

# POLLUTION OF REALITY SULLIES CLEAN AIR BILL

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**S**en. George Mitchell, D-Maine, bought the bromide that the public shouldn't watch two products being made: sausage and legislation.

When he had to thrash out a new clean air bill, Mitchell, the Senate majority leader, feared lobbying by auto, oil, coal and steel companies would be nasty. He was nervous about squabbling between Midwestern and Eastern senators. So Mitchell decided to hide the messiness behind closed doors.

For 23 days Mitchell locked his "Gang of 15," five senators from each party plus five Bush honchos, in a private room off the Senate chamber. Capital cops guarded the thick mahogany door.

Sure, a familiar ploy in the Podunk City Council. But it's extraordinary in the U.S. Senate. Bills, especially one affecting the nation's dirty air into the 20th century, are supposedly crafted in public sunshine.

Did Mitchell's clandestine gambit work? Wails of anguish often emitted from the room until 3 a.m. "It took tenacity, grit, perversity and being . . . ornery . . ." said Sen. Al Simpson, R-Wyo. "Not a good system."

Lobbyists, baying outside the room like hounds around a treed coon, mangled the Clean Air Bill anyway. And the secrecy enabled White House conservatives, working phones to chief of staff John Sununu and Budget Director Dick Darman, to wrench the bill their way. Meaning: corporate America's way.

In the end, the clean air bill was gutted.

Knifed out was a tough, key provision that would switch cars to alternative fuels (methanol, ethanol, natural gas, etc.) in smoggiest U.S. cities.

Thus at noon on the 23rd day, Mitchell appeared in the TV lights. He was surrounded by the "Gang of 15" in their tailored suits. One by one, they bragged that their grand compromise would clean the air without damaging business. Even the loser, Environmental Protection Agency head Bill Reilly, said smoothly, "This is an historic milestone. We've broken a 10-year stalemate."



Since the "Gang of 15" counts on short memories, go back to George Bush's ballyhooed TV speech of June 12. The centerpiece Bush boasted loudest was alternative fuels with plans for the nine dirtiest U.S. cities to run fleets of a million cars, buses and trucks on "clean fuels" by 1997.

"Every American in every city will breathe clean air," Bush waxed rhapsodic. "The wounded winds of north, south, east and west will be purified, the integrity of nature made whole."

Goodbye rhetoric, hello reality.

Bush's alternative fuels dream, which Detroit carmakers and big oil companies hated, has been dumped for the corporations' pet gimmick, reformulated gasoline, a classic "bait-and-switch."

"Outrageous," said Sen. Tim Wirth, D-Colo. "The president made an impassioned pitch for alternative fuels. It would be clean and easy. Now these guys cave."

Sen. Pete Wilson, R-Calif., running for governor in that smog-bound state, broke with Bush loyalists over the fuel surrender. "I sat in that room 23 days and never got a satisfactory answer," Wilson said.

"Detroit and oil opposed it," snapped Wirth. "They won."

Behind locked doors, EPA's Reilly was rolled on alternative fuels by Darman, who sneers at Reilly as a "global rock star," and Sununu, who considers environmental rules a costly fad. Remember that when you're wheezing from hydrocarbons and ozone in big-city glop.

"Every day the OMB (Office of Management and Budget) was in that room talking cost, cost, cost," said Sen. [Frank Lautenberg](#), D-N.J.

But Bush, the original clean-fuels dreamer, thought the sellout dandy. "I'm not going to shut down America," Bush bristled.

"He called himself the environmental president," sighed Lautenberg. "But all I hear is 'Just Say No.'"

Well, now we know what senators make behind closed doors.

Sausage.

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