Thank you very much. And congratulations to all the honorees. I apologize for my voice. I have a little bit of laryngitis today, but hopefully it will warm up while I speak.

I was thinking as I was coming down here this morning about what I was going to talk about. And I think what I'd like to talk about is the primary issues that I think this generation is going to face over the coming decades, and those are democracy, the threats to our democracy, and the environment, and they are intertwined.

The best way that you could measure the effectiveness of a democracy is how it distributes the goods of the land – the air that we breathe, the water, the commons, those assets that are not susceptible to private property ownership but, by their nature, are shared by us all: wildlife, public lands, et cetera, the air and the water that we rely on.

And I'm going to talk a little bit this morning about the major threat that I see to democracy, which is the corrosive impact of excessive corporate power, which is growing and growing as we speak. And I'm going to say things, some of them that are critical of the current administration, but I hope you won't view me as a Democrat attacking a Republican. I have been disciplined over 20 years as an environmental advocate about being bipartisan and nonpartisan in my approach to these issues. I don't think there's anything such as Republican children or Democratic children.

I think the worst thing that can happen to the environment is it becomes the province of a single political party. And I have supported both Republican candidates and Democratic candidates over the past 21 years that I have been
doing this work. But you can't talk honestly about the environment in any context today without speaking critically of this administration.

If you go to NRDC's website, the Natural Resources Defense Council, which is one of the groups for which I work, you'll see over 400 major environmental rollbacks that have been promoted over the last four and a half years as part of a deliberate, concerted effort to eviscerate 30 years of environmental law.

It's a stealth attack. The administration has gone to great lengths to conceal this radical agenda from the American public through a lot of different mechanisms, one of them being that the principal agencies that are supposed to be protecting Americans from pollution are now being run by the worst polluters.

The head of the air division at EPA is a utility industry lobbyist who has represented nothing but the worst air polluters in our country. The head of the forest service is a timber industry lobbyist. The head of public lands is a mining industry lobbyist who believes that public lands are unconstitutional. The head of Superfund is a woman whose last job was advising corporate polluters how to evade Superfund. The second-in-command of EPA is a Monsanto lobbyist.

And if you go through all of the departments of government that are relevant to the environment – the Department of Energy, the Department of Agriculture, Interior, even the Department of Commerce which regulates fisheries, EPA – you'll find the same thing, that it is the polluters who are now running the agencies that are supposed to protect Americans from pollution.

There's nothing wrong with having businesspeople in government. It's a good thing if your objective is to recruit expertise and competence. But as I show
in my book, these individuals have not entered government service for the public interest but rather to subvert the very laws that they're now charged with enforcing. And they've imposed huge costs on the American public that you and I don't know about, most Americans don't know about. I know about them. Most Americans don't see those connections because we have an indolent and negligent press in this country that simply is not covering these issues, and because the administration has gone to great lengths to kind of conceal that connection from the American public.

But I just want to talk about one industry today and illustrate some of the costs that this has imposed, that these rollbacks have imposed on us, and it's coal-burning power plants. And I'm talking about that because it's a big issue in this part of the country and particularly in Pennsylvania.

I have three sons who have asthma. One out of every four black children in American cities now has asthma. We don't know why we're having this epidemic of pediatric asthma. Asthma rates have quintupled among our children over the past couple of decades and doubled again over the last five years. We do know that asthma attacks are triggered primarily by bad air, by ozone and particulates. And the principal source of those materials in our atmosphere are 1,100 coal-burning power plants who are burning coal illegally.

It's been illegal for 15 years. They were supposed to have been cleaned up. The previous administration was prosecuting the worst 75. Many of them did clean up; 1,100 did not. The previous administration was prosecuting the worst 75 of those plants. But this is an industry that contributed $48 million to this White House prior to 2000 and has given $58 million since. And one of the first
things that the administration did when it came into office was to order the Justice Department and EPA to drop all those lawsuits.

The top three enforcers at EPA all resigned their jobs. These were not Democrats. These were people – Eric Schaeffer, Bruce Buckheit, Sylvia Lowrance – who had served through the Reagan administration and the Bush administration. The Justice Department lawyer who was running the case said it had never happened before in American history where a presidential candidate accepts money from criminals under indictment and then orders those indictments dropped.

