

'A Straw Man'

To the Editor:

As Election Day draws close, the Administration is making last-minute efforts to attract the environmental vote. It would seem an uphill struggle.

As chairman of the 1981 Regulatory Relief Task Force, Vice President Bush crafted a wide range of strategies designed to emasculate regulatory agencies, particularly the Environmental Protection Agency and Occupational Safety and Health Administration. These included budget and personnel cutting; appointing ideologically selected agency heads and senior staff, such as Anne Burford, Rita Lavelle and James Watt, hostile to their agency mandates; insisting on formal cost-benefit analyses that focused on industry costs with little or biased consideration of failure to regulate, thus effectively stalling the regulatory process.

With the complicity of the Vice President, E.P.A. has emerged as the anti-environmental champion of the Administration. Its track record includes political sabotaging of the hazardous waste program, followed by shell-gaming and foot-dragging; refusal to enact national groundwater protection regulations; refusal to regulate carcinogenic industrial air emissions; manipulation and downgrading of risk estimate of cancer-causing chemicals; failure to adhere to mandated schedules for pesticide testing, and failure to ban a wide array of dangerous pesticides.

With E.P.A.'s well-publicized recent announcement of its "discovery" that radon contamination of homes is a major national cancer hazard, together with its proposed monitoring and remediation program, the agency is attempting to whitewash its abysmal track record by posing as a public health champion and thus supporting Mr. Bush's conversion to environmentalism.

The flaw in this public relations scam is that the agency's radon advisory warning is at best grossly inflated, at worst a straw man. The warning was based on a few homes found to have radon hot spots in their basements, but not in living rooms, under nonventilated winter conditions. These atypical levels were then misrepresented as widespread homeowner exposure, from which grossly exaggerated lung cancer risks were derived.

The highly critical and skeptical reaction of the scientific community has, however, received little or no attention in the news media. Given the short memory span of the public and the superficial nature of the campaign exchanges and debates, the likelihood is that Mr. Bush will get away with his environmental double-speak.

SAMUEL S. EPSTEIN, M.D.

Chicago, Oct. 5, 1988

The writer, professor of occupational and environmental medicine at the University of Illinois, is president of the Rachel Carson Council.