Perspectives on Environmental Defacement in the U.S. and Middlebury, VT

With new tensions arising on the Middlebury College campus due to recent graffiti, reflecting on perspectives of environmental aesthetics and personal responsibility for the environment is becoming more and more relevant. Historically speaking, perspectives on littering and environmental defacement have not changed a great deal since the sixties and seventies, when awareness of littering as a national problem first began to gain a foothold in the United States. A few central themes that were present in recent American and Middlebury history are still present today. These themes include the necessity of protecting America’s and Middlebury’s natural beauty, the responsibility of citizens towards the environment, and the existence of a fight against littering and human carelessness.

A crucial part of this perspective is the idea of America’s natural beauty. President Lyndon B. Johnson’s 1965 “Special Message to the Congress on Conservation and Restoration of Natural Beauty”\(^1\) provides an opportunity to better understand how this idea was present in the United States in the sixties. In his speech, President Johnson repeatedly referred to the beauty of the country, and the importance and value of beauty. One of his preferred examples illustrated the magnitude of the problem through describing the litter of abandoned cars across the American countryside. In his mind this exemplified both the threat of modernization to the

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natural beauty of the environment, and also the neglectful attitude of the American people. He stressed the idea of preserving environmental beauty as a form of patriotism. Johnson’s rhetoric is not alone in supporting the protection and preservation of America’s natural aesthetics. Further investigation into Middlebury’s history reveals that this perspective was present on a smaller scale as well. As early as 1955, student contributors to the Middlebury Campus write about their “beautiful campus,” and the necessity that students “take a little pride in [its] appearance.”²

President Johnson’s abandoned cars are present in the town of Middlebury as well, as evidenced by a 1969 Campus article³ describing rubbish dumps in the area. The article’s main focus is how these large, uncontrolled dumps in addition to careless littering prompted the formation of a new group in Middlebury dedicated to “beautifying”⁴ the town. Advertising from the fifties, sixties, and seventies also depicted littering as ugly and anti-American as well.⁵ Many ad campaigns included variations on this patriotic battle against litter. The antilitter organization Keep America Beautiful published many of these ads, and reminded Americans to protect “their beautiful outdoors,”⁶ fostering a sense of propriety over America’s natural beauty.

A closer examination of the Keep America Beautiful organization, or KAB, helps to shed light on a second fundamental piece of prevailing historical perspectives of litter and environmental damage: the idea of “universal responsibility.”⁷ This concept communicates the

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⁴ Grimes, “Action for a Better Community.”
⁶ Dunaway, Seeing Green, 83.
⁷ Dunaway, Seeing Green, 3.
culpability of all Americans in the defacement of the environment, and their responsibility to restore the natural beauty of their country. President Johnson’s speech reflected this as well, when he states directly that society must “take responsibility” for environmental problems. However, it is also here that his perspective and corporate perspectives begin to diverge. Many container manufacturers and packaging companies, including Coca Cola, founded KAB in 1953 in an effort to shift public perspectives during a period of rising environmentalism. Their idea of universal responsibility placed a focus on individuals, and problems like littering, obscuring their own culpability in creating the problem and distracting from the necessity of large-scale environmental legislation. While President Johnson agreed with much of their rhetoric on personal responsibility, he also hoped to create change through public policy, something that large corporations feared. In Middlebury, a 1962 student editorial in the Middlebury Campus denounces “litterbug[s],” and encourages individual students to “accept the responsibility of cleaning up after themselves,” showing that this idea of accountability reached to all levels of the American public.

