JOHN ROSENTHAL

BRIDGING THE GREEN

Van Jones On Jobs, Jails, And Environmental Justice

DAVID KUPFER

DIVIDE

Watching activist Van Jones deliver a speech is an unforgettable experience. Dressed in his trademark black turtleneck, black slacks, and black sport jacket, Jones can step up to a podium and disarm listeners with a potent mix of confidence and modesty. He speaks softly at first, but as he makes a point about racism or the environment, his voice rises and turns staccato. Afterward it's common to hear observers liken him to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Trained as a lawyer, Jones has spent two decades fighting what he sees as an inefficient and prejudiced criminal-justice system. He defies easy categorization: attorney, human-rights advocate, political radical, environmentalist, churchgoing Christian — Jones is all of these. He can sit with two feet squarely on one side of an issue — rising juvenile prison populations, for example — and simultaneously intuit how others might see the same problem differently.

Recently Jones has been connecting two issues that have largely been seen as separate worlds: the abysmal conditions of U.S. inner cities and the need for a healthier planet. To stem global warming, Jones argues, the mainstream environmental movement must make itself relevant to low-income Americans; why should a single parent working two jobs care about greenhouse gases if there are far-more-immediate concerns at hand? Jones calls for the creation of a "green-collar" job corps that will train urban youth of color to retrofit U.S. cities so that they are environmentally sustainable.

Jones grew up in rural Tennessee and attended the University of Tennessee, where he wrote for the campus newspaper and started an underground publication called The 14th Circle. *He also helped found the* New Alliance Project, *a statewide African American newspaper, and the* Third Eye, *a Nashville alternative monthly. While interning one summer as a cub reporter in Shreveport, Louisiana, Jones attended a rap concert where police officers lined the streets and helicopters traversed the sky in anticipation of violence. Although the crowd was largely mild-mannered, the next day his own newspaper led with a story that highlighted every noise violation and misdemeanor; alongside the article was a map of the city marked with exploding-bomb icons. In Jones's mind, the coverage promoted the image that black youth were violent, even when they were just attending a peaceful musical event.*

Disillusioned with journalism, Jones enrolled at Yale Law School with the hope of reshaping the laws that perpetuated injustice. He arrived on campus with combat boots and a Black Panther Party badge on his backpack. In 1992 he spent a semester interning at the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights in San Francisco. His internship coincided with the Rodney King trial: four white LA police officers had been caught on videotape beating King, an unarmed black motorist. When three of the four officers were declared not guilty, riots erupted in parts of LA, and spontaneous protests broke out across the country. Acting as a legal observer at the San Francisco demonstrations, Jones was arrested alongside hundreds of activists. In jail he met a broad cross section of young people fighting for change and was so impressed that, after finishing law school, he moved to San Francisco to be part of their movement. He went on to cofound the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights (EBC), named for the civil-rights heroine (www.ellabakercenter.org). Their first office was a closet, literally; they pulled out the shelves and stuck a desk inside. Ten years later the EBC has twenty-four people on staff and a $1.7 million budget. Its mission is to promote democratic control of law-enforcement agencies and to advance alternatives to the incarceration of young people.

Over the years Jones's anger has given way to a passionate yet practical approach to fostering change. He says he is willing to collaborate with anybody working toward the same ends, regardless of background or affiliation. Jones's current campaign has been successful mostly because he is able to move between worlds, from Capitol Hill to inner-city streets. Due in large part to his efforts, the U.S. House of Representatives and the city of Oakland, California, have recently passed legislation mandating the creation of green-collar jobs.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Jones spoke out about the intersections of race, environmental injustice, and

poverty revealed by the disaster. He cofounded colorofchange.org, an online community of four hundred thousand members that focuses specifically on African American issues. Jones's first book, The Future Is Getting Restless, *is due out later this year.*

Jones lives in Oakland with his wife, Jana, and their three-year-old son, Cabral, named after African revolutionary Amilcar Cabral. I spoke with Jones on a hot summer day at the EBC in Oakland, in a back room where several people were using the copy machine. Despite being the center's cofounder, Jones had a cramped office no bigger than the rest — too cramped for our meeting. Amid the bustle, he was focused and warm, his voice lilting the same way it does when he gives a speech to a packed conference hall.

