

The Sweet Hereafter: Our craving for sugar starves the Everglades and fattens politicians

by Paul Roberts

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Part 1

Like any modern farming town, Clewiston, Florida, de facto capital of the American sugar industry and, by its own estimate, "America's Sweetest Town," reveals itself to visitors well beyond the city limits. Thirty miles out, the famous sugarcane crop begins - tall, genetically tailored, and emerald green - stretching out like nappy AstroTurf as far as the eye can see. Next come the thick, mile-high smoke clouds as the freshly cut cane fields are burned off. And then comes the smell: the funky, earthy, sickly-sweet odor of cane juice being boiled down into coarse blond crystals of raw sugar. Six months a year, twenty-four hours a day, in Clewiston or anywhere else in the Rhode Island - size piece of drained swamp known as the Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA), the scent is inescapable and unmistakable, a territorial marker that makes newcomers grimace and reminds everyone else what money smells like. On this particular October afternoon, one week before Election Day, 1998, the lucrative bouquet is especially sharp in downtown Clewiston. Not only has the cane harvest begun but U.S. Sugar Corporation, headquartered here since 1931, is planning a huge bash for the opening of its new sugar refinery. Located on the south side of town, the refinery towers twelve stories over the flat former swamplands, a colossal monument to prosperity in the age of consolidated agribusiness.

After today, U.S. Sugar will no longer need East Coast refiners to turn its raw crystals into white table sugar but will sell directly to the customer, in everything from 2-pound bags for homemakers to 100-ton railcar loads for industrial users. This is the kind of vertical integration that already defines most of the food industry, and its arrival in Clewiston is being treated like the discovery of oil, or the acquisition of a pro football team, or something less earthly altogether: for indeed, J. Nelson Fairbanks, CEO of U.S. Sugar, is a fiercely religious man who believes his company is on a mission from God and who is, in any case, throwing a party of biblical proportions.

Already, workers are unfolding a circus-size tent that, when erected, will boast stadium-caliber air-conditioning, a magnificent stereo sound system, a full-size catering kitchen, and seating for 750. The guest list reads like a who's who of sugar: lobbyists and industrial sugar users, analysts and reporters, local lawmakers, top state politicians, and congressmen - even Fairbanks's arch rivals, Alfonso "Alfy" Fanjul and his brother, Jose "Pepe," authentic sugar barons whose neighboring cane holdings are the biggest in America and whose political connections in Tallahassee and Washington are so famous that Hollywood has based movie villains on them.

The political tone of the festivities is no accident. Sugar has always been on intimate terms with government, for without it the industry could not enjoy its current size and wealth. For example, until recently, growers like Fairbanks and the Fanjuls relied on a federal "guest" worker program for a steady supply of cheap, docile Caribbean cane cutters. And although that particular embarrassment is gone, cane producers remain absolutely beholden to other forms of governmental intervention. Nearly every acre of sugarcane in south Florida is irrigated and drained via a costly, tax-supported system of pumps, dikes, and canals that effectively prevents the Everglades Agricultural Area from reverting to swamp while keeping Lake Okeechobee, to the north, from flooding.

Part 2

.... Unfortunately, this system, in combination with the heavy fertilizers sugar farmers apply to their fields, has degraded the remaining "pristine" Everglades downstream, yielding years of litigation and an environmental catastrophe that will cost taxpayers \$8 billion to fix. But not sugar. Although Florida cane farmers are footing part of the cleanup cost, their small share is all but buried under another, more pervasive government handout: a federal sugar program that keeps the domestic price of sugar some 50 percent above the world market price. This sweet protectionist deal not only adds a nickel profit to every pound of sugar produced by large U.S. cane farmers but has abetted the Everglades' decline by encouraging farming in marginal swamplands that could not be profitably planted otherwise.

Sugar is, in effect, getting paid to do some serious ecological damage, an argument made by environmentalists, free-traders, and other critics each time Congress reauthorizes the sugar program, but to little avail. Each time, the industry prevails with an impressive blend of political skill and resources. Between 1990 and 1998, American cane farmers and their sometime allies - sugar-beet farmers, sugar refiners, and the makers of high-fructose corn syrup (HFCS) - poured some \$13 million into presidential and congressional campaigns and tens of millions more into local races, especially in Florida, where sugar has spent at least \$26 million on everything from referendums to supporting Jeb Bush for governor in 1998.

