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## War on Waste: Can America Win Its Battle with Garbage?, and Rush to Burn: Solving America's Garbage Crisis?

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## BOOK REVIEWS

### WAR ON WASTE: CAN AMERICA WIN ITS BATTLE WITH GARBAGE?

LOUIS BLUMBERG and ROBERT GOTTLIEB

Covelo, California: Island Press, 1990.

Pp. xxiii, 300. \$34.95 cloth, \$19.95 paper

### RUSH TO BURN: SOLVING AMERICA'S GARBAGE CRISIS?

From *Newsday*

Covelo, California: Island Press, 1990.

Pp. xii, 269. \$22.95 cloth, \$14.95 paper

Taken together, these two new books issued by the resource conservation publishing house, Island Press, delineate very fully the dilemmas confronting U.S. policy-makers, businesses, and interested citizens, in coping with municipal solid waste. They also bound the issues geographically, as each focuses on a coastal case: the now-defunct Los Angeles City Energy Recovery (LANCER) incinerator project in Los Angeles, and the Long Island garbage glut that sent the barge *Mobro* on its world-wide wanderings. In some ways the first of their kinds—full-length, serious treatments of this subject—these books reflect growing public concern with the subject of garbage and a new recognition that an aspect of our lives long unseen and unmentioned now lays claim on strategic priorities and skills.

*War on Waste*, which had its origins in a 1987 UCLA Urban Planning Program report on LANCER, is an excellent overview, filling in the broad outlines of material, technical, economic, and political problems with copious, precisely recorded, information. The authors (a UCLA professor and then-doctoral candidate) lay the groundwork for each substantive area with brief but quite fascinating histories of public concerns and policies from the early twentieth century onward. What comes through clearly is the cyclical nature of responses as well as the sharp u-turns resulting from changing technologies and political configurations. They trace the modern conception of solid waste management back to the 1890s with the "sanitary reform movement" associated with the Progressive Era. Back then, as now, Americans generated more waste than Europeans and had fewer

government services to cope with them. Spurred by health concerns, 50 percent of American cities had installed municipal collection services by 1915—but it wasn't until 1930 that virtually all city governments collected garbage.

From the start, the three main methods were the same three alternatives we choose among today: land and ocean dumping, burning, and reuse or reduction. Then as now, early incineration methods imported from Europe did not work here, but new technologies did make burning the preeminent option between 1910 and 1930, to be eclipsed in the 1940s by the alluringly cheap alternative of "sanitary landfilling." This in its turn threatened to give way again to incineration as new environmental concerns surfaced in the mid-1970s.

In parallel, the authors describe the extraordinary expansion of the waste stream during the 1950s and 1960s, with the rising affluence of Americans and the burgeoning plastics and packaging industries; the declining willingness to conserve resources, and several ebbs and flows of interest in recycling; and the checkered evolution of policy on solid waste—particularly since the 1960s (with the advent of environmental regulation in the Clean Air Act of 1967). Along the way, they illuminate key technical issues, for example, the ambiguous relationship of municipal and hazardous waste, the reasons why incineration technologies seem almost as errant as nuclear, and the shell game involved in the transfer of toxics from land to air to water and sometimes back again, in most current waste disposal methods.

The powerful forces behind the current drive for incineration—and the resistance to them—are central to the LANCER study and to this book's argument. The authors show how U.S. corporations have raced for position in a new growth industry and how communities in the early 1980s also leapt before looking into "mass burn" or "waste-to-energy"—a.k.a. "resource recovery." But while community officials are beguiled by the "total solution" incineration offers, and by the corporate sales pitch, citizens groups, as in Los Angeles, have become increasingly resistant, given the poor track records of the costly European technologies which are being marketed for very different American conditions by U.S. entrepreneurs. Resistance is indeed the strongest public reaction on waste alternatives—with equal grass roots opposition focused against landfills, as environmentally related costs rise and garbage streams expand.

According to the authors, the best way out of this impasse, which lies in reduction of waste and recycling, will take concerted positive effort of a magnitude not yet in evidence, by citizens, government, and business. To date, as they demonstrate, the citizen-led NIMBY politics have focused only on very proximate goals, the federal government has virtually abdicated responsibility, local governments have failed to put any resources

behind pro-recycling rhetoric, and the main private sector actors have been powerful opponents in the packaging and plastics industries.

For their part, they offer a full range of policy options to foster a holistic waste management strategy [I avoid the term "*integrated* waste management," which has become synonymous with strategies leaning heavily on incineration] including: product disposal taxes, discounting for resource depletion, and procurement requirements for recyclable materials. What they propose, finally, for a public reflexively hostile to government interference in business, is a "reformulation of the waste issue as a matter of democratic intervention in the political process where waste management strategies are selected and the industrial process where the production system is governed." (Tell that to John Sununu.)

Covering much of the same territory, *Rush to Burn* reflects its journalistic origin in a *Newsday* investigation of Long Island's—and America's—garbage problem, conducted through much of 1987 following the voyage of the town of Islip's garbage barge. Less comprehensive and thorough on the complex of issues, this study takes a particularly long and useful look at the symbiosis between local politics and the incineration industry. The authors tell vividly of Hempstead's incinerator—the story of the D'Amato brothers: the Senator, Alphonse, who as town supervisor backed the previous incinerator (demolished after a year-and-a-half of faltering operation); and the lawyer, Armand, who represented the vendor hired to build its replacement. They highlight the vulnerability of municipalities short on technical expertise in a field where European technologies often fail when built to operate on a much larger scale for U.S. conditions, and where "expert" consultants end up making most of the decisions and a lot of money.

The book also points out the penchant for those involved in the faltering nuclear energy industry to reemerge in the field of waste management, with its analogous high-tech allure and public sector capitalization. The New York State/Long Island case illustrates particularly forcefully the confusion and waste inherent in reliance on local government to deal with a problem requiring coordination of resources on a fairly broad scale. Faced by the indifference of the EPA, and a state government which shrugged off involvement, the six towns floundered separately and expensively, with several building redundant incineration capacity and others planning to haul their trash elsewhere. Three years after the *Mobro*, the area's garbage problem does not seem much nearer to solution.

Because both books are driven by skepticism about what is being marketed as the panacea of incineration, their main themes reinforce each other closely. Both underline the power of existing economic stakeholders to shape future alternatives—in seeming defiance of economic rationality but with the support and subsidy of governments. *War on Waste*, in

particular, also portrays the emerging force of grass roots activists who have essentially played the watchdog role that governments have abdicated responsibility for in this area. But both books are realistic about the gap between many "mustard-seed" type efforts and the sort of concerted, multi-level attack on the waste problem that is needed. They point out the total absence of the EPA from the solid waste arena for more than a decade, and a pull-back during the Reagan years from legislation passed previously.

As the garbage crisis begins to ripen, *War on Waste* represents a first-rate foundation (and *Rush to Burn* a helpful supplement) for environmental specialists and officials who want to build a rational policy agenda for waste management. The two books also appear to signal the elevation of garbage as a serious subject on scholarly agendas as well as those of the Third Estate.

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