VAN JONES

Kupfer: What stake do people of color have in the environmental movement?

Jones: A big one. It's the people of color who are disproportionately affected by bad food, bad air, and bad water. People of color are also disproportionately unable to escape the negative consequences of global warming. Look at Hurricane Katrina. People of color need equal protection from the worst environmental disasters and equal access to the best environmental technologies. We should be speaking out ourselves on these issues, because we are going to be hit first and hardest by everything negative, and we will benefit last and least from everything positive — unless everybody works to solve this problem.

Kupfer: What do you think are some of the primary lessons from Katrina?

Jones: One lesson is that the right wing's ideology, which says that we don't need government and we don't need each other, is wrong. We've spent almost thirty years listening to them say that government is the problem, not the solution; that collectivism is inferior to individual strength and fortitude. We've heard for thirty years that people don't need government: "Let them sink or swim." Then everyone turned on the television one day and saw an American city underwater, and we saw people sink beneath that water as a direct consequence of that ideology. It wasn't a deviation from what the right wing had been shouting about; it was an inevitable outcome of their policies of defunding government and stripping away essential services. A lot of those people in the floodwaters were hotel workers who scrubbed toilets and changed sheets for the tourists. But they weren't unionized, so their wages were much lower than those of hotel workers in, say, Las Vegas, who are unionized. So when the hurricane hit three days ahead of payday, people didn't have the money to leave. Even if they worked every day, they might not have a functioning car, a credit card, or money in the bank. And they were left to make do with a free-market evacuation plan.

That is the primary lesson of Katrina: In a flood, there is no room for an ideology that says, "Let your neighbor sink or swim." We need a philosophy that says, "We are all in this together." We are now entering an age of disasters, an age of storms, an age of perils. Rugged individualism isn't going to cut it. Certainly we need individuals to be responsible and to contribute, but none of us can expect to be immune to the consequences of a few centuries' worth of industrial pollution. As those bills start to come due, we are going to need each other. If we don't retool our politics and our economy to reflect that, then I think we will continue to embarrass ourselves on the world stage with our response to crises.

Kupfer: Do you hold the Army Corps of Engineers culpable for not maintaining the levees?

Jones: Sure, but there has been a wholesale neglect of public infrastructure by both political parties. A bridge just fell in Minnesota. You are going to see more bridges and levees failing because we have put all our money into this warfare state. I think the Democratic Party is beginning, under pressure from its left wing and its grass roots, to take a different view. But even now, during the presidential campaign, you don't hear a full-throated call for the sort of World War II–level mobilization that it's going to take to avert ecological catastrophe. If you look at the scientific data on global warming, you can see that we can't avoid a wholesale disaster unless we put this country back to work — putting up solar panels, weatherizing buildings, and constructing wind farms on a massive scale.

Even now the Democratic Party is bashful about calling for that kind of response. We can't rely just on markets and technologies and consumer behavior. That sort of eco-elitism is a dead end. Eco-populism is a better model for dealing with these problems. We need a greater faith in communities, government action, voters, and work.

Kupfer: Last year voters in California turned down Proposition 87, which would have increased taxes on big oil companies and used those funds to invest in renewable-energy projects. Why didn't it pass?

Jones: We saw an alliance form between poor people and polluters. The oil companies told the poor that Proposition 87 was going to make their energy bills go up and send gas prices through the roof, so the poor voted against it. If polluters can appeal to poor folks and people of color in California and get them to kill a clean-energy ballot measure that would have created jobs and cleaned up the air, then the same could happen in any state in the Union. Proposition 87 failed because the clean-energy proponents didn't reach out to the people who feel the most vulnerable. For the eco-elites, the idea of energy independence is exciting just by itself. For the person who is dealing with bread-and-butter, grits-and-gravy concerns, that's all just pie in the sky. Nobody is showing people of modest means how they will benefit from green energy. Green is the new gold for rich eco-entrepreneurs, but it can be just one more burden for low-income people if they get stuck paying higher rates.

You can't have a sustainable economy when only 20 percent of the people can afford to pay for hybrids, solar panels, and organic cuisine, while the other 80 percent are still driving pollution-based vehicles to the same pollution-based jobs and struggling to make purchases at Wal-Mart.

