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## Book Review of Toxic Debts and the Superfund Dilemma

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**Toxic Debts and the Superfund Dilemma.** By Harold C. Barnett. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994. xiv + 334 pp. Illustrations, bibliographical references, index. Cloth \$49.95, paper \$19.95.

When the environmental history of late-twentieth-century America is written, the enactment and implementation of the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation and Liability Act (CERCLA) is unlikely to be viewed as a crowning achievement. The act, commonly known as the "Superfund," is the focus of *Toxic Debts and the Superfund Dilemma*, by Harold C. Barnett, an economics professor at the University of Rhode Island. Barnett concludes that the Superfund, which went in to effect in 1980, has failed to promote an efficient and equitable response to environmental and public health threats posed by hazardous waste sites. This failure, he states, stems from inherent conflicts over economic and environmental priorities that never have been adequately resolved.

Barnett first examines the underlying production of hazardous wastes, then discusses the political evolution of the CERCLA law and analyzes its implementation. He concludes the book by identifying the law's shortcomings and recommending its redesign. Barnett argues that CERCLA's failure is attributable to four essential characteristics of the program:

- The failure to resolve the conflict over "How clean is clean?" resulted in costly and impermanent remedies. Barnett blames this on Congress, for failing to set forth cleanup objectives as the starting point of remedy selection and making cost a secondary factor, and on the Environmental Protection Agency, which sacrificed cleanup effectiveness to cost considerations.
- The inability to resolve conflicts over an equitable distribution of the cleanup expenses also compromised the program's efficiency. Under the Superfund scheme, the EPA bears the responsibility for distributing cleanup costs—but it could not (or would not)

impose major remediation expenses on major industries. This seems to be as much a problem of political will as of contradictory policy goals.

- Barnett found that EPA staff resources were insufficient to carry out a broad remediation mandate—a common enough problem, in that aggressive, publicly-supported regulatory policy often is frustrated by inadequate funding for implementation.
- Barnett also notes that the Superfund program has come to depend on state governments, for-profit contractors, and other entities whose interests do not necessarily coincide with those of Congress.

For Barnett, the “Superfund dilemma” is a question of “whether it is preferable to err on the side of higher than necessary cost and potentially negative economic impacts [for waste cleanups] or on the side of higher risk and potentially negative public health and environmental impacts” [p. 282].

*Toxic Debts and the Superfund Dilemma* reaches disturbing conclusions about the ability of the U.S. government to fashion an effective and equitable environmental policy in the face of substantial corporate opposition.

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