

A Question for Journalists: How Do We Cover
Penguins and the Politics of Denial?

by Bill Moyers

(From the keynote address to the annual convention of the
Society of Environmental Journalists, Austin, Texas, October 1, 2005.)

Thank you for inviting me here today and for counting me as a colleague.

I don't fit neatly into the job description of an environmental journalist although I have kept returning to the beat ever since my first documentary on the subject some 30 years ago. That was a story about how the new Republican governor of Oregon, Tom McCall, had set out to prove that the economy and the environment could share the center lane on the highway to the future.

Those were optimistic years for the emerging environmental movement. Rachel Carson had rattled the cage with *Silent Spring* and on the first Earth Day in 1970 twenty million Americans rose from the grassroots to speak for the planet. Even Richard Nixon couldn't say no to so powerful a subpoena by public opinion, and he put his signature to some far-reaching measures for environmental protection.

I shared that optimism and believed journalism would help to fulfill it. I thought that when people saw a good example they would imitate it, that if Americans knew the facts and the possibilities they would act on them. After all, half a century ago, I had walked every day as a student across the campus of my alma mater, the University of Texas and could look up at the main tower and read the words: "You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free." I believed we were really on the way toward the third American Revolution. The first had won our independence as a nation. The second had finally opened the promise of civil rights to all Americans. Now the third American Revolution was to be the Green Revolution for a healthy, safe, and sustainable future.

Sometimes in a moment of reverie I imagine that it happened. I imagine that we had brought forth a new paradigm for nurturing and protecting our global life support system; that we had faced up to the greatest ecological challenge in human history and conquered it with clean renewable energy, efficient transportation and agriculture, and the non-toxic production and protection of our forests, oceans, grasslands and wetlands. I imagine us leading the world on a new path of sustainability.

Alas, it was only a reverie. The reality is otherwise. Rather than leading the world in finding solutions to the global environmental crises, the United States is a recalcitrant naysayer and backslider. Our government and corporate elites have turned against

America's environmental visionaries – from Teddy Roosevelt to John Muir, from Rachel Carson to David Brower, from Gaylord Nelson to Laurence Rockefeller. They have set out to eviscerate just about every significant gain of the past generation, and while they are at it they have managed to blame the environmental movement itself for the failure of the Green Revolution. If environmentalism isn't dead, they say, it should be. And they will gladly lead the cortege to the grave.

Yes, I know: the environmental community has stumbled on many fronts. All of us in this room have heard and reported the charges: that the rhetoric is alarmist and the ideology polarizing; that command-and-control regulation produces bureaucratic bungles, slows economic growth, and delays technological advances that save lives; that what began as a grassroots movement has now become an entrenched green bureaucracy precariously hanging on in occupied Washington while passionate citizens across the country are starved for financial resources. There is some truth in these charges; all movements flounder and must periodically regroup.

Before we consider the case closed, however, let me urge you to take a hard look at the backlash. I didn't reckon on the backlash. If the Green Revolution is a bloody pulp today, it is not just because the environmental movement mugged itself. It is because the corporate, political, and religious right ganged up on it in the back alleys of power. Big companies fund a relentless assault on green values and policies. Political ideologues launch countless campaigns to strip from government all its functions except those that reward their rich benefactors. And homegrown ayatollahs are more set on savaging gay people than saving the green earth.

I especially failed to reckon with how ruthless the reactionaries would be. What they did to Rachel Carson when *Silent Spring* appeared in 1962 has been honed to a sharp edge aimed at the jugular of anyone who challenges them.

I felt the knife's edge some years ago when I took up the subject of pesticides and food for a Frontline documentary on PBS. My producer, Marty Koughan, learned that the industry was plotting behind the scenes to dilute the findings of a National Academy of Science study on the effect of pesticide residues in children. When the companies found out we were on the story, they came after us. Before the documentary aired television reviewers and the editorial pages of newspapers were flooded with disinformation. A whispering campaign took hold. One *Washington Post* columnist took a dig at the broadcast without having seen it and later confessed to me that he had gotten a bum tip about the content from a top lobbyist for the chemical industry and printed it without asking me for a response.

Some public television managers were so unnerved by the propaganda blitz against a yet-to-be aired documentary that they actually protested to PBS with a letter prepared by the chemical industry.