Kupfer: You often speak about "eco-apartheid." Could you define it?

Jones: "Eco-apartheid" is a situation in which you have ecological haves and have-nots. In other words, if you are in the San Francisco Bay Area, and you visit Marin County, you'll find hybrid vehicles, solar panels, organic food, organic everything. If you then get in your car and drive twenty minutes, you'll be in west Oakland, where people are literally choking on the fumes of the last century's pollution-based technologies. That's eco-apartheid, and it's morally wrong, because we should deliver clean jobs and health benefits not just to the wealthy, but also to the people who need them most. Eco-apartheid doesn't work on a practical level either, because you can't have a sustainable economy when only 20 percent of the people can afford to pay for hybrids, solar panels, and organic cuisine, while the other 80 percent are still driving pollution-based vehicles to the same pollution-based jobs and struggling to make purchases at Wal-Mart.

For the sustainable economy to be successful, it has to be a full-participation economy. Right now it is a niche economy, a lifestyle economy. Though green products are a $230 billion industry and growing, that's still a slice of a slice of a slice of the overall pie. It is easy for the eco-elites in Massachusetts or northern California to wrap themselves in the trappings of sustainability and think that the problem has been solved, but the people who clean their houses are going back to neighborhoods that may be fifty years in the past in terms of their ecological sustainability. As we move toward a sustainable economy, if we do not take care to minimize the pain and maximize the gain for the poor, they will join forces with the polluters to derail the green revolution.

It's important from both a moral standpoint and a purely crass political point of view that we create a "new-deal" coalition among green businesspeople, labor, the poor, and people of color. You unite groups by offering immediate, as well as long-term, benefits for each constituency. For poor people, that could take the form of job opportunities, better mass transportation, and free bus passes. Obviously, you'll want to split the business community: the problem makers should get nothing but grief; the problem solvers should get plenty of support. Right now the problem makers — the warmongers, the polluters, the clear-cutters, the incarcerators — get all the support they need from the government. The problem solvers — the solar engineers and the people who are growing local and organic produce — get very little support from any level of government. We want to lure the government away from the problem makers and put it back on the side of the problem solvers: give *them* the tax breaks, the subsidies, and the incentives, and starve those other guys.

Another part of the new-deal strategy is to give labor plenty of support. We have to find union-wage jobs for low-income people, and those are just the sort of jobs that building a sustainable infrastructure will create. But it will require government action, public-private partnerships, and, most of all, leadership.

Kupfer: What's the status of the Green Jobs Act of 2007, which you have helped advance in Congress?

Jones: The bill has passed through both houses of Congress, and President Bush has signed it into law as a part of the energy bill. The act authorizes $125 million a year to train people for green-collar jobs. Twenty percent of that is dedicated to helping those who need the most support: the poor and unemployed, high-school dropouts, and formerly incarcerated people. I call it "green pathways out of poverty."

The green economy will be strong enough to lift people out of poverty, but only if the people who need the jobs most receive training and support. Otherwise you're just retraining the existing workforce and not making a dent in the larger social problem. We are standing on the verge of a new economy in the U.S., and we need to think about who this economy will include, and who it will exclude. It would be easy to say that once we have renewable this and organic that, everybody will benefit, but that's not a progressive policy; it's just trickle-down Reaganomics in "greenface." Of course there will be jobs created, but will kids over in west Oakland be able to get those jobs? Will we be satisfied with a sustainable economy that, at the end of the day, is eco-apartheid? Is a green economy only about reclaiming throwaway stuff, or is it also about reclaiming throwaway communities, throwaway people, throwaway children? In the last century, people of color fought for equal opportunity in the gray, pollution-based economy. Certainly we should fare better in the green economy, because its leaders are supposed to be more passionate about inclusion and equal access.

Kupfer: Are you finding much long-term commitment from the Democratic leadership?

Jones: That remains to be seen. We've deliberately kept the numbers relatively small so far. Next we are going back

COLE THOMPSON

to Congress to ask for $1 billion to lift a quarter million people out of poverty and into green-collar jobs. That process will involve job training, employer incentives, and more. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi is passionate about the current $125 million Green Jobs bill. What she will think about $1 billion is another question, but I believe there is leadership in the Democratic Party that will embrace it.