I can watch my children gasping for air on bad air days. Today, if you look at the EPA's website – this is not me saying it but the EPA – if you look at it today, you'll see that that decision, that single decision to drop those lawsuits and then to abandon the new source rule, which was the most important rule of the Clean Air Act – it's the rule that required those companies to clean up 15 years ago, and it's gone today, so there's no obligation for them to ever have to clean up those ozone and particulates – the EPA's website today says that decision alone kills 18,000 Americans every single year, six times the number that were killed by the World Trade Center attacks.

Eight weeks ago, the EPA announced that in 19 states, including Pennsylvania, it is now unsafe to eat any freshwater fish in the state because of mercury contamination. The mercury is coming from those same 1,100 coal-burning power plants. In 48 states, at least some of the fish are now unsafe to eat from mercury contamination.
We know a lot about mercury we didn't know a few years ago. We know, for example, that one out of every six American women now has so much mercury in her womb that her children are at risk for a grim inventory of diseases – autism, blindness, mental retardation, heart, liver and kidney disease. I have so much mercury in my body – I got my levels tested recently – just from eating fish, my levels are double the levels that EPA considers safe.

I was told by Dr. David Carpenter, who is the national authority on mercury contamination, that a woman with my levels of mercury in her blood would have children with cognitive impairment. And I said to him, you mean might have? And he said, no, no. The science is very certain today. Her children would have permanent brain damage. He estimated an IQ loss in those children of five to seven points.

Well, today there's 630,000 children born in our country every single year who have been exposed to dangerous levels of mercury in their mothers' wombs. The previous administration, recognizing the gravity of this national health epidemic, reclassified mercury as a hazardous pollutant under the Clean Air Act. That triggered a requirement that all of those companies remove 90 percent of the mercury within three and a half years.

It would have cost them less than one percent of plant revenues. The technology is available. It's already mandated in Massachusetts and many other states. But this is the industry that gave $100 million to this administration. And although it would have been a great deal for the American people, it would have still cost them billions of dollars. And six weeks ago, the White House announced that it was abolishing, abandoning the Clinton-era rules and substituting instead
rules that were written by utility industry lobbyists that will require that they never have to clean up that mercury.

We're living today in a science fiction nightmare where my children, the children of millions of other Americans who are asthmatic, are being brought into a world where the air is too poisonous for them to breathe because somebody gave money to a politician, and where my children and the children of most Americans can now no longer safely engage in the seminal, primal activity of American youth, which is to go fishing with their dad or mom in the local waterway, and come home and safely eat the fish, because somebody gave money to a politician.

I live three hours south of the Adirondacks, the oldest protected wilderness on the face of the earth. It's been forever wild, protected since 1888. Yet today, one-fifth of the lakes in the Adirondacks are sterilized from acid rain. And this White House has put the brakes on the statutory requirements that the coal-burning power plants clean up that acid rain. And directly as a result of that, this year, for the first time since the Clean Air Act was passed, sulfur dioxide levels in America's air rose a full four percent, which is an astronomical rate.

I flew over, last May, the coal fields of the Appalachian Mountains in Kentucky and West Virginia where this coal is being mined, and I saw something that, if the American people could see it, there would be a revolution in this country. We are cutting down the Appalachian Mountains with giant machines called drag lines that are 22 stories high, they cost a half a billion dollars, and they practically dispense with the need for human labor. And 2,500 tons of dynamite are exploded just in West Virginia every single day, a Hiroshima bomb
every week. We are blowing the tops off the mountains to get at the coal seams for these giant companies, Peabody Coal and Massey Coal. Then they scrape the rock and debris and rubble into the adjacent river valley and bury the rivers. They've already buried 1,200 miles of rivers. They will have, by the time this administration leaves office, flattened an area of the Appalachians the size of Delaware.

We sued them. It's illegal. You can't dump rocks and debris and rubble into a waterway of the United States in this country without a Clean Water Act permit, and you can never get a permit to do it. We sued them. We won the suit in front of Judge Charles Hayden. He said it's all illegal, and he enjoined all mountaintop mining in West Virginia.

