, very interested in building his own oil empire in the west. But he was also very anxious to make connections to South America, to Latin America. And he, for instance, hired one of his close associates. An executive in the company was a missionary in Peru and was aware both of the oil potential of Peru but also of this kind of fertile, as they saw it, land for witnessing and spreading kind of a gospel of conservative evangelicalism. So, these two operations, the search for oil and the quest to save souls for Christ, as Lyman Stewart saw it, went hand in hand very much early on.

**Amy Westervelt:** World War I effectively ended the Progressive Era, and the United States swung back to its love affair with industry. Especially the idea of global industry, with the U.S. dominating it. In the 1920s, large oil reserves were discovered not only throughout Latin America, but also in the Middle East, where U.S. and European oil companies fought over control of oil fields—in other countries, mind you! The big global oil companies at the time were known as The Seven Sisters, and they included all the ones you’ve heard of—Chevron, Exxon, Mobil, Texaco, Shell—and a couple you may not have: Gulf Oil, which later merged with Chevron, and Anglo-Persian, which became BP. The detailed geopolitics around Middle East Oil throughout the 1920s would take a whole other podcast to get into. But in 1928, the Seven Sisters and their respective governments settled matters amongst themselves and divvied up Middle East Oil through a treaty known as the Red Line Agreement. It’s called that because they drew a literal red line around the Arabian Peninsula and parceled out Iraqi, Iranian, and Saudi oil reserves. It just represents a staggering degree of entitlement.

[Music]

**Amy Westervelt:** In the years leading up to World War II, Standard Oil sent its publicist, Ivy Lee, over to Germany to do the company a favor. It had just begun a fruitful relationship with a German chemical company called IG Farben. But now this Hitler fellow was stirring up trouble, and the Germans wondered whether the Rockefellers’ great PR guy could come over and talk him out of some talking points that would make conditions bad for business on both sides of the Atlantic. In his diary entries, telegrams to Rockefeller and, ultimately, testimony before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, Lee described multiple meetings with Hitler and Goebbels, who he counseled

on ways to make themselves more appealing to Americans and the rest of the world. Of course his efforts failed, and within a few years, the U.S. was embroiled in World War II, another fossil-fueled conflict in Europe and the Pacific.

**[Break]**

**Amy Westervelt:** I grew up thinking, like a lot of Americans, that in the wake of World War II, Americans were just so glad to be done with the war that they took up a huge buying boom out of sheer euphoria.

**1950s advertisement, archival:** [Light instrumental music] At last, the Bryans have all the space they could need. Big floor to ceiling closets for each member of the family, large comfortable bedrooms ....

**Amy Westervelt:** And sure, maybe that's part of it. But not long ago I found an archive in Wisconsin that held all the old papers of another Standard Oil PR guy: Earl Newsom, who worked for the company from the late 1920s until it became Exxon in the early 70s. In one of the 20-odd boxes of Standard Oil documents....

**Amy Westervelt, at library:** OK, I've got a folder marked 'confidential' here, so that's interesting.

[Sound: flipping pages]

**Amy Westervelt:** I found a plan from 1944.

**Amy Westervelt on tape:** [Pages turning] This is some kind of strategy. Wow, OK, holy sh\*t. Typed at the top of this page it says, 'The Premise.' And then it goes, 'Next to crushing the Axis, and avoiding runaway inflation while we are doing it, the most important problem confronting us is to keep the American people convinced of the intrinsic social and economic worth of the free enterprise system and of its superiority over statism, [turns page] so that the people will be determined to remove unnecessary governmental controls and reestablish competitive, democratic, free enterprise capitalism when the war is won.'

[Music]

**Amy Westervelt:** This plan goes on to lay out how various companies and industries can coordinate their pro-free enterprise campaigns, without seeming like they're coordinating at all. And, of course, without using the words "free enterprise." Don't want to give away the plot. The fossil fuel industry spent a lot on PR from its early days, but you see that spending ramp up quite a bit after World War II, particularly in these more subtle, hidden ways. Here's sociologist Bob Brulle again.