Kupfer: Have you seen this new-deal coalition that you're calling for beginning to form?

Jones: We have seen it locally here in Oakland. The Oakland City Council is very fractious — there are eight members and ten factions on that council [laughter] — but they voted unanimously to create a Green Jobs Corps, committing a quarter million dollars of city money. They might disagree on everything else, but they can agree that giving our young people job training and job opportunities is important. To my knowledge this is the first time a city has had a Green Jobs Corps. Our slogan is "Green jobs, not jails."

We are seeing a new kind of social-uplift environmentalism, and a new image of an environmentalist with a hard hat, a lunch bucket, and rolled-up sleeves: somebody who says, "Give us the tools. Give us the technology. We can fix America." I believe this kind of working-class eco-populism will become the dominant political mode for progressives in the new century as we put people to work weatherizing buildings, installing solar panels, building windmills, and creating public-transportation systems.

It used to be that the more radical you were on environmental issues, the farther you were from working-class people, poor people, and people of color, because you were making individual lifestyle changes that alienated you from the majority. You looked different; you ate different foods; you wore different clothes. Working-class people were shopping at Wal-Mart and eating at McDonald's, and you were mad at them for it. With this new environmentalism, the more radical you are on environmental solutions, the closer you are to the working class.

We've reached the limits of what can be done with individual lifestyle choices. From now on it's going to require a massive investment from government and the private sector to completely restructure the economy. If you're a radical environmentalist, you may still look a little odd, but you have a reason to talk to that labor leader, that African American preacher, that kid living in rural or urban poverty who doesn't have a future. You can say to that person, "We want you to help save the world, and you can get paid doing it." Once activists do that, I think a new day will dawn in American politics. You are going to see a major realignment, as occurred with the New Deal and the Great Society programs of the mid-twentieth century and the rise of the Far Right toward the end of that century.

Both the welfare state and the warfare state are exhausted

ideas in U.S. politics. There has to be a new political center of gravity, where people join with government to try to solve the problems of the economy and the environment. Those people are going to be the eco-entrepreneurs, progressive labor, and antipoverty activists who are looking to create ecologically responsible jobs. They will show that you can have a populist movement based on environmental values.

Kupfer: Do you think that the green-jobs initiative will help soften the social, economic, and ecological shocks to come?

Jones: As much as they can be softened. One good thing about green-collar jobs is that they can't be outsourced. If you want to weatherize this building, you can't ship it to India or China. If you want to build wind farms, it's the wind blowing in the U.S that has to be captured. If you want to install solar panels, it's the sun shining on the U.S. they have to catch. Green-collar jobs create a stable source of employment for U.S. workers, who right now are under tremendous pressure from India and China. God bless India and China; I want their economies to do well. But the outsourcing of good blue-collar manufacturing jobs has created enormous social and political instability in the U.S.

Right now the Far Right has overplayed its hand, and the progressives have an opportunity to take advantage of that. In 2008 we are likely to elect a Democratic president, House, and Senate. But there's no guarantee we will keep them. We can't afford a repeat of what we saw from 1992 to 1994, when President Bill Clinton and a Democratic Congress lost the ball, and Republicans rallied behind Newt Gingrich and took over the Congress. I think we need eight to twelve years of progressive stewardship to deal with our ecological problems. The only way we are going to get that is if working people feel that help is on the way and that somebody on the Left is concerned about the economic crisis in this country.

Kupfer: Is this what some refer to as the "politics of inclusion"?

Jones: Yes, in some ways it's the opposite of the traditional, white, mainstream environmentalist approach. Environmentalists sometimes don't understand that what motivated them to get involved in political activism and change their lifestyle isn't going to inspire everyone else. It's not just a matter of their explaining louder and louder why everyone should be like them. That's not the politics of inclusion; that's the politics of elitism. The reality is that working people will support ecological solutions, but not for the same reasons that the eco-elites support them.

A lot of wealthy, educated people wanted to take action as a result of Al Gore's documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*, but most low-income people and people of color I know had no interest in seeing the movie in the first place. They already have enough problems. They don't need new crises to worry about. Around here we say that the people who already have a lot of opportunities are the ones who need to hear about the crises. So if you have a house and a car and a college degree, then, yes, you should hear about global warming, or peak oil, or dying species. But poor and low-income people need to hear about opportunities. They need to hear about the expected reduction in asthma rates when we reduce greenhouse gases. They need to hear about the wealth and health benefits of moving to a sustainable economy. Otherwise you are just telling people who are already having a bad day that they should have a worse one.