Two days from when we won that case, the administration met with Massey Coal and Peabody, and then rewrote one word of the Clean Water Act, the definition of the word "fill," and got rid of 30 years of statutory interpretation so that you no longer need a Clean Water Act permit in this country to dump rock, debris, garbage, any solid waste into any waterway of the United States. All you need is a rubber-stamped permit from the Corps of Engineers.

This is why I say that there's a connection between democracy and the environment. Because this is not just about destroying our land and our life support system, but it's also a subversion of our democracy.

And we are not protecting the environment for the sake of the fishes and the birds. We're protecting it because nature is the infrastructure of our communities. And if we want to meet our obligation as a generation, as a nation, as a civilization, which is to create communities for our children that provide
them with the same opportunities for dignity and enrichment as the communities that our parents gave us, we've got to start by protecting our environmental infrastructure – the air we breathe, the water we drink, the fisheries, the wildlife, the public lands that connect us to our past, that provide context to our communities, that are the source ultimately of our values and our virtues and our character as a people.

And if you ask the people on Capitol Hill or in industry who are promoting these kinds of rollbacks, why are you doing this, what they invariably say is, well, the time has come in our nation's history where we have to choose now between economic prosperity on the one hand and environmental protection on the other. And that is a false choice. In one hundred percent of the situations, good environmental policy is identical to good economic policy if we want to measure our economy, and this is how we ought to be measuring it, based upon how it produces jobs and the dignity of jobs over the generations, over the long term, and how it preserves the values of the assets of our community.

If, on the other hand, we want to do what they've been urging us to do on Capitol Hill, which is to treat the planet as if it were a business in liquidation, convert our natural resources to cash as quickly as possible, have a few years of pollution-based prosperity, we can generate an instantaneous cash flow and the illusion of a prosperous economy. But our children are going to pay for our joyride. And they're going to pay for it with denuded landscapes and poor health and huge cleanup costs that are going to amplify over time and that they will never be able to pay.
Environmental injury is deficit spending. It's a way of loading the costs of our generation's prosperity onto the backs of our children. And one of the things that I've done over the past several years is to constantly go around and confront this argument that an investment in our environment is a diminishment of our nation's wealth. It doesn't diminish our wealth. It's an investment in infrastructure, the same as investing in telecommunications and road construction. It's an investment we have to make if we're going to ensure the economic vitality of our generation and the next.

I want to say another thing, which is that there's no stronger advocate for free market capitalism than myself. I believe that the free market is the most efficient and democratic way to distribute the goods of the land. And a free market is the best thing that can happen to the environment, because a free market encourages efficiency, and efficiency means the elimination of waste, and pollution is waste.

The free market also encourages us to properly value our natural resources. And it's the undervaluation of those resources that causes us to use them wastefully.

In a true free market economy, you can't make yourself rich without making your neighbors rich and without enriching your community. But what polluters do is they make themselves rich by making everybody else poor. They raise standards of living for themselves by lowering quality of life for everybody else. And they do that by escaping the discipline of the free market. You show me a polluter; I'll show you a subsidy. I'll show you a fat cat using political clout
to escape the discipline of the free market and force the public to pay his production costs. That's what all pollution is.

When those coal-burning power plants put mercury into the air that poisons our women and children, when they put the acid rain in that destroys the lakes and the Adirondacks and destroys the forest cover on the high peaks of the Appalachians from Georgia all the way up into northern Quebec, when they put ozone and particulates in our air that kills 18,000 Americans every year, cost a million workdays, hundreds of thousands of asthma attacks, all of those impacts impose costs on the rest of us that should, in a true free market economy, be reflected in the price of that company's product when it makes it to the market.

And what all of the federal environmental laws were meant to do is to restore free market capitalism in America by forcing actors in the marketplace to pay the true cost of bringing their product to market.

And what I do as a Riverkeeper and at NRDC is, I don't even consider myself an environmentalist anymore. I'm a free marketeer. I go out into the marketplace and I catch the cheaters, the polluters, and I say to them, we're going to force you to internalize your costs the same way that you internalize your profits. Because as long as somebody is cheating the free market, none of us gets the advantages of the efficiency and the democracy that the free market otherwise promises our country.