Here's what most perplexed us: eight days before the broadcast, the American Cancer Society, an organization that in no way figured in our story, sent to its three-thousand local chapters a "critique" of the unfinished documentary claiming, wrongly, that it exaggerated the dangers of pesticides in food. We were puzzled. Why was the American Cancer Society taking the unusual step of criticizing a documentary that it had not yet seen, that had not yet aired, and that did not claim what the Society said was in it? An enterprising reporter named Sheila Kaplan later looked into these questions for *Legal Times*. She found that the Porter Novelli public relations firm, which had several chemical companies as clients, also did pro bono work for the American Cancer Society. The firm was able to cash in on some of the goodwill from their "charitable" work to persuade the communications staff at the Society to distribute erroneous talking points about the documentary before it aired – talking points supplied by, but not attributed to, Porter Novelli. *Legal Times* headlined the story, "Porter Novelli Plays All Sides," a familiar Washington game.

This was just round one. The producer Sherry Jones and I spent more than a year working on another PBS documentary called "Trade Secrets." This was a two-hour investigative special based on records from the industry's own archives. Those internal documents revealed that for over 40 years big chemical companies had deliberately withheld from workers and consumers damaging information about toxic chemicals in their products. They confirmed not only that a shameless and amoral industry knowingly deceived the public. They also confirmed that we were living under a regulatory system designed by the chemical industry itself – one that put profits ahead of safety.

Once again the industry pounced. We found ourselves the target of another public relations firm – this one noted for using private detectives and former CIA, FBI and drug enforcement officers to conduct investigations for big business. One of its founders acknowledged that corporations "sometimes" resort to unconventional resources, including "using deceit." We were the target of a classic smear campaign and PBS felt the pressure. Still, the documentary ran, created a big impact across the country, and a year later received an Emmy from our peers for outstanding investigative journalism.

But this crowd never gives up. President Bush has turned the agencies charged with environmental protection over to people who don't believe in it. To run the Interior Department he chose a long-time defender of polluters who has opposed laws to safeguard wildlife, habitat, and public lands. To run the Forest Service he chose a timber industry lobbyist. To oversee our public lands he named a mining industry lobbyist who believes public lands are unconstitutional. To run the Superfund he chose a woman who made a living advising corporate polluters how to evade the Superfund. And in the White House office of environmental policy the President placed a lobbyist from the American Petroleum Institute whose mission was to make sure the government's scientific reports on global warming didn't contradict the party line and the interest of oil companies.

Everywhere you look, the foxes own the chicken coop.

My colleagues and I reported these stories again and again on my weekly PBS series, to the consternation of the President's minions at the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. The CPB Chairman, Kenneth Tomlinson, turned the administration's discomfort at embarrassing disclosures into a crusade to discredit our journalism. Tomlinson left the chairmanship this week but the Rightwing coup at public broadcasting is complete. He remains on the board under a new chair who is a former real estate director and Republican fund raiser. She recently told a Senate hearing that the CPB should have the authority to penalize public broadcasting journalists if they step out of line. Sitting beside her and Tomlinson on the board is another Bush appointee – also a partisan Republican activist – who was a charter member and chair of Newt Gingrich's notorious political action committee, GOPAC. Reporting to them is the White House's handpicked candidate to be President and chief executive officer of the CPB – a former co-chair of the Republican National Committee whose husband became PR director of the Chemical Manufacturers Association after he had helped the pesticide industry smear Rachel Carson for her classic work on the environment, *Silent Spring*. Mark my words: if this gang has anything to say about it, there will be no challenging journalism to come from public television while they are around; no investigative reporting on the environment; no reporting at all on conflicts of interest between government and big business; no naming of names.

So if the environmental movement is pronounced dead, it won't be from self-inflicted wounds. We don't blame slavery on the slaves, the Trail of Tears on the Cherokees, or the Srebrenica massacre on the bodies in the grave. No, the lethal threat to the environmental movement comes from the predatory power of money and the pathological enmity of rightwing ideology.

Theodore Roosevelt warned a century ago of the subversive influence of money in politics. He said the central fact in his time was that big business had become so dominant it would chew up democracy and spit it out. The power of corporations, he said, had to be balanced with the interest of the general public. That warning was echoed by his cousin Franklin, who said a "government by organized money is as much to be feared as a government by organized mob." Both Roosevelts rose to that challenge in their day. But a hundred years later mighty corporations are once again the undisputed overlords of government. Follow the money and you are inside the inner sanctum of the Business Roundtable, the National Association of Manufacturers, and the American Petroleum Institute. Here is the super board of directors for Bush, Incorporated. They own the Administration lock, stock, and barrel, and their grip on our government's environmental policies is leading to calamitous consequences. Once the leader in cutting edge environmental policies and technologies and awareness, America is now eclipsed. As the scientific evidence grows, pointing to a crisis, our country has become an impediment to action, not a leader. Earlier this year the White House even conducted an extraordinary

secret campaign to scupper the British government's attempt to tackle global warming – and then to undermine the UN's effort to stabilize greenhouse gas emissions. George W. Bush is the Herbert Hoover of the environment. His failure to lead on global warming means that even if we were dramatically to decrease greenhouse gases overnight we have already condemned ourselves and generations to come to a warming planet.