**Bob Brulle:** You can actually start to see movies being put out by the American Petroleum Institute in the 1920s, 1930s, all the way through—I believe I sent you one for the 1950s?

**Amy Westervelt, on tape:** Yep.

**Amy Westervelt:** He did, and it's become one of my favorite examples of fossil fuel propaganda. It's from 1956 and it's called "Destination Earth." The basic premise is that Martians, who apparently are communists, travel to our planet and discover oil and capitalism and how great it all is.

**Destination Earth, narration in voice of "Martian":** It seemed no time 'til I was approaching a country of Earth called, um, the United States of America. It



seems that almost everybody in this country has one of those, um, they call them automobiles! The source of their nourishment was something called ... petroleum. A power source like that must be a highly prized state secret!

**Bob Brulle:** Connecting the good life to fossil fuel use has been and continues to be a chronic, paradigmatic element of American Petroleum Institute, the fossil fuel propaganda efforts. And the message from that 1950s movie you saw is not a whole lot different than what you see in their “Fueling it Forward” commercials, you know, that they show in 2017 at the Super Bowl. So, they've been at that a long time.

[Music]

**Amy Westervelt:** Of course that Post-WWII messaging dovetails with the Cold War too, and further solidifies this relationship between American identity, capitalism, and oil, both at home and abroad. Here's historian Darren Dochuk again.

**Darren Dochuk:** Moving into the 1950s and the Cold War period, this pursuit of black gold is going to be all the more intensified against the backdrop of the Cold War and the fight with communism and the fear that Latin America might lose

itself to the great secular communist threat of the Soviet Union. So oil and the pursuit of souls is going to become all the more important at that point.

**Amy Westervelt:** But despite this concerted effort from Big Oil and American industry in general to push the idea that free enterprise and capitalism equal freedom, and that Americans should trust private corporations to deliver that freedom....

**Movie audio, The Graduate, 1967: Ben (Dustin Hoffman):** Mr. McGuire.

**Mr. McGuire:** Ben.

**Amy Westervelt:** ...here come the Sixties. It's a time of protest movements, and other more sardonic challenges to the status quo, including in movies like *The Graduate*.

**The Graduate: Mr. McGuire:** I just want to say one word to you. Just one word.

**Ben:** Yes, sir?

**Mr. McGuire:** Are you listening?

**Ben:** Yes, I am.

**Mr. McGuire:** [Pause] Plastics.

**Amy Westervelt:** The new decade introduces two particular problems for industry: Rachel Carson and Ralph Nader. Carson's book, *Silent Spring*, sparks a public outcry

about the ways that industry uses and abuses nature to benefit itself, ultimately leading to the creation of new regulations, the federal Environmental Protection Agency, and the first Earth Day. Nader plants a very simple, powerful idea in the minds of Americans: consumers deserve protection. Here's Carson talking about her work on CBS shortly after her bestseller, *Silent Spring*, came out in 1962:

**Rachel Carson:** We have to remember that children born today are exposed to these chemicals from birth, perhaps even before birth. Now what is going to happen to them in adult life as a result of that exposure?

**Amy Westervelt:** And here's Nader a few years later, after the release of his book, *Unsafe at Any Speed*, which targeted the automotive industry for cutting corners on safety.

**Ralph Nader:** Business is not so much opposed to Marxism or communism as they are to good old free enterprise, competitive business and consumer sovereignty. That's what really gets them all worried. One can imagine what would happen if people could see what goes into their processed food products or they could see what frauds so many of the so-called cleaners and cleaning agents are, and the kind of harm that's involved. Or they could see the enormous price fixing that goes on in the petroleum industry.

**Amy Westervelt:** So you can see why Nader really got them going. But there's another important difference between the consumer protection movement and the environmental movement. If you listened to the Seeing White season of Scene on Radio—and you should—you know that the biggest threat to early landowners in America was a cross-racial coalition of poor and working-class people. Nader made that threat real again. He connected his consumer protection arguments with all the other social justice movements happening at the time. The environmental movement, though, made a conscious decision *not* to do that.

