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The Triumphs and Failures of the EPA

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Forty years ago today, a sweeping environmental panic that transcended socioeconomic class and political party spurred President Nixon to create the Environmental Protection Agency. Charged with cleaning up a [visibly soiled](#)

[nation](#), the EPA spent its first 10 years enacting much-heralded air, water, and solid-waste regulations. But under President Reagan in the 1980s, the EPA began to develop the more complicated role it plays today. With the low-hanging fruit largely gathered, the agency passed deeper-cutting regulations and ended up butting heads more with industry.

Today, the EPA has become a rallying point for many conservatives, as Republicans in the House and Senate [attempt](#) to strip the agency of its authority (and court-ordered mandate) to regulate greenhouse gases.

Below, a historian, a clean air advocate, and a business lobbyist weigh in on where the agency has triumphed and where it's stumbled.

Adam Rome, environmental historian at [Penn State University](#):

Triumphs:

The most interesting thing to me about the EPA was that when it was founded, the first director, William Ruckelshaus, said two things I think were really fascinating. He said the mission of the agency was really to encourage an environmental ethic in the American people. It's probably an impossible task for a government agency, but that spirit is really fascinating. The EPA really did try, beyond issuing regulations, to speak for the environment, to try to change the way people saw our relationship to nature.

The other interesting thing he said was that the agency had no obligation to promote commerce or industry--they had their own departments. Eventually, in the '80s, the EPA was forced to balance environmental and economic goals. But in the early years, that wasn't its job.

Stumbles:

Over time, business became much more aggressive in pushing to change how the EPA operated in order to ensure that it had to take into consideration economic issues and risk assessment.

Then, of course, you have Reagan deciding that regulation is a problem, period. The '80s was a time of scandal for the EPA, of shrinking budgets and personnel. It took a while for the agency to recover from that just institutionally. I don't think it's ever really gotten back its original gusto.

But I don't blame the EPA for a lot of its failures. I think it's been hamstrung in many ways since the 1980s.

Armond Cohen, co-founder and executive director of the [Clean Air Task Force](#):

Triumphs:

People like to run down the idea of technology-forcing regulations, where you mandate an aspiration level when the technology maybe doesn't exist or isn't employed. But I think the EPA has a very good record of setting tough standards and industry meeting them.

In the case of cars, there were tight nitrogen oxide standards that were thought to be unachievable when proposed in the 1970s, but what resulted was the catalytic converter. It was cutting-edge at the time--many people in the industry said it couldn't be done. But now the cost of a converter is trivial in the cost of an automobile.

Now the question is can they fashion a technology-forcing program for climate that makes sense and is aggressive but not too aggressive. We've been primarily trying to do a price-based approach, which would have us cap carbon and let people trade it. While in theory that may work very well, we haven't paid enough attention to just mandating reductions in different industries and insisting that they meet them.

Stumbles:

There was a moment in the 1990s where the EPA, under Clinton, had been considering controlling all pollutants from power plants at once--including

carbon dioxide. But they failed to act and left it open to the Bush administration, who proposed the so-called Clear Skies Initiative, which would have pushed all that backward.

On a broader level, it's probably unfair, but I think you can argue that the EPA has failed to articulate a vision of where we want the power sector to be environmentally. It's been much more reactive. It's fair to say that is more the role of Congress, but I think it would have been good at any of these moments for the EPA to have gathered its analytic powers and pushed an agenda.

Bill Kovacs, Senior Vice-President at the [U.S. Chamber of Commerce](#):

Triumphs:

In the early 1970s, when the EPA was created, really through sometime in the late 1990s, they were very successful. Emissions levels have all gone down over the years.

Stumbles:

Well, they're literally pushing the limits of what it is that technology can do. Let's take mercury. In 1970, around the time of the first Clean Air Act, we had 900 tons of mercury in the atmosphere--so it was easy to take it out. Now we have 50 tons, and it's getting harder and harder. You're imposing harsher conditions on an economy that's already stressed for starters, and there needs to be some acknowledgment somewhere in the process that there is an economic impact that cannot be ameliorated by technology.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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