You no doubt saw those reports a few days ago that the Arctic has suffered another record loss of sea ice. This summer, satellites monitoring the region found that ice reached its lowest monthly point on record – the fourth year in a row it has fallen below the monthly downward trend. The anticipated effects are well known: as the Arctic region absorbs more heat from the sun, causing the ice to melt still further, the relentless cycle of melting and heating will shrink the massive land glaciers of Greenland and dramatically raise sea levels. Scientists were quoted saying that with this new acceleration of melt the northern hemisphere may have crossed a critical threshold beyond which the climate cannot recover.

Nonetheless, last year a Gallup poll found that nearly half of Americans worry “only a little” or “not at all” about global warming or “the greenhouse effect.” In July of this year, ABC News reported that 66% of the people in a new survey said they don't think global warming will affect their lives.

If you've seen the film “March of the Penguins,” you know it is a delight to the eye and a tug at the heart. The camera follows the flocks as they trek back and forth over the ice to their breeding ground. You see them huddle together to protect their eggs in temperatures that average 70 degrees below zero Fahrenheit. So powerful and beautiful a film can only increase one's awe of our small neighbors far to the north.

In the New York Times recently, Jonathan Miller reported that conservatives are invoking “March of the Penguins” as an inspiration for their various causes. Some praise the penguins for their monogamy. Opponents of abortion say it verifies “the beauty of life and the rightness of protecting it.” A Christian magazine claims it makes “a strong case for intelligent design.” On the website “lionsofgod.com” you can find instructions to take a notebook, flashlight and pen to the movie “to write down what God speaks to you” as you watch the film.

Fair enough. It would not be the first time human beings felt connected to a transcendental power through nature. But what you will not find in the film is any reference to global warming. Why is it relevant? Because to reproduce, the penguins must go to the thickest part of the ice where they can safely stand without fear it will break beneath their weight. Global warming obviously weakens the ice. If it becomes too thin, the penguins will lose the support necessary for reproduction. Yet the film is silent on this threat to these little creatures that conservatives are adopting as their mascots in the culture wars. The film's director explained that he wanted to reach as many people as

possible and since “Much of public opinion appears insensitive to the dangers of global warming,” he didn’t want to go there.

Again, fair enough. I can’t fault him for the aspiration to tell the story for its own sake, in the most simple and profound way. I can’t fault him for wanting to avoid disturbing the comfort of viewers. I often wish that I were a filmmaker instead of a journalist and didn’t have to give people a headache by reporting the news they’d rather not hear.

But what we don’t know can kill us.

Our oldest son is addicted to alcohol and drugs. I’m not spilling any family secrets here; my wife Judith and I produced a PBS series based on our family’s experience and called it “Close to Home” because we wanted to remind people that addiction hijacks the brain irrespective of race, creed, color or street address. He’s doing well, thank you – he’s been in recovery for ten years now and has become one of the country’s leading public advocates for treatment. But we almost lost him more than once because he was in denial and so were we. For a decade prior to his crash he would not admit to himself what was happening, and he was able to hide it from us; he was, after all, a rising star in journalism, married, a home-owner and a God-fearing churchgoer. Naturally we believed the best about him: A drug addict, slowly poisoning himself to death? Not our son! The day before he crashed I was concerned about his behavior and asked him to lunch. “Are you in trouble?” I asked? “Are you using?” He looked me squarely in the eyes and said, “No, Dad, not at all. Just a few problems at home.” “Whew,” I said, placing my hand on his. “I’m really glad to hear that.” And I switched the subject. The next day he was gone. We searched for days before his mother and a friend tracked him down and coaxed him from a crack house to the hospital.

They say denial is not a river in Egypt. It is, however, the governing philosophy in Washington. The President’s contempt for science – for evidence that mounts everyday – is mind boggling. Here is a man who was quick to launch a ‘preventative war’ against Iraq on faulty intelligence and premature judgment but who refuses to take preventive action against a truly global menace about which the scientific evidence is overwhelming.

