

**The Bridge at the Edge of the World:
Capitalism, the Environment, and Crossing from Crisis to
Sustainability**

By James Gustave Speth, Yale University Press

By Ross Gelbspan ©

Contemporary capitalism and a habitable planet cannot coexist. That is the core message of "The Bridge at the Edge of the World," by Gus Speth.

Speth is a giant of American environmentalism. A founder of two major environmental groups, former chair of the President's Council on Environmental Quality and a former administrator of the UN Development Programme, he has produced an extremely probing and thoughtful diagnosis of the root causes of a severe case of planetary distress.

But don't expect a litany of innovative environmental policy proposals. The target of this extremely important book is not our intractable environmental indifference. The culprit in Speth's view is the system of corporate capitalism that has brought us, simultaneously, to the threshold of abundance and the brink of ruination.

While global warming most imminently threatens the future of a coherent civilization, Speth makes it clear that climate change is only the leading edge of a potential cascade of ecological disasters.

"Half the world's tropical and temperate forests are gone," he notes. "About half the wetlands...are gone. An estimated 90 percent of large predator fish are gone...Twenty percent of corals are gone...Species are disappearing at rates about a thousand times faster than normal...Persistent toxic chemicals can now be found in...every one of us...Human activities [are]...warming the planet and disrupting the climate..."

One would assume, given this setup, that Speth would argue for a revitalization of the environmental movement. He does not. Environmentalism, in his view, is almost as compromised as the planet itself. Speth faults the movement for using market incentives to achieve environmental ends and for the deception that positive change can come from engaging the corporate sector and working within the system without changing our lifestyles or taking aim at the secular god of economic growth.

Above all, Speth faults environmentalists for assuming they hold the key to arresting the accelerating deterioration of the planet. That task, he emphasizes, requires the involvement of a wide array of activist groups working on campaign finance reform, corporate accountability, labor, human rights and environmental justice, to name a few.

Global warming and all the other degradations of our species home are not the result of flawed or inattentive national policies in his view. To the contrary, they

are the predictable outcomes of an economy and a values system based on the idolatry of economic growth.

"[M]ost environmental deterioration is a result of systemic failures of the capitalism that we have today," writes Speth, who is currently the dean of Yale University's School of Forestry and Environmental Studies.

He dismisses the use of the Gross Domestic Product to measure a country's economic health. While the GDP measures the value of financial transactions, it is incapable of measuring human welfare, social justice and environmental sustainability. As an alternative, he explores the discipline of ecological accounting which includes the costs of resource depletion and pollution in calculating wealth and poverty.

More deeply, Speth identifies the major driver of environmental destruction as the modern corporation. The more than 60,000 multi-national corporations that have emerged over the past decades are programmed to increase their own growth and profitability while, at the same time, deflecting efforts to rein in their most destructive impacts. "The system of modern capitalism...will generate ever larger environmental consequences, outstripping efforts to manage them...Working only within the system will...not succeed when what is needed is transformative change in the system itself."

Regrettably, the means to facilitate that scale of change are currently beyond reach because of the stranglehold of large, powerful corporations on our political system. As Speth argues: "Weak, shallow, dangerous and corrupted, it is the best democracy that money can buy." But even absent the current obsession of free-market fundamentalism, "it is unimaginable that American politics as we know it will deliver the transformative changes needed..."

While Speth dismisses a socialist alternative, he seems to have overlooked a third possibility -- the transformation of contemporary capitalism into a truly cooperative economy. He provides a few examples of successful cooperative enterprises but he stops short of imagining the prospect of a fully cooperative economic system.

In one sense, "The Bridge at the Edge of the World" is a review of the best of the burgeoning literature of environmentally-driven economic and political prescriptions. Too frequently, however, Speth uses extended quotes from other experts rather than his own voice.

A larger objection involves Speth's assertion that a profound change in values is a necessary prerequisite to the structural changes that nature requires. But he does not tell us how to accomplish that change. "People have conversion experiences and epiphanies," he notes, asking: "Can an entire society have a conversion experience?"

Speth concludes his book with a call for "the Environmental Revolution of the twenty-first century...to avert huge and even catastrophic environmental losses." That revolution would be marked by a new politics which is essentially local in nature, in tandem with some form of global governance.

At its core, Speth's prescription is more reformist than revolutionary. He implies that a more highly-regulated and democratized form of capitalism could be compatible with environmental salvation. But he fails to address the ultimate question: how can any economic system based on growth not collide with a planet whose limits are fixed and finite?

Speth concedes that any transformative change can only be triggered by truly a cataclysmic event – like the Great Depression or some equally profound type of social breakdown.

That is a dismal prospect. But it is undoubtedly one we will soon be experiencing. Unfortunately, that breakdown will likely not result from a political or economic failure. It will most likely result from what the UN panel of climate scientists foresees as a series of “rapid and irreversible” changes in the global environment.

I fear that the ultimate failure of this most thoughtful and substantive book lies in its timing. Around the world, glaciers are melting, deep oceans are warming, violent weather is increasing, the timing of the seasons is changing and all over the globe, fish, birds, insects, animals and whole ecosystems are migrating toward the poles in search of stable temperatures. In short, we are standing at the threshold of runaway climate change.

It seems frighteningly likely that the potential of Speth's contribution to influence the course of civilization may have surfaced too late to meet nature's deadline. One hopes that Speth will soon undertake a new book that provides more guidance about how to restructure our society to cope with a very different, a very forbidding world.

Ross Gelbspan is author of [The Heat Is On](#) (1997) and [Boiling Point](#) (2004). He maintains the website: www.heatisonline.org.