On December 31, 1970, President Richard M. Nixon signed the Clean Air Act. William Ruckelshaus and Russell Train, who later led the way in implementing the new law, stood by his side with beaming smiles. Nixon supported the basic features of the bill. But he had considered vetoing the final version because Senator Ed Muskie (D Maine) had added tough pollution requirements for carmakers. Aides persuaded him to sign it instead and seek later amendments.

After some modifications, the 1970 Act remains the foundation of modern air pollution regulation. Twenty years later, President George H.W. Bush signed the most important amendments, which modernized and in many ways strengthened the statute. The history of this law is a reminder that environmental protection used to be a bipartisan goal. Let's hope that it turns out that way again.

No doubt we could design a more effective and efficient regulatory scheme if we were start over. But the Clean Air Act has nonetheless had a major impact. Here's what EPA has to say on the subject — and remember, this is from the Trump EPA, which is no fan of regulation:

- Experience with the Clean Air Act since 1970 has shown that protecting public health and building the economy can go hand in hand.
- Clean Air Act programs have lowered levels of six common pollutants — particles, ozone, lead, carbon monoxide, nitrogen dioxide and sulfur dioxide — as well as numerous toxic pollutants.
- From 1970 to 2017, aggregate national emissions of the six common pollutants alone dropped an average of 73 percent while gross domestic product grew by 324 percent. This progress reflects efforts by state, local and tribal governments; EPA; private sector companies; environmental groups and others.
- The emissions reductions have led to dramatic improvements in the quality of the air that we breathe. Between 1990 and 2017, national concentrations of air pollutants improved over 75% for lead, carbon monoxide, and sulfur dioxide; 56% for nitrogen dioxide (annual); and 22% for ozone. Particulate concentrations improved more than a third between 2000, when trends data begins for ultra-fine particles, and 2015.

These improvements did not come cheap. Nevertheless, the cost was worth it. The Trump EPA also stated that "[t]he value of Clean Air Act health benefits far exceeds the costs of reducing pollution." Citing its peer-reviewed 2011 study, EPA reports that central benefits estimate of $2 trillion in 2020 exceeds costs by a factor of

more than 30-to-1, and the high benefits estimate exceeds costs by 90 times. Even the low benefits estimate exceeds costs by about 3-to-1." That's still the Trump EPA talking.

In short, the Clean Air Act is a real American success story. Maybe we should think of all the champagne and fireworks we'll see tonight as celebrating that success, as well as the passage of another year. Let's lift a glass tonight to celebrate the Act's fiftieth birthday.