U.S. BACKS BIG OIL AGAINST TINY ARCTIC TRIBE

Two nations are waging a war of words against one another. The tiny nation includes the Neets'āii Gwich'in Athabascan people of Arctic Village, Alaska, a community inaccessible by road or boat. The superpower nation is the United States, centered within the urban beltways of Washington, D.C. My sympathies are with the tiny underdog for showing what an Earth-centered, egalitarian view of life should look like.

The 152 people of Arctic Village (based on the 2010 census) are predominantly of the Neets'āii band. One of them is Faith Gemmill, an international activist for universal human rights. On April 18, she gave the keynote speech for UConn's semesterlong Metanoia - "the journey of changing one's mind" - on the environment. I was there.

She opened her talk by giving thanks to the Creator for our earthly blessings. She did so in her own Athabascan language. Though the words she spoke were unintelligible to me, the message from her heart was dignified with reverence.

Switching to our language, she thanked the native people of Connecticut for allowing us to be in this place. In so doing, she bypassed the last 400 years of New England history, a narrative of usurpation, racism and genocide followed by appreciation. Pointedly, she did not acknowledge the Euro-American governments at town, state and federal levels.

Gemmill was visiting Connecticut as an advocate for global environmental justice, the notion that the marginalized peoples of our planet be given a voice in global environmental management. This includes the acquiring of resources, disposing of wastes, managing landscapes and dealing with changing climates. As U.S. citizens, we take the fundamental rights of individuals for granted. Should not the same rights be extended to all individual nations?

Her central concern involves our government's relentless thirst for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge of northeast Alaska, known as the ANWR. Its coastal plain is the calving ground for the Porcupine caribou herd, the mainstay of the Gwich'in nation's subsistence economy. Their annual autumn caribou hunt takes place during the herd's migration through the ANWR to its subarctic winter range in eastern Alaska and adjacent Yukon Territory. The Gwich'in way of life is directly threatened by oil development in one of the most remote places on Earth.

Two days after her talk, the U.S. government published the following announcement in the Federal Register of April 20: "In accordance with Section 20001 of the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017 (Tax Act) ... the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) ... intends to prepare ... an oil and gas leasing program within the area." Believe it or not, this reopening of the ANWR's north slope for oil and gas development was mandated by the labyrinthine tax cut package approved by all three Republican branches of government last year.

Making the announcement for the Department of the Interior was Joe Balash, a former oil industry lobbyist who's now assistant secretary for land and minerals management. According to an April 19 story by the Society of Environmental Journalists: "Developing our resources on the coastal plain," Balash claims, "is an important facet for meeting our nation's energy demands and achieving energy dominance," and is the "responsible path forward." The fossil fuel industry is delighted. The CEO and president of the Alaska Oil and Gas Association, Kara Moriarty, praised the decision.

Progressive voices for a sane energy policy and fairness to indigenous peoples are appalled. Matt Lee-Ashley, a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress likened this "rushed environmental
review" to a "kangaroo court" presided over by Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke. Members of Congress remain divided, partisan to the bone, locked into their respective ideological bunkers and generally insensitive to the fate of their moderate constituents.

I feel sorry for Gemmill and every other marginalized voice seeking environmental justice in the court of global opinion. Apparently, the U.S. is determined to burn every drop of petroleum and cubic foot of gas, knowing that it will harm Gemmill's people by threatening the Porcupine caribou herd, magnifying climate change and squelching indigenous rights.

Though I love my country, I'm ashamed to be associated with the present federal administration.