The success of environmental issues ultimately lies in the hands of politicians. No eco-friendly organization or individual will be strong enough to influence an increasingly selfish population to put an inanimate Earth’s needs before its own. Most of us are well aware that the environment is deteriorating, and there are many organizations and governments (such as Japan’s) who are helping out the cause of awareness. But that awareness is still not enough to change most people’s ways; the history of environmental treatment has shown humans continually moving towards exploitative behavior, living like parasites on the planet’s surface, sucking all the good out and seldom returning the favor. There have been bumps in this path towards complete exploitation, however. The conservation era of the early twentieth century led by the Roosevelt administration and the massive environmental reforms of the 1970s enacted by the Nixon administration are some examples that prove humans are not destined to exploit the earth and that environmentally friendly governments do make an impact. Environmental improvement needs to be pursued by the government today like it was in these past administrations and given as much effort as we put towards our country’s economic health and domestic safety. Why is the government necessary to the success of environmentalism? The answer is simple: politicians are the only group that has the power to make a change. Politicians can guide us to the right path through their ability to speak to the masses and to make laws that people must follow. They can aid us in changing our attitudes, or perhaps more successfully, they can create punishment for mistreating the environment. The problem with the government being the environment’s sole savior is that these officials are often disillusioned themselves about the proper treatment of our earthly home. Too often they fall into the trap of earthly misuse for their own good, as they are only humans like the rest of us. Politicians are the stewards that regulate the rest of us; therefore, they are the official stewards of the environment. But we should all be stewards, or caretakers, of the environment.

Many politicians from both Democratic and Republican parties in the United States proclaim that they have a responsibility to care for the environment in the form of stewardship. In general, the argument for this responsibility usually stems from religious origins, particularly from Christianity and Judaism. According to these religions, God specified in the beginnings of creation that people would be “stewards” of the Earth—in other words they could use the Earth’s resources to survive, but they must continually care for and maintain the Earth while doing so. Our current president, George W. Bush, has stated that “Good stewardship is a personal responsibility of all of us” and “that’s what’s important for Americans to understand—that each of us has a responsibility, and it’s part of our value system in our country to assume that respon-
sibility” (qtd. in Cooper 5). Like President Bush, D. Christiansen, a theologian and Christian writer, is a supporter of stewardship, but is convinced that governments and individuals alike have not reached the level of care for the environment necessary to make improvements. Lynn White, a history professor and the author of “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” however, is critical of this religious approach to environmentalism and finds Christianity the primary reason that environmental mistreatment has developed at all because it has taught us to care more about ourselves than the environment.

What we need, then, is a politician who truly sees the Earth as an object to be cared for instead of as an eternal provider of resources and profit; this change could have an astounding impact on the attitudes and actions of the rest of the population. Politicians everywhere claim that they support environmental stewardship, but there are problems with the way that they, along with the rest of the population, are currently interpreting the Judeo-Christian responsibility to the Earth. For decades, taking care of the environment seems to have taken a back seat to other issues in politics. The last two presidential administrations (Bush’s and Clinton’s) have only addressed environmental issues when it was absolutely necessary or after other, supposedly more important, issues were solved. The stewardship proposed by certain religious groups can work, though, if it is used in the way that it was originally meant. The well-being of humans is more important, yes, and we can use the earth’s resources for our own good—we have mastered this half of stewardship. But the other half is that caring for the environment is a job that was given to us and that should be just as important as every other job that we are responsible for carrying out. Politicians seem to think that the Earth can wait until the world is at peace and the economy is in good shape. What they do not address is that when the environment gets so bad that we can no longer fix it, issues like world peace and the economy will not matter anymore. There is an imbalance in the human-environment relationship today, for which our baser nature is largely to blame. The idea of using the Earth for our own benefit while preserving and maintaining it sadly has become misconstrued to mean that we can use environmental resources without worrying about the outcome; it has been made to mean that the Earth was given to us to do with what we please and can wait until we are ready to take care of it. Too long have selfish, often commercial, interests presided over the responsibility that many claim to believe in but fail to carry out. Only a true steward relationship to the Earth, where we restore as well as extract, can save the environment, and only a politician will have the power to change our relationship to the environment.