That's a lot of money, especially from an industry less than one tenth the size of automobiles or oil, and it has forged a chain of political obligations and alliances that is immune to even the most vigorous good-government crazes. Three years ago, for example, the sugar lobby not only throttled a congressional attempt to phase out sugar price supports (persuading six of the bill's co-sponsors to switch sides) but dished out some \$23 million to stop a Florida proposal to tax growers for Everglades restoration. And just this April, sugar lobbyists in Tallahassee pushed through a last-minute bill eakening federal authority over Everglades cleanup, then convinced newly elected Governor Bush to sign the law immediately, before incensed environmentalists could mount a veto campaign.

Nor is the White House immune to sugar's charms. In 1996, just hours after Al Gore proposed his own sugar tax and vowed to make the Everglades the centerpiece of the administration's environmental policy, Alfy Fanjul called Clinton, interrupting the President's meeting with Monica Lewinsky, to remind him of the vast sums the Fanjuls had pumped into Clinton's presidential campaigns. (Lewinsky would later remember the caller's name as "something like 'Fanuli.'") Gore's tax proposal vanished, as did the administration's interest in genuine restoration.

This July, Gore presented Congress with an \$8 billion, twenty-year Everglades restoration plan, which calls for ripping out hundreds of miles of dikes and claims to let the swamp flow free and wild again. What Gore failed to mention, however, is that the plan is crippled because, at the behest of sugar lobbyists, it leaves virtually untouched the cane farms that helped to create the mess in the first place. If anything, the new refinery in Clewiston is really a colossal monument to a relatively small industry's success in utterly dominating an entire segment of American policy.

Part 3

.... With two days till the opening, Clewiston is abuzz with a homecoming-game excitement. Dignitaries have begun to arrive and the hotels are full. The Clewiston News's "Special Clewiston

Sugar Refinery Grand Opening Issue" has hit the stands, and a small army of U.S. Sugar publicists has prepared a paralyzing concoction of press releases, backgrounders, tours, and free food for the coming media hordes. Arriving in Clewiston, I'm greeted by Laura Jamieson, a cordial, businesslike flack assigned to me by U.S. Sugar's public relations firm in Miami. Over a small table in the dimly lit Everglades Lounge, Jamieson thanks me profusely for my interest in sugar, passes me several pounds of press material, then outlines my itinerary for the next two days - a nonstop series of refinery visits, executive interviews, and aerial tours, culminating in a front-row seat at the refinery opening, with side options for a fishing trip or a tour of Miami Beach, if the journalistic need arises. It's a blend of Southern hospitality and sophisticated "communications strategy," a full-court press designed to keep me exhaustively informed, thoroughly occupied, and completely out of mischief while I'm in Clewiston.

In contrast, U.S. Sugar's main competition, the Fanjuls, and their company, Florida Crystals, seem altogether indifferent to the press. Neither Alfy nor Pepe will consent to speak to me even by phone, and requests to visit the company's vast offshore cane holdings in the Dominican Republic are steadfastly ignored. The brothers' reclusiveness isn't surprising. Whereas Fairbanks and U.S. Sugar have continued to bank on their image as sugar pioneers with close ties to the land, the Fanjuls have no such cachet. Rich, controversial, and Cuban-born, with Palm Beach mansions and a \$500 million fortune, the brothers are easy targets for muckrakers from 60 Minutes to the National Enquirer, most of whom portray the Fanjuls, in not so subtle racist undertones, as symbols of why America is going down the toilet. The unkindest cut was *Striptease*, a satirical 1996 film featuring two cutthroat Cuban-American sugar barons, their toadying congressman, and the dancer that brings them all down. Miami Herald columnist Carl Hiaasen, on whose novel the movie was based, called his barons Joaquin and Wilberto Rojo. But any reader of the south Florida society pages had no difficulty recognizing Alfy and Pepe, their collection of yachts and politicians, or their family's elitist disregard for those who work their lands. "Christopher had never been to the farm, but he'd seen photographs," writes Hiaasen of Joaquin Rojo's womanizing, barhopping son. "The cane fields looked like a stinking hellhole; he was astounded at the fortune they produced. There was so much money that one couldn't possibly spend it all."