It's no surprise that the country that has the world's biggest pollution problem also has the most prisons. We've got a disposable mind-set: disposable products, disposable species, disposable people.

The politics of inclusion requires that you let different people approach ecological issues through different doors. Wanting to create jobs for poor kids has to be just as valid an entryway as concern about the rain forest. These different crises — political, ecological, and spiritual — are all interlocked.

The people who are dominating the environmental discussion right now want everybody to watch their movie, sign their petition, and march in line behind them. But the movement cannot grow the way we need it to unless we let the working-class guy and the undocumented worker and the poor kid from the inner city articulate their own agendas.

Kupfer: You've also been involved over the years with prisoners' rights and prison reform. What challenges do we face in reforming the criminal-justice system?

Jones: People ask me, "What do prisons have to do with the ecological crisis?" To me it's no surprise that the country that has the world's biggest pollution problem also has the most prisons. We've got a disposable mind-set: disposable products, disposable species, disposable people. We don't see our sisters and brothers, much less all the animal species, as sacred. The failure to honor the sacred is at the root of both problems.

Most of our prison-population growth has come from convictions on nonviolent drug offenses, which rich people and poor people commit in equal measure, but for which only poor people end up serving time. When I was at Yale, I saw more drugs on campus than I saw in the poor community. But the police never kicked in the door at the Skull and Bones Society and made arrests there; they were busy arresting people in the housing projects.

Drug users need treatment, not jail time. We know how to take care of people who are in trouble with drugs, because

believe there will come a day when there will be no such thing as a "green building"; there will just be buildings. And what is now "green technology" will become just the way things are done.

we do it for rich kids. We should do the same thing for poor addicts, because it's the right thing to do and we'd save money doing it.

California, which is considered a liberal state, spends more money on prisons than any other state in the country — not because it is bigger, but because it has the wrong strategy. The governor wants to expand the size of the prison system by fifty thousand beds — the population of a couple of small towns. We need to be moving in the opposite direction.

In California the juvenile prisons are like expensive prep schools for adult prison. We are beating and brutalizing these kids, and 90 percent of them end up as repeat offenders. In the so-called "red" state of Missouri, on the other hand, they are taking juvenile offenders out of huge prisons and placing them in small, dormlike facilities. The doors have locks, but rather than the kids putting on orange uniforms and having adults in blue uniforms scream at them all day, everyone dresses normally. They have coaching, counseling, art instruction, yoga, and gardening. Seventy percent of those kids never get in trouble again, because they are being treated like human beings, not savage creatures. That Missouri program costs $30,000 a year per kid, as opposed to the $120,000 a year we are spending here in California.

Think of what you could do with a troubled kid and $120,000 a year. You could take the kid to Europe. You could buy the kid a hybrid. You could say, "Here's fifty grand; if you stay out of trouble for a year, I'll give you seventy more." There is no way that that kid should ever get in trouble again.

We should close the prisons and bring the prisoners and the guards home and help them heal, and then put them to work installing solar panels and pursuing urban forestry and gardening and organic agriculture. But first we have to give up our addiction to punishment.

Kupfer: Dealing with the prison guards' union here in California must be a significant challenge.

Jones: The prison guards' union is the main obstacle to prison reform in California at the moment. It's unfortunate, but the union pushes for tougher laws so that more people will be locked up for longer periods, which means we'll have to build more prisons and hire more guards, which means a bigger union and more union dues. Then the union uses those dues to push for even tougher laws. Right now we don't have a criminal-justice system; we have a massive incarceration industry that has to be fed with human bodies.

Kupfer: Some years ago you helped found the group Bay Area PoliceWatch, a legal help-line for victims of police misconduct. Since then a number of comparable groups have sprouted up around the country. Have you seen progress in the effort to end abuse on the part of law-enforcement agencies?

Jones: Unfortunately we haven't. Instead we've seen an expansion of police power with no corresponding expansion of police oversight, which is always a recipe for abuse. Any human system that doesn't have adequate checks and balances will tend toward corruption.

