

Clearing the air

Using the family name for good, Robert F. Kennedy Jr. critiques Dubya's environmental record in his latest book **By Darren D'Addario**

Robert F. Kennedy Jr. is very serious when it comes to protecting America's ecosystems—and his family's famous name. In August, Kennedy, 50, a high-profile environmental litigator and a professor at Pace University's law school, published *Crimes Against Nature*, a scalding indictment of the current Bush administration's dubious environmental policy. In the broadside, he not only takes Shrub and company to task for allowing cronyism and corporate greed to reduce the quality of our air and water, but also criticizes a culture that focuses more on celebrity profiles than scientific facts (though it seems unlikely that this scholarly treatise about politics and pollution would be landing on best-seller lists without the author's celebrated surname on the cover). Talking to **TONY** via telephone from his office in Westchester, Kennedy freely discussed environmental issues and the presidential election, but wasn't quite so forthcoming when the conversation turned to his family's complicated public legacy.

Time Out New York: In what major ways have Bush's ecological policies been lacking?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: This is the worst environmental administration in American history. It's been a concerted three-and-a-half-year effort to eviscerate environmental law. Most insidiously, they put polluters and their lobbyists in charge of the agencies that are supposed to protect the American people. President Clinton was prosecuting the worst of these polluters.

TONY: In all fairness, I don't remember swimming in the East River when Bill Clinton was President, either. Can you give me some concrete examples of how Bush policy has diminished the quality of life in New York?

RFK: I'm telling you that New Yorkers are being killed! One in four black children in New York has asthma. The primary reason is the [nation's] 1,100 coal-burning power plants. This is an industry that has donated \$100 million to Bush since 2000.

TONY: What has the Bush administration done to safeguard the Indian Point Nuclear Power Plant?

RFK: Almost nothing. Nobody is charged with protecting that plant against terrorist attacks. The operator has no duty to protect it, because of lobbyists. The office of Homeland Security has no armed forces and the Pentagon hasn't allocated troops. There are also hundreds of chemical plants across the Hudson River that are unprotected.

TONY: In your book, you draw a parallel between the rise of Christian fundamentalism and antienvironmentalism.

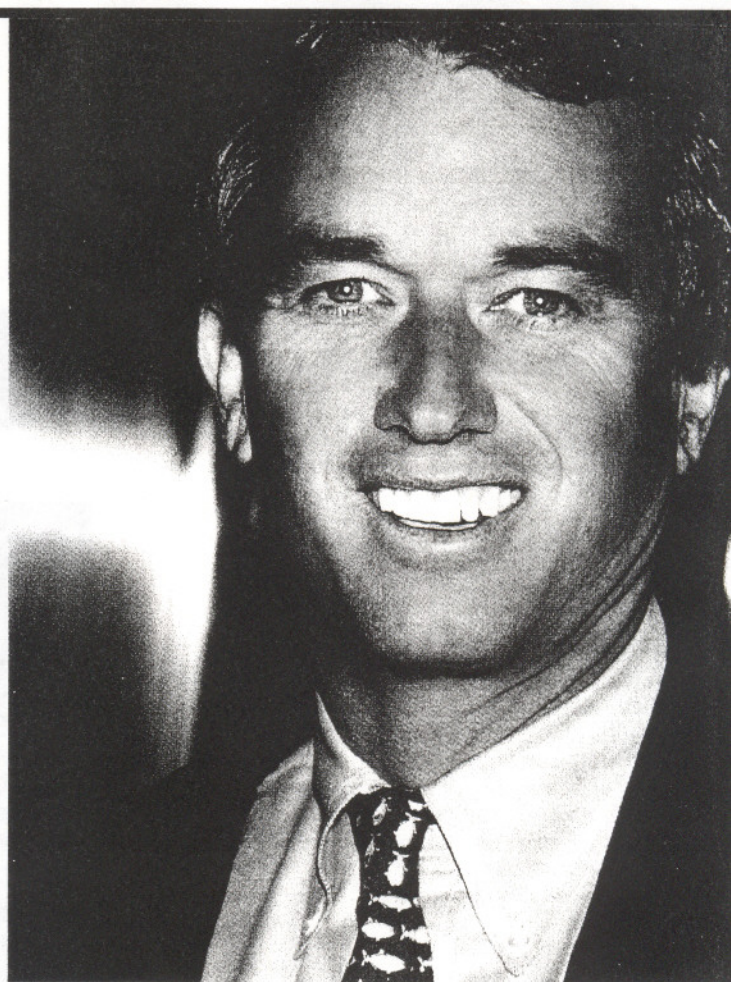
RFK: There's a connection there. In response to Earth Day in the '70s, large industrial polluters began forming links with right-wing Christian groups, particularly with [televangelist] Pat Robertson and Rev. Sun Myung Moon.