Unfortunately, the people in his core constituency who could most effectively call on this President to lead are largely silent. I mean the Christian conservatives who gave President Bush 15 million votes in 2000 and maybe 20 million in 2004. Without their support, the transnational corporations who now control Washington would fail to have the votes needed to eviscerate our environmental protections.

Some of these Christian conservatives are implacable. They have given their proxies to the televangelists, pastors, and preachers who have signed on with the

Republican Party to turn their faith into a political religion, a weapon of partisan conflict.

But millions of these people believe they are here on earth to serve a higher moral power, not a partisan agenda. They overwhelmingly respond to natural disasters like last year's tsunami or the AIDS crisis in Africa by opening their hearts and wallets wide. Alas, although many of them may believe Christians have a moral obligation to protect God's creation, most remain uninformed about the true scope of the environmental crisis and the role of the Republican Party in it. As a result, they typically vote their consciences on social issues rather than environmental ones.

Listen to this anguished moral missive from Joel Gillespie, a conservative Christian who recently wrote to *On Earth* magazine: "I'll admit that when I pushed the button for President Bush, I did so with some sadness, given his dismal environmental record. But many of us who love the natural world...feel we face an almost impossible either-or-predicament. Voting for pro-environmental candidates usually means voting for a package of other policies that we will never swallow. We're forced to choose unborn babies or endangered species, traditional marriage or habitat protection, cleaning up the smut that comes across the airwaves or the smut that fouls our air. And the fact that we are forced to make such choices has harmed the natural environment and the special places we love and cherish."

Many evangelical Christians face Gillespie's dilemma. They need to be challenged to look more closely at their moral choices – to consider whether it is possible to be pro-life while also being anti-earth. If you believe uncompromisingly in the right of every baby to be born safely into this world, can you at the same time abandon the future of that child, allowing its health and safety to be compromised by a President who gives big corporations license to poison our bodies and destroy our climate?

In his grandstanding during the Schiavo right-to-die case last spring, President Bush said, "It is wise to always err on the side of life," and he pleaded for a "culture of life." But by ignoring the wise counsel of thousands of environmental scientists, the President is not erring on the side of life. He is playing dice with our children's future – dice that we have likely loaded against our own species, and perhaps against all life on earth.

There is a market here for journalists who are hungry for new readers. The conservative Christian audience is some fifty million readers strong. But to reach them, we have to understand something of their belief systems.

Reverend Jim Ball of the Evangelical Environmental Network, for example, tells us that "creation-care is starting to resonate not just with evangelical progressives but with conservatives who are at the center of the evangelical spectrum." Last year, in a document entitled *For the Health of the Nation: An Evangelical Call to Civic*

Responsibility, the National Association of Evangelicals declared that our Bible “implies the principle of sustainability: our uses of the earth must be designed to conserve and renew the earth rather than to deplete or destroy it.” In what might have come from the Sierra Club itself, the declaration urged “government to encourage fuel efficiency, reduce pollution, encourage sustainable use of natural resources, and provide for the proper care of wildlife and their natural habitats.” Ball and a few evangelical leaders have also pushed for a climate change plank to their program, standing up to demagogues like James Dobson, Jerry Falwell, and Pat Robertson who are in the service of the corporate-funded radical wing of the Republican Party.

But we can't expect to engage this vast conservative Christian audience with our standard style of reporting. Environmental journalism has always spoken in the language of environmental science. But fundamentalists and Pentecostals typically speak and think in a different language. Theirs is a poetic and metaphorical language: a speech that is anchored in the truth of the Bible as they read it. Their moral actions are guided not by the newest IPCC report but by the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

Here's an important statistic to ponder: 45 percent of Americans hold a creationist view of the world, discounting Darwin's theory of evolution. I don't think it is a coincidence then that in a nation where nearly half our people believe in creationism, much of the populace also doubts the certainty of climate change science. Contrast that to other industrial nations where climate change science is overwhelmingly accepted as truth; in Britain, for example, where 81% of the populace wants the government to implement the Kyoto Treat. What's going on here? Simply that millions of American Christians accept the literal story of Genesis, and they either dismiss or distrust a lot of science – not only evolution, but paleontology, archeology, geology, genetics, even biology and botany. To those Christians who believe that our history began with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and that it will end soon on the plains of Armageddon, environmental science with its urgent warnings of planetary peril must look at the best irrelevant. At worst the environmental woes we report may be stoically viewed as the inevitable playing out of the end of time as presented in the book of Revelation. For Christian dominionists who believe the Lord will provide for all human needs and never leave us short of oil or other resources, no matter how we overpopulate the earth, our reporting may be viewed as a direct attack on biblical teachings that urge humans “to be fruitful and multiply.” It's even possible that among many Christian conservatives, our environmental reporting – if they see it at all – could seem arrogant in its assumptions, mechanistic, cold and godless in its world view. That's a tough indictment, but one that must be faced if we want to understand how these people get their news.