**Reverend Lennox Yearwood:** The modern-day climate movement, meaning around the creation of EPA right around between 1968 and 1972, most of the large, the big green organizations, were created. So NRDC, LCV, Rainforest Action Network, all those organizations—UCS—were created within that four-year timeframe.

**Amy Westervelt:** This is Reverend Lennox Yearwood, founder of the Hip Hop Caucus and a longtime environmental justice activist. Those organizations he mentioned are NRDC, the Natural Resources Defense Council; LCV, the League of Conservation Voters; Rainforest Action Network; and UCS, the Union of Concerned Scientists.

**Rev. Lennox Yearwood:** What's also important is that the people were in the streets. So you had the Black people with the Black Power movement, was in the streets. And that was part of this process.

**Amy Westervelt, in interview:** In those same years, yeah.

**Rev. Lennox Yearwood:** You had the women's movement that was emerging, the gay rights movement that was, that was powerful in New York City and just throughout the world was just moving forth. You had all the, even had the anti-Vietnam movement, so even young white kids who were putting out street heat. They weren't engaging—the climate movement literally said at the very beginning, we are not going to be a part of that kind of movement. They immediately pull back from the inception, and they coasted along.

**Amy Westervelt:** That made the environmental movement less of a threat, and Nader, advocating for a cross-racial coalition that threatened the powerful, Public Enemy Number One. Industry really went after him, and more or less succeeded in making Nader seem like a radical. A crank. They had far less success with Carson, an award-winning science writer who won the National Book Award. But the effort to discredit her, to fight back against this new environmental movement, mirrors really closely how industry handled the Progressive movement more than a half century earlier. And the guy who leads the charge against Carson will go on to play an integral role in the debate over global warming just a few decades later. For industry, Bob Brulle says, this was a bad flashback to the Progressive Era, and they tackled it the same way: with PR.

**Bob Brulle:** Ivy Lee, of course, is now long dead, but into this breach steps E. Bruce Harrison.

**Amy Westervelt:** There are two types of PR guys: the ones who want their names in the press, too, and the ones who prefer to work their magic behind the scenes. Like Ivy Lee before him, E. Bruce Harrison was the latter sort—all “aw shucks” Southern charm but a master manipulator of the public and the government. He started his PR career working as a press guy for a Democratic senator from Alabama. But the chemical lobby wooed him to work for them, making him the very first “environmental information officer” ever, and almost immediately he found himself facing an enormous challenge: beating back the first wave of the environmental movement and “that damn book,” *Silent Spring*. He lost that first battle. Working for the Chemical Manufacturers Association, now called the American Chemistry Council, he threw everything at Carson and *Silent Spring*. She was a woman. She wasn’t really a scientist. She had cancer so she probably wanted to carry out some sort of paranoid revenge plot. She might have been a lesbian. Nothing stuck, partly because Carson died not long after *Silent Spring* was published, which only increased the book’s impact. Harrison never really forgot that failure. Melissa Aronczyk, the Rutgers media studies professor we’ve heard from before, spent quite a bit of time with Harrison in his final years.

**Melissa Aronczyk:** E. Bruce Harrison was the consummate public relations professional in the United States. He checks all the boxes in terms of what is

underlying the power of public relations in American life. One is that he was virtually unknown. He was incredibly powerful. He had hundreds of clients. I think the signature move of E. Bruce Harrison was to give companies, especially the most environmentally contentious companies, a language and a voice to speak about the environment and be taken seriously by their publics.

**Amy Westervelt:** Bob Brulle puts this a little more bluntly.

**Bob Brulle:** He's the father of greenwashing.

**Amy Westervelt:** In the aftermath of the Silent Spring debacle, Harrison realizes that companies need a major strategy to deal with ecological issues, and he invents a whole new realm of PR to help them do just that.

**Melissa Aronczyk:** The key was that he looked at how companies could communicate an environmental commitment. They were not necessarily walking the talk. They were not necessarily enforcing behaviors or changing their production style to demonstrate an environmental commitment. But they got really good at communicating their environmental commitment.