TONY: But don't Christian fundamentalists like to fish and kayak, too?

RFK: [Long pause] Through pure demagoguery, people can be led to believe that there's some greater threat to their cultural assumptions.

TONY: When your uncle [John F. Kennedy] ran for President in 1960, people were skeptical of him because of his Catholic faith. Should we be more skeptical of how Bush's faith has affected policy?

RFK: If you look at history, there are parallels between [the U.S. today] and the destruction of Islamic culture, which during the Middle Ages was the leader in math, architecture, poetry, science and music. That culture was destroyed by religious fundamentalism.



We're currently seeing the same attack on American culture and values by fundamentalism.

TONY: Do you know John Kerry well?

RFK: Yes, I see a lot of John. He's been a champion on our issues. He has a 96 percent [approval] rating from the League of Conservation Voters. It's the best record in the Senate.

TONY: Do you have a personal anecdote about Kerry that would paint a more complete portrait than that we're getting from the media?

RFK: Well, last summer John and my brother Max [Kennedy] windsurfed 48 miles over open water to Nantucket. And you know, he didn't give a press conference at the end. He just did it for fun. That's pretty admirable.

TONY: Uh...right. Who do you think will win the election?

RFK: [Pause] Um...well...It's unimaginable to me that anyone could vote for George W. Bush after the mess he's made of our country. But, um, I guess there are a lot of Americans living in that non-fact-based world. [Laughs]

TONY: How do you think California's Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has performed in regard to the environment?

RFK: I think he's surprised a lot of people and done very well. He just passed the nation's toughest automobile emissions standards.

TONY: Yet Schwarzenegger is supporting Bush's reelection.

RFK: Well, that's party politics.

TONY: Are you content to continue with your present work, or do you have aspirations to run for office?

RFK: I like what I'm doing, and if I feel like I can be effective doing this, I'm going to keep doing it.

TONY: If you did run for office, do you think the Kennedy name would be more of an asset or a liability at this point?

RFK: An asset, of course. Because there are millions of Americans for whom my father and my uncle stand for the best of democracy, justice and hope in America. We can't advance ourselves as a people by leaving our poorer brothers and sisters behind or by denying our responsibility to future generations.

TONY: Do you think some Americans grew weary of the Kennedy political dynasty because of all of your family's scandals?

RFK: [Angrily] I think there's a lot of people who understand the battles my family has fought for this country. You know what, I'm not gonna talk about this stuff. I don't talk about my family. I think I'm done with this interview.

TONY: Maybe you could tell me why you think America has become so politically polarized?

RFK: [Long pause] The major problem is the media isn't doing its job. Before Ronald Reagan overturned the fairness doctrine in 1987, you couldn't have had a Rush Limbaugh or Fox News. The domination of the media by six large companies has turned the news departments into corporate profit centers. They're appealing to the lowest common denominator with sex and celebrity gossip. They're giving us Kobe Bryant, Laci Peterson and Michael Jackson, but news departments have a greater responsibility than to entertain us.

Crimes Against Nature (HarperCollins, \$21.95) is out now.