And one of the things that we have to understand as Americans is, there is a huge difference between free market capitalism, which democratizes our country, which makes us more prosperous and efficient, and the kind of corporate crony capitalism which has been embraced in Washington today, which
is as antithetical to democracy and efficiency and prosperity in America as it is in Nigeria.

Corporations are a great thing because they drive our economy, and we would not have the prosperity in our country without them. We need them. But they should not be running our government. And the reason they shouldn't be is because their aspirations for our country are different than ours.

Corporations do not want democracy, and they do not want free markets. They want profits. And the best way for them to get profits is to use our campaign finance system, which is just a system of legalized bribery, to get ahold of a government official and then use that government official to dismantle the marketplace, to disable their competitors, give them control of that market, and to allow them to privatize the commons, to privatize our air, our water, our fisheries, our wildlife, our public lands, and turn those things over for private profit. And that's why, from the beginning of our national history, our greatest, most visionary political leaders, both Republicans and Democrats, have warned the American people against the excess of corporate power.

Teddy Roosevelt, who was one of our greatest Republicans in our history, said that America would never be destroyed by a foreign enemy, but he warned that our democratic institutions would be subverted by malefactors of great wealth who would erode them from within.

Dwight Eisenhower, another Republican, in his most famous speech ever, warned Americans against the domination by the military industrial complex.
Abraham Lincoln, the greatest Republican of our history, said during the height of the Civil War in 1863, I have the South in front of me and I have the bankers behind me. And for my country, I fear the bankers more.

And Franklin Roosevelt said during World War II, he said, the domination of government by corporate power is, quote, the essence of Fascism.

And that's what Benito Mussolini, who had an insider's view of that process, he said essentially the same thing. He said that Fascism should not be called Fascism; it should be called corporatism, because it is the merger of state and corporate power.

And what we have to understand in this country is that communism is the domination of business by government, and the domination of government by business is called Fascism. And what our job is is to walk that narrow trail in between, which is free market capitalism and democracy, where we keep big government at bay with our right hand and corporate power at bay with our left.

And in order to do that, we need a vigorous and informed citizenry who is willing to stand up and defend our democracy and who understands all the stages of tyranny, of that continuum. And also we need a free and independent press that is willing to speak truth to power. And we do not have that in the United States of America today, for a variety of reasons.

I want to make one last point, which is this, and it's the point I started out with, that the reason that we protect the environment is not for the sake of the fishes and the birds; it's because we recognize the environment enriches us. It enriches us economically, yes. It's the basis of our economy, and we ignore that at our peril. The economy is a wholly owned subsidiary of the environment, but it
also enriches us aesthetically and recreationally and culturally and historically and spiritually.

And human beings have other appetites besides money. And if we don't fulfill them, we're not going to grow up. We're not going to become the kind of beings that our Creator intended us to become. When we destroy nature, we diminish ourselves. We impoverish our children.

We're not fighting to save those ancient forests in the Pacific Northwest, as Rush Limbaugh wants to say, for the sake of a spotted owl. We're preserving those forests because we believe the trees have more value to humanity standing than they would have if we cut them down. And I'm not fighting for the Hudson River for the sake of the shad or the sturgeon or the striped bass but because I believe my life will be richer, my children, my community will be richer if we live in a world where there are shad and sturgeon and stripers in the Hudson and where my children can see the fishermen in their tiny boats, their open boats, the traditional gear fishermen of the Hudson River who I've spent 21 years fighting for their property rights and their livelihoods and their culture. I want my kids to be able see them, to touch them when they come to shore to prepare their nets and wait out the tide, and connect themselves to 350 years of New York State history, and to understand that they're part of something larger than themselves, they're part of a continuum, they're part of a community.

I don't want my children to grow up in a world where there are no commercial fishermen on the Hudson, where it's all Gorton's Seafood and Unilever with 400-ton factory trawlers a hundred miles offshore with no interface with humanity; and where we don't have any family farmers left in our
country, where it's all Smithfield and Cargill and Premium Standard Farms raising animals in factories and treating their stock and their neighbors and their workers with unspeakable cruelty and polluting the environment in the process; and where we've lost touch with the seasons and the tides and the things that connect us to the 10,000 generations of human beings that were here before there were laptops and that connect us ultimately to God.