One of the most important things that E. Bruce Harrison did to earn that title of the founder of “environmental PR,” or “green PR,” as he liked to call it, “green communication,” was to create an environmental coalition. And this coalition was called the National Environmental Development Association, or NEDA. The name was appropriately vague. It was meant to be vague so that it would not be obvious what side of the aisle, so to speak, this organization or coalition sat on. NEDA was a coalition of a number of industry groups and labor groups that were trying, in the 1970s, to mitigate or soften federal environmental restrictions. And when Bruce Harrison founded his own public relations firm in 1973 called the E. Bruce Harrison Company, NEDA was its first client. You have to really admire a person who starts his own agency with a client that he has created himself.

**Amy Westervelt:** Harrison started his firm with his wife, Patricia, and eventually they created NEDA sub-groups. One to focus on the Clean Air Act, another for the companies that worried about the Clean Water Act, and so forth.

[Music]

**Amy Westervelt:** A couple decades after he lost the battle over *Silent Spring*, E. Bruce Harrison got another shot at defending industry against environmental regulations. Working as he was with oil, automotive, and manufacturing companies, he saw the



global warming issue coming a mile away. And he created more of his coalitions to deal with it. At home in the U.S., he pulled various industry groups and companies together into an organization called the Global Climate Coalition. And by the early 1990s he had gone international.

**Melissa Aronczyk:** E. Bruce Harrison was already working internationally by the time the Earth Summit rolled around, the United Nations conference in Rio. And sustainable development was *the* theme that everyone was talking about at that conference.

**Amy Westervelt:** Harrison had pulled together an international network of what he called “environmental communications”—PR firms all over the world that were using his approach to deal with ecological issues. And keep in mind that in the lead-up to that summit, the idea of tackling global warming had bipartisan support. The first president George Bush famously said he would tackle the greenhouse effect with the White House effect.

**George H. W. Bush, campaign speech:** Some say these problems are too big, that it’s impossible for an individual, or even a nation as great as ours, to solve the problem of global warming, or the loss of forests, or the deterioration of our oceans. My response is simple. It can be done, and we must do it.

**Amy Westervelt:** That kind of talk made businesses with skin in the global warming game very nervous—so, basically, any company or industry that emits a lot of CO2. Think oil and gas but also automotive, manufacturing, industrial agriculture.

**Melissa Aronczyk:** So, Harrison was already working with a lobby group in Brussels and was creating a kind of franchise network that was called EnviroCom, whereby his firm in Washington, his firm would license the rights to use his sustainable communication strategies in whatever country they were located in. He was working with countries—Italy, France, Germany, the Netherlands—and he also had franchises in Mexico he was working with. He was really everywhere. And it was at the events run by business surrounding that conference, of which there were many, that he presented his paper on the concept of sustainable communication. And he had very willing ears of all the CEOs from all over the world who were interested in this idea.

[Music]

**Amy Westervelt:** Again, this is the early 1990s. And the United Nations, organizers of the Rio Earth Summit, the first big international policy conference on climate, had really

bought into the idea that business needed to participate, that they needed to have industry buy-in.

[Music]

**Melissa Aronczyk:** Because business communities had been invited to the conference and because they knew that their buy-in was so important, they planned extensively in the lead-up to the conference, to be able to present what they called their own sustainable development charter, a kind of, again, non-binding, not legal document, but a kind of voluntary self-regulating document with a set of rules that business agreed to operate by when it came to environmental sustainability. And as you can imagine, this charter, it did not contain anything that would have really transformed how companies did business. It was a very business-as-usual document. But it paid a lot of lip service to the idea of going green, of being sustainable, being very concerned about the environment. And because they got out in front of the actual conference and the other types of events that were being designed, they were really able to put that document forward and stave off other kinds of more binding legislation or more draconian regulations that would have caused problems for these companies' profits.