Begging off a dinner invitation from Jamieson and her P.R. colleagues, I spend my first night exploring America's Sweetest Town, a task that takes all of about ten minutes. Clewiston's 6,348 residents live in a narrow crescent, bounded on the north by the huge earthen levee that keeps Lake Okeechobee from overflowing its banks and in every other direction by cane - a sea of green that laps up against backyards and parking lots, playgrounds and curbs, and fundamentally shapes every aspect of life within. In fact, although cane is grown in some eighty tropical and semitropical nations and states - and sugar beets nearly everywhere else - few spots on earth render the bizarre spectacle of the modern sugar industry quite so visible as south Florida. Three counties south of Lake Okeechobee account for more than half the country's cane production, a focus on sugar so intense and deeply entrenched that, depending on the time of year, a visitor will find not only the U.S. Sugar Corporation and the Sugarland Highway but also Sugar Industry Appreciation Week, the Sugar Festival, the Taste of Sugar Country Dessert Contest, the "Miss Sugar" Beauty Pageant, and even, in the small black town of Harlem, a Miss Brown Sugar contest. Driving slowly down Clewiston's main street, hunting for something other than political ads and Christian rock on the radio, I nearly rear-end a green Ford pickup making a left turn. The driver, wearing the customary straw planter's hat, stares searchingly at me in his rearview mirror, then smiles warmly and makes his turn. His bumper sticker reads: we raise cane.

Factory and farming towns have always found quaint ways to celebrate their economic mainstays, but there is more to sugar's pull than mere dollars. Sugar has power because almost no one who has once tasted sugar ever wants to do without it. We love sugar, and our affection is physical, an involuntary, evolutionary adaptation that guided our ancestors to fruits and other crucial carbohydrates and that seems to involve the same pleasure-producing neural chemistry associated with opiates. That may or may not explain why people kicking heroin crave sugary snacks, or why, in lab tests, even healthy subjects eat significantly more food when it's sweetened. But it certainly does make clear why the food industry now adds sucrose and other sweeteners - notably HFCS - to nearly all processed foods, from ketchup and sandwich bread to frozen entrées and baby food. Like Elvis or sex, sugar is everywhere and in everything - our economy and politics, our language and demographic makeup, our physiology and mass psychology, and, of course, our diet. Sweeteners now make up a fifth of America's caloric intake: the average American consumes a pound of sweetener, or 117 teaspoons, every sixty hours.

Part 4

All green plants create sucrose from sunlight, air, and water via photosynthesis. But the most proficient species are the sugar maple, the sugar beet, and sugarcane. And although beets are now the nation's greatest source of sucrose, it was cane, or *Saccharum*, that launched the sugar business and that has, for better or worse, provided most of the industry's visible character. A massive, bamboo-like grass that can grow twenty feet tall, *Saccharum* was discovered in southern Asia 10,000 years ago and by 300 b.c. was being processed into sweet syrups. Crusaders brought a crude crystalline sugar back to Europe, where demand soon outstripped supply. By the fifteenth century, when European explorers sailed south to the African coast and west to the New World, they were driven as much as anything by the need to find more suitable sugar-growing regions.

By the 1600s, the sugar colony had emerged as the mercantile model of imperial commerce - a massive, centralized slave plantation devoted to a single crop that was shipped back to the mother country for refining. A delicate plant, cane needed ample fertilizer, irrigation, and a workforce inured to backbreaking tedium. During harvest, slaves spent weeks in the fields, bent over, hacking the tough woody stalks with razor-sharp machetes as they marched down the bug- and snake-infested rows. The cane would be hauled to a mill and ground between rollers to extract the juice. The precious liquid was then reduced in massive heated cauldrons, tended round the clock in oppressively hot proto-factories, and, at a precise consistency, poured into molds. Excess liquid was drained off as molasses, and the hardened bricks of raw sugar were sent to refineries in Antwerp, London, or Rouen for additional whitening. Timing was critical, for cane juice spoils in hours; during harvest, milling continued around the clock, leaving workers so tired that the fingers and hands of those feeding the mills often slipped in between the grinding rollers. As one historian notes: "A hatchet was kept in readiness to sever the arm, which in such cases was always drawn in; and this no doubt explains the number of maimed watchmen."

These were minor obstacles. By 1700, spurred by the growing popularity of coffee, chocolate, and tea, sugar had surpassed tobacco as the New World's most lucrative export. Sugar, molasses, and rum (from fermented molasses) gave the struggling colonies their first economic impetus, fostering new commercial and political elites - and new patterns of exploitation. Under the infamous "triangle of trade," sugar from English colonies in the Caribbean went to England for refining, ships then went on to Africa to exchange goods for fresh slaves, who were shipped to Caribbean plantations.