In the early twentieth century, the United States population was in a fervor trying to improve the country—from the living conditions in urban areas to the quality of food, and for the first time, even the environment. A series of environmental protection laws were enacted during the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt who, in addition to being a successful politician, was an avid explorer of nature and a renowned naturalist. Roosevelt is a prime example of a politician who supported environmental improvement and gained popular support for the movement, and at the same time ensured its success by putting laws in place that the people must follow. His main approach to preserving the environment was through conservation, for which he set aside over 16 million acres of land for national parks that could not be used for commercial interests. Although we may get nostalgic about the good character of Roosevelt and his environmental advisors, we must keep in mind that they had the opinion that people’s needs were
more important than nature’s imbedded in their minds as well. Roosevelt’s main advisor in the area, Gifford Pinchot, illustrates this imbalance clearly in a statement where he describes conservation as “the use of the earth for the permanent good of man” (qtd. in McConnell 464). The movement largely succeeded because humans would ultimately win in the situation: if they set aside certain lands for later use, they would be ensured to have resources as long as they needed them. The movement also flourished because America was in a stage where most citizens feared the rise of big business, and Pinchot gave the conservation movement an anti-monopoly slant as well: “The natural resources must be developed and preserved for the benefit of many, and not merely the profit of the few” (qtd. in McConnell 466). Conservation was a great start to environmentalism in this country, for, according to Grant McConnell, “Pinchot did succeed—and this was his essential achievement—in directing the energies and the enthusiasm of the Progressive movement in its early stages to conservation” (McConnell 466). But was conservation created for the noble reason of giving back to the environment? It was not.

The effects of the conservation movement persist today and continue to play into current politics. President Bush feels that the environmental and conservational gains made in the last three decades, including the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act (both policies to reduce pollution in these areas), and laws to protect endangered species and force the cleanup of toxic wastes have been tremendous. He feels that “we’ve done all this at a time when our economy and population grew dramatically ... [showing] that we can expand our economy for the good of all of us, while also being good and conscientious stewards of the environment” (qtd. in Cooper 24). Most of these environmental policies were put in place in the 1970s, though. The policies have been very beneficial; they mark a shift in that era towards a feeling of real responsibility towards the earth. But unfortunately we have not had a lot of environmental policy action since those years. Although one fourth of the United States’ land mass is part of a national park, new technologies threaten these parks, especially the use of snowmobiles on the preserved land (Cooper 15). President Clinton, in the last months before leaving office in 2000, put into effect a regulation on snowmobiles in several major national parks. When President Bush took office the regulation was still new and poorly founded due to its late passing and Bush put this regulation, along with 175 other environmental protection laws, on hold (Cooper 15). Rather than showing a true concern for the environment, both leaders seemed to have been using these environmental policies as playing pieces in their game of political chess.

President Bush has been criticized by many environmentalists and Democrats for favoring industry over the environment, and many feel that the United States needs to take action on the new and extremely threatening dilemma of global warming (Cooper 5). In addition to putting Clinton’s snowmobile bans on hold, Bush also refused to comply with the Kyoto Protocol, an international treaty to cut down on emissions of greenhouse gases that cause global warming. He defended this decision by stressing that “the approach taken under the Kyoto Protocol would have required the United States to make deep and immediate cuts in our economy to meet an arbitrary target;” this statement reveals that he values people’s material comfort over the environment (qtd. in Cooper 8). He feels that “as president of the United States, charged with safeguarding the welfare of the American people...I will not commit our nation to an unsound international treaty that will throw millions of our citizens out of work” (qtd. in Cooper 8). What he fails to recognize is that as president, he is
also a key steward of the environment and has the power to influence the way all Americans behave in the environment. During the Progressive Era, human as well as environmental progress was made. In the 1970s, as President Bush said, we made economic advances while protecting the environment. Today, we may be technologically and economically progressing, but environmental issues are at a standstill, and politicians have dropped their duty as stewards for issues that they feel are more important. Now, the environment has been harmed to the point that the only solution may be to sacrifice our own comfort.

