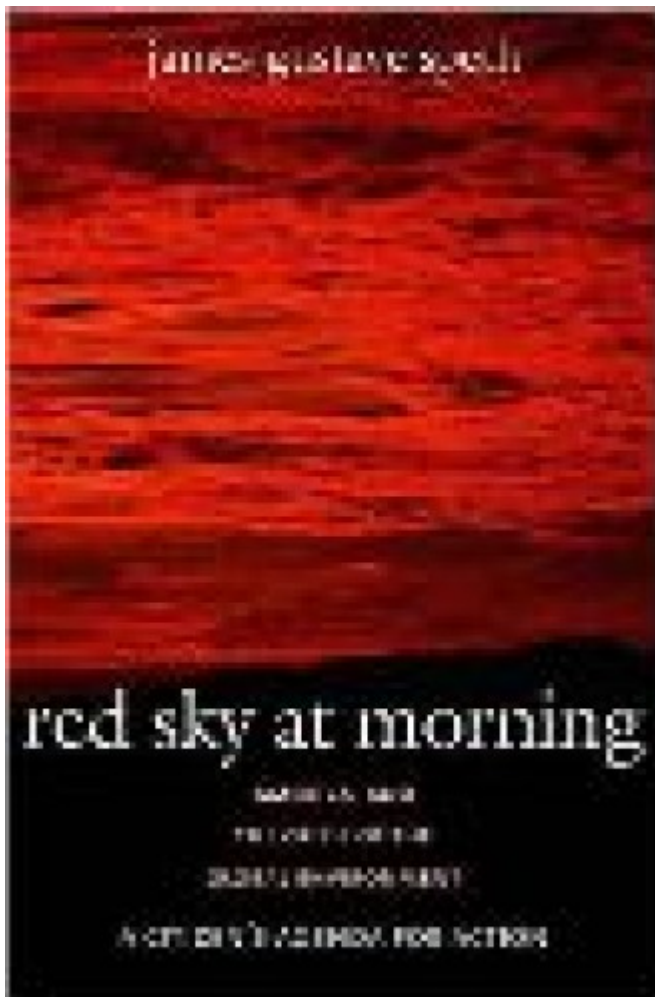


Red Sky at Morning: America and the Crisis of the Global Environment

reviewed by [David Douglas](#) in the [July 27, 2004](#) issue

In Review



Red Sky at Morning: America and the Crisis of the Global Environment

James Gustave Speth
Yale University Press

Like novelist Richard Brandford, James Gustave Speth, one of America's premier environmentalists, uses the familiar nautical adage "red sky at morning, sailors take warning" to title a coming-of-age story—here the story of the international environmental movement. As Speth reports, the movement has had a disappointing adolescence and it faces dark prospects on the horizon. "Global environmental problems have gone from bad to worse and governments are not yet prepared to deal with them."

Few are better credentialed to sound this alarm. Dean of Yale's environmental school, Speth has advised presidents, helped found the Natural Resources Defense Council and the World Resources Institute, and headed the UN Development Program.

His keen-eyed account chronicles the meager international response to deforestation, desertification, water pollution, loss of biological diversity and climate change. Lamenting the economic and social causes that accelerate ecological decline, he warns that "we have wasted much of the 20 years that we could have spent preparing for action."

If Speth's book lacks the groundbreaking impact of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, it's in part because the world's "long-term, chronic and complex" environmental perils are already well documented. What Speth seeks to overcome is not ignorance but apathy.

The slogan "think globally and act locally" can lead to a backyard view of planetary responsibility. Speth challenges Americans whose environmental ethics end at their nation's boundary. He reminds us that the U.S. emits 30 percent of the world's greenhouse gases, and he points to America's opportunity to help heal the earth's wounds, even in the face of the Bush administration's unilateralism. Speth contrasts the strides made to protect America's domestic environment (notably bipartisan during the Nixon years) with the post-1980 failures to protect the globe's air, water, species and climate. "We were building a fool's paradise here in America by concentrating on local environmental concerns while ignoring . . . global-scale ones," he writes.

Since the 1987 Montreal Protocol to protect the earth's ozone layer, international agreements have made little progress ("the Senate is a virtual graveyard full of unapproved environmental treaties"). Speth explores ways to move beyond today's

stalemate so that “global-scale concerns come alive with the immediacy and reality of our domestic challenges in the 1970s.” Though Speth may not persuade those who heed conservative radio commentator Rush Limbaugh rather than the National Academy of Sciences, his meticulous assembling of facts and measured warnings overwhelm the sanguine ecological forecasts of books like Bjorn Lomborg’s *The Skeptical Environmentalist*.

The wonder is that such a veteran conservationist could tally all the missed opportunities without cynicism. Speth weights his book toward solutions, proposing sensible alterations to the current trajectory of consumption, technology, corporate governance and environmentally unfriendly values.

No reader should feel let off the hook. Speth would enlist allies from all sectors of society—civic, religious, academic and business. His invaluable “resources for citizens” chapter, brimming with contact information and Internet sites, shows how individuals—without waiting for governments—can confront global environmental threats. The world is already deeply mired in environmental squalor. Hence Speth’s sense of urgency as he calls for a course correction to avoid even rougher weather ahead.