A sense of duty to the environment often accompanied this perspective of citizen responsibility. Starting in 1970, Middlebury students joined the Vermont community in cleaning up litter along public roads during annual “Green-Up” Vermont events, at times paired with a

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8 Johnson, “Special Message to the Congress on Conservation.”
9 Dunaway, Seeing Green, 81.
10 Johnson, “Special Message to the Congress on Conservation.”
11 Dunaway, Seeing Green, 86.
blackout dance\textsuperscript{14} or another type of event raising environmental awareness. Middlebury student participation in “Green-Up” days is evidence of the environmental perspectives of some students on campus, but at the same time reveals the opposing perspectives of others, and perhaps of many Americans. In 1970 the \textit{Middlebury Campus} covered Vermont participation in Green-Up day, discussing low Middlebury student turnout despite the promised award of a keg to those who help the most. The writer refers to this phenomenon as “student apathy,”\textsuperscript{15} but this feeling towards the environment was not unique to college students. President Johnson also referenced the “carelessness”\textsuperscript{16} of the American people in his 1962 address, and KAB made use of this phenomenon in their advertising campaigns, naming “individual thoughtlessness”\textsuperscript{17} as the central cause of environmental defacement. In one infamous campaign KAB used a photograph of a crying Native American man in an attempt to promote feelings of guilt in the American public, and portray themselves and their cause as helpful and aware. In the words of one of these advertisements, some Americans have a “deep abiding respect for the natural beauty” of their country, and some don’t.\textsuperscript{18} In this way the fight against litter became a fight against American apathy and carelessness, and this idea of fighting became a central component of ad campaigns starting in the sixties.\textsuperscript{19} From Vermont Green-Ups to the formation of an Action for a Better Community (ABC) environmental group\textsuperscript{20} in Middlebury in 1969, this idea undoubtedly influenced a great deal of environmental action at the time. In a \textit{Middlebury Campus} article

\textsuperscript{15} John Bell, “One Quarter of Vermont Participates in Green-Up.”
\textsuperscript{16} Johnson, “Special Message to the Congress on Conservation.”
\textsuperscript{17} Dunaway, \textit{Seeing Green}, 83.
\textsuperscript{18} Dunaway, \textit{Seeing Green}, 79.
\textsuperscript{19} Dunaway, \textit{Seeing Green}, 83.
\textsuperscript{20} Grimes, “Action for a Better Community.”
announcing the formation of the group this influence is evident when the author declares that
ABC “combats” pollution and refers to a general “fight against pollution.”

From the fight against litter to the preservation of aesthetic beauty to the citizen’s
responsibility towards the environment, many pieces contribute to an overall understanding of
historical perspectives of littering. Despite numerous other changes, these essential pieces are
still present today. Green Up Vermont is still an annual event over forty years later, and the
Middlebury Campus still covers it, acknowledging the event in 2003 as a way to “give back to
the community.” In the same article, an interviewee questions why people litter in the first
place, implicitly recognizing the same apathy in Americans that her predecessors identified in the
sixties and seventies. In 2007, a Middlebury student participated in the Green-Up with the goal
of making the Trail Around Middlebury more “aesthetically pleasing,” her motivation echoing
historical ideas of preserving natural beauty for the good of the community. The article proceeds
to discuss this idea in terms of “stewardship,” showing that the perspective of individual and
community responsibility for the well being of the environment is still prevalent today.
Middlebury students continue to acknowledge this responsibility, and in 2013 the SGA President
Rachel Liddell writes a Middlebury Campus article discussing the feasibility of a Community

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21 Grimes, “Action for a Better Community.”
22 “About Us,” Green Up Vermont, last modified 2015, accessed May 14, 2015,
http://www.greenupvermont.org/?page_id=16
23 Dan Polifka, “Green-Up Day Rids Vermont of Litter,” The Middlebury Campus, May 7, 2003,
24 Kelly Janis, “Area towns strive to ‘Green-Up’ state,” The Middlebury Campus, May 9, 2007,
25 Janis, “Area towns strive to ‘Green-Up’ state.”
26
Education Requirement for students. She mentions collecting litter as a potential way to fulfill this requirement.

Today, just as in the sixties and seventies when litter first gained momentum as a national issue, it is a multifaceted issue, encompassing many perspectives. Simultaneously a problem of individuals and communities, littering is at heart an issue of aesthetics. Although it is often the case that societal perspectives change over time, upon careful examination it is evident that core views of littering as problematic to the nation as a whole and to smaller communities like Middlebury, Vermont have remained the much the same.
References

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