**Amy Westervelt:** Here's where Harrison activated the lessons he'd learned battling Rachel Carson and *Silent Spring*.

**Melissa Aronczyk:** He spoke with me at great length about that moment as being a defining moment because he felt that the big mistake had been not understanding how to communicate with the public, to convey a sense of compromise and a sense of consensus among all of the interested parties. If you just tried to discredit existing knowledge by saying it's wrong, you'll meet with a lot of resistance. So what Harrison understood and what ended up defining the rest of his career was in developing public relations strategies where *consensus* was the order of the day. It was always about the spirit of compromise that required everyone having a voice, everyone sitting at the table to discuss environmental problems. And for Harrison, that included his clients. His clients deserved, in his eyes, a voice at the table. And to me, that's one of the biggest liabilities. That's essentially the beginning of the end as far as environmental policy in the United States is concerned, because what you have, if you always have business voices at the table, is a sense of the self-interest of business, which is always going to be at odds with the need to protect the environment.

[Music]

**Amy Westervelt:** In the wake of Rio, Harrison would go on to orchestrate industry's attack on the Kyoto Protocol, an emissions reduction agreement that was binding. His wife Patricia would head the Republican National Committee that secured a win for George W. Bush. One of Bush's first actions after his inauguration was to pull the U.S. out of the Kyoto Protocol.

**President George W. Bush:** For America, complying with those mandates would have a negative economic impact.

**Amy Westervelt:** A moment repeated shortly after another heavily oil-funded president took office in 2017:

**President Donald Trump:** The Paris Climate Accord is simply the latest example of Washington entering into an agreement that disadvantages the United States, leaving American workers, who I love, and tax-payers....[fades out]

[Music, continued]

**John Biewen:** If I didn't know better, Amy, I'd say you're trying to make a case for the U.S. as the number one culprit in creating the global ecological emergency.

**Amy Westervelt:** Well, you know, if the shoe fits. Yeah, we're far and away number one.

**John Biewen:** For a century and a half we've led the world in pumping *and* consuming fossil fuels. And if that weren't enough, people in the U.S. invented the very industry, public relations, that helped to protect those corporate spewers of greenhouse gases by staving off any real action on climate change.

**Amy Westervelt:** For decades.

**John Biewen:** You've been reporting on that for years.

**Amy Westervelt:** Yep. The truly monumental efforts by people in the oil and other related industries. They muddied the waters about the science, blocked real action by Congress, helped to leverage those decisions by U.S. presidents to pull out of international agreements.

**John Biewen:** Folks, if you haven't listened to Amy's investigative podcast, *Drilled*, you should. Start with Season 1, The Origins of Climate Denial. But I also want to highlight

the earlier parts of *this* episode, Amy, where Colin Jerolmack was talking about this country's unique laws around private property rights.

**Amy Westervelt:** Yes, that whole 'up to heaven and down to hell' thing.

**John Biewen:** Yes. Colin talked about the importance of John Locke, the 17<sup>th</sup> century English philosopher, for the founders of the U.S., and again we get to make connections to some of our previous work on this show. In Season 4, our democracy series, we quoted the framers at the Constitution who made statements like, "Property is the main object of society." That was Gouverneur Morris. Well, Locke wrote, about a century earlier, "Government has no other end than the preservation of property."

**Amy Westervelt:** Yes. It's *possible* to interpret a phrase like that in a relatively benign way. Government is the civilizing force that allows people to live together without constantly thumping each other over the head and stealing each other's stuff. Maybe that's what Locke meant?

**John Biewen:** Yeah, I mean, maybe, in part. Fair enough. But if you take these competing Enlightenment values, that are really in tension with each other, and imagine a sliding scale—on one end, values like human equality and the collective well-being, and on the other, individual liberty, private property rights, 'this is my stuff and my land, keep your paws off'—the ruling classes in the U.S. have consistently come down on the

side of, *my* rights, *my* freedoms, trumping the common good. That has huge consequences for people and the environment.

**Amy Westervelt:** Yeah, that's right. For example, our unique laws that give property owners the right to use their land 'down to hell.' So you have the right to dig up any minerals under that ground. Or to chop down a thousand-year-old tree that happens to be standing on "your" land. Your deed of ownership trumps any interest that the community has in keeping that tree alive, or keeping that coal in the ground.