Due to the way that current politicians, and thus ordinary citizens, are misconstruing the meaning of environmental stewardship, there are some that have disconnected from the concept of stewardship, and therefore from the government’s support of it. Lynn White, a historian and a leader of the anti-stewardship environmentalists, sees Christianity as “the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen” and contends that the notion of humans rightfully being able to use the earth makes us think that “God planned all of this [the earth] for man’s benefit and rule: no item in physical creation had any purpose save to serve man’s purposes” (1205). White is correct in thinking that people are currently using the earth for their own purposes; there is no doubt about that. But the thought that “the roots of our trouble are so largely religious” is unclear (1207). His feeling that we feel that “we are superior to nature, contemptuous of it, willing to use it for our slightest whim” is perfectly right, for according to stewardship, people are superior to nature. Today, this dominion has become similar to a tyrannical government with most of its subjects under serfdom. We use every aspect of the environment for our own benefit and take no account of its welfare. What White does not realize, though, is that the values of Judaism and Christianity are, in actuality, to be unselfish and not to care about material possessions. Plans are laid out in religious doctrine for people to take care of the earth—this is their job. Environmental decay then, along with the decay of numerous other moral responsibilities, is really caused by a selfish human nature formed outside of these religions that their founders never intended us to acquire. White suffers from terminology confusion: he has interpreted “dominion” to mean “perpetually exploitative,” the form that the term has taken today. However, the real concept of stewardship and examples of environmental friendliness in the past prove that when used literally, dominion can save an environment that cannot save itself.

D. Christiansen insists that the Judeo-Christian ethic of stewardship can be used successfully. Just as a foundation of these religions is the care of the poor and suffering, the care of the environment is a basic value as well. “Christianity and its official interpreters have much to regret regarding neglect of the environment,” he says, but he argues that “the Christian tradition on nature has been misrepresented, depreciated, and frequently reviled” (2). The stewardship concept is right, but Christiansen feels more sacrifice must be made to heal our environment. He feels the selfish nature, or the “excessive preoccupation with possession and accumulation” that many humans have developed is the cause of the environment’s demise as well as the lack of love and care we have in our personal relationships: “Humanity cannot care effectively for the earth because we are not yet ready to care for one another” (4). According to Christiansen, it is not a mere coincidence that the environment is decaying at the same time that major social problems like starvation and terrorism are rising:

The decay of the environment is matched by the deterioration of our cities. The extinction of species is matched by indiffer-
ence to our children, born and unborn. The pollution of the atmosphere is accompanied by a neglect of the poor. The contributing factors are many; the source is one. All suffer for the want of care. (5)

Politicians who have the power to influence our treatment of the earth, and each other, are not doing the environment or humanity justice because “the short-term interests of nations and of economic conglomerates prevail over the global common good” (4). When we form a “culture of care,” a culture where love overcomes our selfish desires and we help to improve the lot of the suffering around us, Christiansen proposes, humanity and the environment will improve: “The fate of the earth and the future of humanity are intertwined. Both depend on a renewal of care in human hearts. Children need care; so also do the growing masses of the developing world; and so does the earth” (5). The concept of humans being stewards of the land is not wrong, it is just not acted upon in the way that it was originally meant to be.

