



The Environmental President?

Last week, the EPA building was renamed for Bill Clinton. This a bit ironic — not that he was anti-environmental, but the environment wasn't exactly his top priority. As you may recall, Clinton's guiding philosophy was expressed by the motto, "It's the economy, stupid." There's no reason to think he has any particular passion about environmental protection.

Admittedly, there was some good news for environmentalists under Clinton. Cost-benefit review of regulation was less rigorous and less frequent than under Clinton's Republican predecessors. EPA also moved forward with implementation of the 1990 Clean Air Act Amendments, enacted under George H.W. Bush. And the U.S. did help negotiate and also signed the Kyoto Protocol, but there was never any serious effort to achieve ratification. During the first two years of the Clinton Administration, EPA enforcement actions soared. All of that was good from the environmentalist perspective, but they didn't get the new legislation they were hoping for, even in the first two years when (like Obama) Clinton had a Democratic Congress.

After the Gingrich Congress came in, the emphasis changed to playing defense. Enforcement dropped by half during 1995 and 1996. The Clinton Administration stressed "collaborative governance." Unfortunately, although these were intriguing ideas, efforts at collaboration like Project XL turned out to be dead ends. (Outside of EPA's domain, efforts like the use of habitat conservation plans were more successful.) What Clinton was best at was fending off the congressional forbears of today's Tea Party Republicans, who wanted to gut environmental laws. That was definitely an achievement, but not the sort of thing that usually gets a building named after you.