**John Biewen:** Never mind the *tree's* right to live. Later in the series we're gonna visit a country that has tried to grant rights to non-human nature itself. But yes. Our worship of private property in the U.S. Our *extreme* individualism.

**Amy Westervelt:** Let's not get started on how that has played out in this country's response to the Covid epidemic.

**John Biewen:** Yeah, let's not. Except to say that it's literally killing thousands and thousands of us. But yes, I think we can add these features to the picture we've painted over four episodes—along with dominion ideology, colonization....

**Amy Westervelt:** ...capitalism, thingification.



**John Biewen:** Amy, I picture some listeners squirming, getting irritated with us, saying, come on, you all are just beating up on Americans, the West, Europeans, so-called white people. It's unfair.

**Amy Westervelt:** Maybe it is. A little.

**John Biewen:** But that's what we *do* on this show. It's a needed corrective in the face of hundreds of years of propaganda and gaslighting about who we were and who we are. Of course, all of that that continues in full force today.

**Amy Westervelt:** Yeah. But going back to the question you raised in an earlier episode: would people in other cultures have led the way in creating an exploitative, extractive culture if they could have, if they'd had the power and the technologies to do it? No doubt, *some* would have. Of course there have been other colonizing, conquering, exploitative groups of humans.

**John Biewen:** But this isn't about assigning blame for the sake of assigning blame, and not who *might* have led us here, but who *did*.

**Amy Westervelt:** Remember: 10 percent of the global population, in the US and the EU, produced 70 percent of the excess greenhouse gases that created the climate emergency. It's about understanding how we got here so we can think more clearly about how we need to change.

**John Biewen:** To save ourselves, and our only livable planet. The only one *I'd* want to live on, anyway.

**Amy Westervelt:** Me, too.

**John Biewen:** I mean, you could maybe get me to *visit* Mars, but....

**Amy Westervelt:** I famously have a t-shirt that says "F\*\*\* Mars."

**Music: Joni Mitchell, "Big Yellow Taxi":** They paved paradise / Put up a parking lot....

**John Biewen:** Let's end this episode on this note. Another reminder that we've known for a long time what we're doing to the planet. Even, yes, *that* "we"—so-called white folks in North America.

**Amy Westervelt:** A long time. Joni Mitchell recorded this, when, in 1970?

**John Biewen:** And uh, that's more than half a century ago. Pretty good math, eh?

**Amy Westervelt:** Impressive, John.

**Joni Mitchell, “Big Yellow Taxi:”** [Music] Don't it always seem to go / That you don't know what you've got / Till it's gone ....

**John Biewen:** In that post-Rachel Carson moment, Joni sings about the loss of paradise. Twenty years later, in 1990—still a solid generation ago—[Music: grungy guitar lead-in] you've got another Canadian, and another of my faves, I'll admit it, going further. Pointing out that our destruction of this living planet is really self-destruction.

**Amy Westervelt:** Yep.

**Neil Young, “Mother Earth:”** [Music] Oh, Mother Earth / With your fields of green / Once more laid down / By the hungry hand / How long can you / Give and not receive / And feed this world / Ruled by greed

**John Biewen:** Thanks, Amy Westervelt. Next time: right now, in the Global South. We go to Indonesia, where, among other challenges, the sea is swallowing the capital city.

[Guitar solo continues]

**John Biewen:** Our story editor this season is Cheryl Devall. I do the production and mixing. Music in this episode by Lili Haydn, Kim Carroll, Chris Westlake, Lesley Barber,

Cora Miron, and goodnight Lucas. Oh, and Joni Mitchell, and Neil Young and Crazy Horse. Music consulting and production help by Joe Augustine of Narrative Music. The show is distributed by PRX, and comes to you from the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University.

**Music: Neil Young, “Mother Earth”:** Respect Mother Earth / And her healing ways / Or trade away / Our children’s days

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*Transcription by Jess Jiang.*