The false interpretation of stewardship is not the only environment-harming misinterpretation. In an effort to encourage people to care more about the environment, the slogan “Love Your Mother” was created. The “mother” referred to is the earth, and the phrase is usually accompanied by a picture of the earth and used on bumper stickers, t-shirts, and the like. The goal was to make people think of the earth as our mother, and care for it accordingly. Those who created the slogan assumed that we would not throw trash on our own mothers. Catherine Roach, part of a movement called ecofeminism that joins ecology and feminism, proposes that propaganda attempts such as these—to make people care for the environment like they would other human beings—actually harm the environment and the people it is compared to. She explains that the “Love Your Mother” slogan “will not achieve the desired aim of making our behavior more environmentally sound, but will instead help to maintain the mutually supportive, exploitive stances we take toward our mothers and toward the environment” (53). Roach claims that “mothers’ housework and child-rearing are unpaid and seldom recognized or appreciated by society” and similarly the resources that the earth provides us are not recognized or appreciated (54). The mother also is seen to take care of all of our problems: “Mother in patriarchal culture is she who provides all of our sustenance and who makes disappear all of our waste products, she who satisfies all of our wants and needs endlessly and without any cost to us” (54). Thinking of the earth as our mother only leads us to believe that no matter what we want or need, we can take it from the earth with no consequence. The phrase “Love Your Mother” was meant to help the earth by commanding our respect. Similarly, the stewardship concept was meant to provide the earth with eternal protection by injecting responsibility for it into our morals. Many humans have found a bypass around these plans. Instead of employing the concept of stewardship and the respect we are supposed to have for our mothers towards the earth, we have created a short cut that favors us and hurts the environment.

Only when humans change their way of thinking about our relationship to the environment, and our relationship to each other for that matter, will we be able to help improve it. Those who disrespect the poor and suffering, other races and other sexes, disrespect the environment. Sadly, though, even those who care for their fellow human beings are turning to environmental exploitation. Politicians are a force that can reach us in this regard. There have been those in the past, like Theodore Roosevelt, who have reached the citizens of our nation and changed our ways, although they were unsuccessful in correcting ouratti-
tude that we can use the earth in any way that we please. Today, as Curt Meine concludes, “our addictions to fossil fuels, constant entertainment, instant communications, mass media, and simplistic answers lock us into political patterns that may have to break before they are reformed” (831). The pattern needs to break, and we need a politician in power who will champion the cause of the environment as enthusiastically as other issues such as homeland security and the economy that have taken the front stage over the past decades. Moreover, we need a politician who is willing to sacrifice some of our comfort for the sake of the environment so that the human-favoring imbalance that stewardship has become in recent years can be corrected—we need someone who uses the true meaning of stewardship. Tom Daschle, a Senator from South Dakota in 2002, explains half of the answer to environmental improvement in this statement:

The question facing us is whether we will have the courage . . . to confront and defeat the threats to our global environment. For the first time, the answer to that question doesn’t depend on science . . . . The answer hinges on one thing: leadership. Unfortunately, we haven’t seen that leadership—at least not yet—from this White House. (qtd. in Cooper 24)

But what Daschle fails to recognize is that the beliefs of our entire nation must also change in order to choose effective leadership and carry out this leadership’s environmental goals. It is our own thinking, the thinking that we can use the earth and not restore what we take out, that has caused the deterioration of the environment. It is not merely as simple as corrupt politicians; we must lay the blame on a selfish attitude that has formed in many of us and not just a group of people in charge. Although they can reach us, their beliefs stem from the same place as the rest of the population and must change along with the rest of ours. To be stewards of the earth is not wrong, but we must learn to take the literal meaning of it, which means protecting the earth as well as using it for our own needs. We cannot think of the earth as our mother, this only leads to more exploitation because of our lack of care, the care that D. Christiansen would say can save humanity and the environment, towards our mothers. We need a leader who believes in true stewardship—one who is also willing to promote the concept and act on it. Furthermore, we need a population of citizens who are ready to sacrifice some economic and material comforts so they can act as true stewards, correcting the damage that selfish attitudes have caused.

Works Cited