So if I were a free-lance journalist looking to offer a major piece on global warming to these people, how would I go about it? I wouldn't give up fact-based analysis, of course – the ethical obligation of journalists is to ground what we report in evidence. But I would tell some of my stories with an ear for spiritual language, the language of parable,

for that is the language of faith.

Let's say I wanted to write a piece about the millions of species that might be put on the road to extinction by global warming. Reporting that story to a scientific audience, I would talk science: tell how a species decimated by climate change could reach a point of no return when its gene pool becomes too depleted to maintain its evolutionary adaptability. That genetic impoverishment can eventually lead to extinction.

But how to reach fundamentalist Christians who doubt evolution? How would I get them to hear me? I might interview a scientist who is also a person of faith and ask how he or she might frame the subject in a way to catch the attention of other believers. I might interview a minister who would couch the work of today's climate and biodiversity scientists in a biblical metaphor: the story of Noah and the flood, for example. The parallels of this parable are wonderful to behold. Both scientists and Noah possess knowledge of a potentially impending global catastrophe. They try to spread the word, to warn the world, but are laughed at, ridiculed. You can almost hear some philistine telling old Noah he is nothing but a "gloom and doom" environmentalist," spreading his tale of abrupt climate change, of a great flood that will drown the world, of the impending extinction of humanity and animals, if no one acts.

But no one does act, and Noah continues hearing the word of God: "You are to bring into the Ark two of all living creatures, male and female, to keep them alive with you." Noah does as God commands. He agrees to save not only his own family but to take on the daunting task of rescuing all the biodiversity of the earth. He builds the Ark and is ridiculed as mad. He gathers two of every species, the climate does change, the deluge comes as predicted. Everyone not safely aboard drowns. But Noah and the complete complement of Earth's animals live on. You've seen depictions of them disembarking the Ark beneath a rainbow, two by two, the giraffes and hippos, horses and zebras. Noah, then, can be seen as the first great preservationist, preventing the first great extinction. He did exactly what wildlife biologists and climatologists are trying to do today: to act on their moral convictions to conserve diversity, to protect God's creation in the face of a flood of consumerism and indifference by a materialistic world.

Some of you are probably uncomfortable with my parable. You may be ready to scoff or laugh. And now you know exactly how a fundamentalist Christian who believes devoutly in creationism feels when we journalists write about the genetics born of Darwin. If we don't understand how they see the world, if we can't empathize with each person's need to grasp a human problem in language of his or her worldview, then we will likely fail to reach many Christian conservatives who have a sense of morality and justice as strong as our own. And we will have done little to head off the sixth great extinction.

That's not all we should be doing, of course. We are journalists first, and trying to

reach one important audience doesn't mean we abandon other audiences or our challenge to get as close as possible to the verifiable truth. Let's go back for a moment to America's first Gilded Age just over a hundred years ago. That was a time like now. Gross materialism and blatant political corruption engulfed the country. Big business bought the government right out from under the people. Outraged at the abuse of power the publisher of McClure's Magazine cried out to his fellow journalists: "Capitalists...politicians...all breaking the law, or letting it be broken? There is no one left [to uphold it]: none but all of us."

Then something remarkable happened. The Gilded Age became the golden age of muckraking journalism.

Lincoln Steffans plunged into the shame of the cities – into a putrid urban cauldron of bribery, intimidation, and fraud, including voting roles padded with the names of dead dogs and dead people – and his reporting sparked an era of electoral reform.

Nellie Bly infiltrated a mental hospital, pretending to be insane, and wrote of the horrors she found there, arousing the public conscience.

John Spargo disappeared into the black bowels of coal mines and came back to crusade against child labor. For he had found there little children "alone in a dark mine passage hour after hour, with no human soul near; to see no living creature except...a rat or two seeking to share one's meal; to stand in water or mud that covers the ankles, chilled to the marrow...to work for fourteen hours...for sixty cents; to reach the surface when all is wrapped in the mantle of night, and to fall to the earth exhausted and have to be carried away to the nearest 'shack' to be revived before it is possible to walk to the farther shack called 'home.'"