And I don't believe that nature is God or that we ought to be worshipping it as God. But I do believe that it's the way that God communicates to us most forcefully. And God talks to human beings through many vectors – through each other, through organized religions, through the great books of those religions, through art and literature and music and poetry, but nowhere with such clarity and force and texture and grace and joy as through creation. We don't know Michelangelo by reading his biography; we know him by looking at the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. And we know our Creator best by immersing ourselves in creation, particularly wilderness, which is the undiluted work of the Creator.

If you look at every religious tradition in the history of mankind, the central epiphany always occurs in the wilderness. Buddha had to go into the wilderness to experience self-realization and Nirvana. Mohammed had to go to the wilderness of Mount Hira in 629 and climb to its summit in the middle of the night and wrestle an angel to have, in Ramadan, the last stanzas of the Koran squeezed from him. Moses had to go to the wilderness of Mt. Sinai for 40 days to get the Commandments. The Jews had to spend 40 years wandering the wilderness to purge themselves of 400 years of slavery in Egypt. Christ had to go into the wilderness for 40 days to discover his divinity for the first time. His
mentor was John the Baptist, a man who lived in the Jordan Valley in a cave, who dressed in the skins of wild animals and ate locusts and the honey of wild bees.

And all of Christ's parables were taken from nature. I am the vine, you are the branches; the mustard seed; the little swallows; the scattering of seeds on the fallow ground; the lilies of the field. He called himself a fisherman, a farmer, a vineyard keeper, a shepherd. The reason he did that – and it's the same reason all the Talmudic prophets did it, the Koranic prophets, the Old Testament, and all of them were shepherds and all of them came out of the wilderness, and they used parables as morality plays to teach the people the difference between right and wrong.

And the reason they did that, the reason Christ did that, was, this is how he stayed in touch with the people. He was saying things that were revolutionary, that contradicted everything they had heard from the literate, sophisticated people of their time. And they would have dismissed him as a quack, but they were able to confirm the wisdom of his parables through their own observations of the fishes and the birds. And they were able to say, he's not telling us something new; he's simply illuminating something very, very old, messages that were written into creation by the Creator at the beginning of time and we hadn't been able to decipher them until the prophets came along who had immersed themselves in wilderness and learned its language and then came back into the cities to translate the wisdom of God.

This is where our values come from. And in this country particularly, our values come from wilderness, our cultural institutions. Frederick Jackson Turner said that American democracy came out of the wilderness. And from the
beginning of our natural history, our greatest political leaders and cultural
leaders were telling the American people, you don’t have to be ashamed because
you don’t have the 1,500 years of culture that they have in Europe, because you
have this relationship to the land, and particularly to wilderness. And that’s
going to be the source of your values and virtues and character as a people. And
in every valid piece of classic American literature, the unifying theme is that
nature is the critical defining element of American culture. Our poets, our artists,
the same thing. This is where it comes from.

This week I saw in the papers on Friday that the administration
announced that it is going to remove protection of 90 million acres of wilderness
area, to open them to the timber industry, the oil industry, and the mining
industry. And I say to myself, this is where our values come from. We have to be
able to point to something to our children and say, we valued something more
than immediate cash returns.

I’ll close with a proverb from the Lakota people that’s been expropriated to
some extent by the environmental movement where they said, we didn’t inherit
this planet from our ancestors; we borrow it from our children. And I would add
to that that if we don’t return to our children something that is roughly the
equivalent of what we received, not just in terms of pure air and pure water, but
also the integrity of the land and the integrity of our democracy, that they’ll have
the right to ask us some very difficult questions.

For those of you who are graduating today, I congratulate you, and I hope
that you’ll use of some of your talents and some of the benefits that you’ve gotten
through this school to use those things to do something to renew our nation's commitment to those values and to those future generations.

Thank you very much.

*Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., Keynote Speaker*

*Wilkes University Spring Commencement 2005*