It's hard to have a rational discussion about law enforcement in the U.S., because the Right wants to divide everyone into "cop lovers" and "cop haters." All we're saying is that oversight is needed. You can call for meat inspections without hating butchers, or building inspections without hating architects. And you can call for increased police oversight without hating anybody in law enforcement.

Since I started working on these issues in the 1990s, we've seen police-state-like measures being taken against Muslims in certain parts of this country. We've seen the loss of habeas corpus and the creation of secret prisons around the world and the abuses at Guantánamo Bay in Cuba and Abu Ghraib in Iraq. These are features of a society that has turned its back on its best traditions.

If the project of Western civilization has anything to offer the world, it's our accomplishments in the domain of human rights. As recently as five years ago that contribution would have been unarguable. Now it's become harder to defend that position, because the same society that's bulldozing the planet is also bulldozing its own Bill of Rights. The Constitution is burning along with the rain forests.

Kupfer: Among the current crop of political leaders, do you see any you think can own up to our country's misdeeds and move us forward?

Jones: I don't think that, in the near term, a politician who wants the country to repent for its sins, past or present, will get very far. We need to be tough on our problems without being tough on America. It is a complicated dance for any reform movement: how to point out the shortcomings — and even the crimes — of the system and still inspire people to change the system rather than shoot the messenger. Some environmentalists and progressives want people to sign a contract that says America is messed up. I think more people want to sign a contract that says America is a great country, but we could be even greater. I can't go home to Tennessee and tell people they are living in a terrible country. I think the late 1960s was really the last time the politics of shame, blame, and confrontation had any mass appeal. I am interested in the meat-and-

CYBELLE CODISH

potatoes, kitchen-table politics that uplifts people who need a break and offers them power, dignity, and solutions.

Kupfer: You seem to be a bridge builder. You're known for connecting different sectors. Is that a conscious strategy?

Jones: I don't wake up in the morning thinking, *How can I get groups together?* I'm just looking for solutions to problems, and there is no way to solve the problems we face with the black people over here, and the lesbians over there, and the labor unions off by themselves. Global warming, the impacts of economic globalization on the U.S. working class, confrontations with Islamic fundamentalism — none of these can be resolved by any one constituency, even a powerful constituency like big business. The only way to solve these problems is to bring everyone together.

It used to be that, to people working for racial justice, the environment was a side issue. The same was true of those working for the environment: racial justice was an add-on. That approach won't work anymore. Social problems are driving ecological problems, which are feeding back into social problems. You have to deal with both at the same time. If you try to fix poverty with suburban sprawl and pollution-based economic development, you are going to sink the environment. But if you preserve the environment by outlawing development, you then strand poor people and displace workers. They're not going to starve to death so that you can have trees. They are going to fight for their survival. You have got to come up with economic development that honors the real constraints of the natural world. All roads lead to the same solution: a green-collar-jobs agenda that puts people to work reengineering our production, waste, energy, and water processes.

Kupfer: Do you identify yourself primarily as an environmentalist or a social-justice activist?

Jones: Right now I fall between the two categories. People on the social-justice side think, *Van is a green person*, and people on the environmental side think, *Van is a social-justice person*. Those categories are going to fall away. I believe there will come a day when there will be no such thing as a "green building"; there will just be buildings. And what is now "green technology" will become just the way things are done.

We are in a transition phase of our history. Suicidal, industrial capitalism is in a slow-motion collapse — we just hope it collapses faster than the environment — and a greener, ecologically wiser form of capitalism is emerging. The danger is that the Al Gores of the world believe technology, consumer

education, and voter education by themselves will solve this problem. They will not. They are important, but without strong government programs that put millions of people to work, the transition will prove to be too difficult. When we move to protect the environment, there will be economic shocks, and the Left will be voted out of office and replaced with even more-reactionary elements than we have in the White House right now. Yes, there will be environmental benefits later, but you have to offer people some benefits right now, to keep them invested in this process and show them that you care. Otherwise people who can't afford to buy a hybrid or shop at Whole Foods feel left out and lectured to. And they will be happy to walk across the street and work for Chevron or Shell.

Kupfer: As you travel around speaking to different groups, do you see more unity on the Left?