Upton Sinclair waded through hell and with "tears and anguish" wrote what he found on that arm of the Chicago River known as "Bubbly Creek" on the southern boundary of the [stock] yards [where]: "all the drainage of the square mile of packing houses empties into it, so that it is really a great open sewer...and the filth stays there forever and a day. The grease and chemicals that are poured into it undergo all sorts of strange transformations...bubbles of carbonic acid gas will rise to the surface and burst, and make rings two or three feet wide. Here and there the grease and filth have caked solid, and the creek looks like a bed of lava...the packers used to leave the creek that way, till every now and then the surface would catch on fire and burn furiously, and the fire department would have to come and put it out."

The Gilded Age has returned with a vengeance. Washington again is a spectacle of corruption. The promise of America has been subverted to crony capitalism, sleazy lobbyists, and an arrogance of power matched only by an arrogance of the present that acts as if there is no tomorrow. But there is a tomorrow. I see the future every time I

work at my desk. There, beside my computer, are photographs of Henry, Thomas, Nancy, Jassie, and SaraJane – my grandchildren, ages 13 down. They have no vote and they have no voice. They have no party. They have no lobbyists in Washington. They have only you and me – our pens and our keyboards and our microphones – to seek and to speak and to publish what we can of how power works, how the world wags and who wags it. The powers-that-be would have us merely cover the news; our challenge is to uncover the news that they would keep hidden.

A lot is riding on what we do. You may be the last group of journalists who make the effort to try to inform the rest of us about the most complex of issues involving the survival of life on earth.

Last year, my final year on *NOW with Bill Moyers*, we produced a documentary called “Endangered Species,” about a neighborhood in Washington, D.C., known as Anacostia, just a few blocks from Capitol Hill. It is one of the most violent and dangerous neighborhoods in the city, one of those places that give Washington the horrendous distinction of the highest murder rate of any major city in the country. It’s horrendous in other ways too. The Anacostia River that gives the neighborhood its name is one of the most polluted in America; more than a billion gallons of raw sewage end up in it every year.

We went there to report on the Earth Conservation Corps, a project started by one Bob Nixon to recruit neighborhood kids to help clean up the river and community. For their efforts, they earn minimum wage, get health insurance, and are offered a \$5000 scholarship if they go back to school.

The area where they work is practically a war zone. Since the project began an average of one corps member has been murdered almost every year. One was beaten to death. One was raped and killed. Another died when he was caught in the middle of a shooting while riding his bike. Three were shot execution style.

One of the most charismatic of the kids who joined the Corps was named Diamond Teague. He worked so hard the others jokingly called him “Choir Boy.” His work became his passion; he loved it. It gave purpose and meaning to his life to try and clean up his neighborhood and river. But one morning while he was sitting on his front porch someone walked up and shot him in the head.

It’s that kind of place, not far from where the swells of Congress are hosted and toasted by lobbyists for America’s most powerful and privileged interests.

After his death Diamond Teague got the only press of his short life – 43 words in the Washington Post:

“A teenager was found fatally shot about 2:05 Thursday in the 2200 block of Prout Place SW, police said. Diamond D. Teague, 19, who lived on the block, was pronounced dead.”

That’s all. That was Diamond Teague’s obit. Not a word about his work for the Earth’s Conservation Corps. Not a word.

It was left to his friends to tell the world about Diamond Teague. One of them explained to us that they wanted people to know that just because a black man gets killed in the Southeast corner of the nation’s capitol, “he’s not just a drug dealer or gang banger...and not just discount him as nobody when he deserves for people to know him and to know his life.”

They made a video – you can see part of it in our documentary. They turned out for his funeral in uniform. They wept and prayed for their fallen friend. And then they went back to work, on a dusty patch of land squeezed between two factories that they envisioned as a park. “We see the bigger picture,” one of Diamond’s friends told us. “All great things have to start in roughness. We’re just at the beginning of something that’s gonna be beautiful.”

They’ve said they would call it the Diamond Teague Memorial Park, in honor of their friend who was trying to save an endangered river and neighborhood but couldn’t save himself.

On that fleck of land, where anything beautiful must be born in roughness, they see “the bigger picture.”

Just blocks away, at opposite end of Pennsylvania Avenue, in the White House and the Capitol, the blind lead the blind, on one more march of folly.

Who is left to open the eyes of the country – to tell Americans what is happening? “There is no one left; none but all of us.”