Jones: Ever since Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Bobby Kennedy were assassinated in 1968, I think people on the Left have longed for a leader who would divide the Right and unite progressives. Well, that leader has emerged, and his name is George W. Bush. President Bush has divided the Right and united the Left in a way no other political leader has for a generation. Over the past five years I've seen more and more progressives willing to work together, listen to each other, and put aside their differences. The Iraq War, global warming, and the fragility of the economy have opened the eyes of people who were narrowly focused on their own issues and constituencies. Now they are looking at these problems anew, and looking around for friends instead of enemies. People on the Left have tended to define themselves by who their enemies are and what they refuse to do. Now we are beginning to define ourselves by who our allies are and what we are willing to do.

When the Democrats won back Congress in November 2006, it was the end of six years of one-party authoritarian rule by the Republicans — six years in which our leaders managed to squander the budget surplus, create a massive deficit, destroy Iraq, and play chicken with China on global warming. None of the Democrats we elected in 2006 was that great, but the worst of the Republicans are out of power in the House and Senate, and the Left has the opportunity to make real gains and progress. I do not know how well we are going to do. If we cling to the last century's answers, progressives are not going to get anywhere. We've seen that Soviet-style industrial socialism has horrible ecological consequences, the same as Western-style industrial capitalism. Any industrial model — socialist, capitalist, or otherwise — is not sustainable. The question we are wrestling with now is not "Who owns the means of production?" but "What will be the means of production?"

Kupfer: Do you think the Democrats' success in 2006 has to do with a generational shift, as more younger people are stepping up to the plate and older conservatives are dying off?

Jones: No, the Republicans simply didn't play their hand well with Iraq or global warming or Katrina. The Far Right took over the whole Republican Party and ran it into the ground — and ran the country into the ground. Now they are about to run the planet into the ground. All of this has repelled independents and young people who haven't made up their minds about party affiliation.

So no, I don't think demographics alone can explain what we're seeing, and I definitely don't think any Democratic strategy can take credit for it. The Left stayed in its circular firing squad throughout this whole period. The Republicans simply became victims of classic imperial overreach. We shouldn't pat ourselves on the back for their misfortune. They blew it. Now we have to figure out how to take advantage of that.

Kupfer: Do you feel there is an inherent contradiction between a free-market economy and a sustainable society?

Jones: There probably is. It would be arrogant for anybody to say that twentieth-century capitalism is the last word for humanity; that we will never invent a better way to allocate wealth. But even if capitalism isn't viable in the long term, there is no way to get to a postcapitalist world except by going through a green-capitalism phase. I think there will be a postcapitalist society. I can't predict what it will look like, except to say that it won't resemble the last century's attempts in that direction. The immediate challenge, however, is to make capitalism as green and humane as we possibly can. Doing that will conceivably buy us a few more decades or centuries on the planet.

Kupfer: How do you deal with cynicism and apathy?

Jones: Some people are committed to being cynical, and they have their role, which is to keep asking the tough questions. I use those people to keep my own thinking sharp. But right now a lot of good people are being cynical who shouldn't be. Some of them accuse me of being "inspirational," as if that were a bad thing. I hope that I am inspirational about projects that excite me.

I want to break people out of their cynicism, because the level of cynicism that we have been indulging in is a luxury that we cannot afford. It is indulgent to live in the richest, most advanced technological society in history and say, "We cannot do it." We have the best shot of anyone at solving the big problems. We have technologies that thirty years ago people couldn't have imagined: the Internet, laptop computers, cellphones. You and I have better computers on our person than the U.S. government had when it landed a man on the moon. Everyone you know is a walking technological superpower by the standards of thirty years ago. To be playing helpless and throwing up our hands when we haven't even tried to solve these problems is totally unacceptable to me.

There was a speech that Winston Churchill gave in the early days of World War II, before the U.S. entered the war. British citizens felt they were living in darker days. "Do not let us speak of darker days," he said. "Let us speak rather of sterner days. These are not dark days; these are great days."

That is how I feel. These are difficult times, but these are great times. It's when the authoritarians have taken over your country and are running it into the ground and the earth is crying out for a change of course that people have to look within and figure out where they stand. I think many people are willing to stand together and make the necessary sacrifices. It is going to be a tough period, but I'm betting that this country's best days lie ahead. ■