Writes historian Sidney Mintz: "The first enslaved Africans brought to [the New World] in 1503-1505 worked on sugar plantations, and the last enslaved Africans smuggled into Cuba in the 1860s or 1870s worked on sugar plantations - a depressingly enduring continuity."

As nations grew accustomed to sugar revenues, the industry gained political power. Countries shielded their planter colonies with protective tariffs, sparking geopolitical strife. In 1733, British planters on Barbados and Jamaica, annoyed that New Englanders were using French Indies molasses to make rum, convinced Parliament to heavily tax any non-British sugar imported by America.¹ The resulting Molasses Act contributed as much to America's revolutionary fervor as any other British snub.

Yet for all sugar's importance to America's origins, the new country had no sugar industry of its own and had to rely on imports - a position that abetted America's growing aspirations to imperialism. In the Kingdom of Hawaii, American sugar planters, hungry for the import privileges enjoyed by U.S. planters, cynically fostered a revolt that drew American military intervention and, eventually, annexation. In Cuba, U.S. investors bought up almost half of all sugar production, which not only let them feed their American refineries with cheap raw-sugar imports but also fostered massive resentment in Cuba that, coupled with the economic instability inherent in one-crop economies, contributed to a century of rebellions, dictatorships, coups, repression, and, finally, revolution.

Even by 1920, the U.S. sugar industry still was small, centered mainly in Louisiana and Hawaii with a slowly developing sugar-beet presence in the Midwest. Florida wasn't even a bit player. Despite a subtropical climate and an early sugar heritage - Cañaveral means "cane field" in Spanish - cane was a garden species, grown piecemeal by settlers and Seminoles. The future capital of cane was still dismissed as a hot, buggy, underpopulated state whose swampy saw-grass interior, in one account, was "suitable only for the haunt of noxious vermin, or the resort of pestilent reptiles."

Part 5

.... At a boat ramp just off the Sugarland Highway, on the eastern edge of the Everglades, Freddy Fisikelli slides a battered aluminum airboat into the tepid waters of an irrigation canal and beckons to me. Sixty-nine years old and rail thin, tanned to the color of shoe leather, Fisikelli grew up on the swamp, hunting and fishing until the game and fish disappeared, and is said to know the Everglades better than anyone alive. I've ditched my sugar publicists for the morning to take a ride in his boat, a sixteen-foot-long flat-bottom barge with a huge rear-mounted propeller and a gargantuan 500-cubic-inch V-8 engine pulled from a Cadillac, sans muffler. Fisikelli hands me ear protectors, hits the ignition, and casts off. We motor slowly down the canal until he finds an opening into the swamp. Tugging on the rudder, he nudges the boat through a curtain of reeds and drops the throttle.

From the air, the Everglades look pretty much like what you'd expect from a huge swamp - miles and miles of soggy grasslands sprinkled here and there with trees. But down low, racing along a narrow canal at 45 mph, the effect is much more like being in a jeep on a savanna, with head-high, brownish-green grass stretching off to a flat horizon and a huge, pale blue sky. For half an hour we roar down the watery track, gathering a gossamer sheath of spider webs on our hands and faces and startling the native fauna. Blackbirds rocket skyward, while the larger, wading varieties - blue herons and cattle egrets - heave up and flap along ahead of us for a dozen yards before veering off. Reeds whip by; a dragonfly creases my hair. The canal widens momentarily, and to one side something large and shiny rolls beneath the water. Fisikelli taps my shoulder: "alligator."

The engine's roar drowns out any real conversation, encouraging a bizarre, vibrating introspection as the landscape flies by. At irregular intervals the boat jogs from side to side as Fisikelli, navigating by invisible landmarks, turns into secluded side canals - right, right, left, right, left - winding deeper and deeper into the marsh. The place is a maze, and I begin to understand why hunters and surveyors who go astray here might spend days looking for a way out - and why drug dealers and other thugs use the place to hide problematic objects. Fisikelli himself has walked out twice after his boat broke down. Once he was just five miles from a road, but it took him six hours to slog through the knee-deep water and muck, and when he reached terra firma, his trousers had been ripped to shreds by the razor-sharp native saw grass. That time, Fisikelli was lucky: he got out before nightfall, when mosquitoes come on so thick that marooned hunters paint themselves with engine oil to ward off bites. I'm about to ask, half-jokingly, whether Fisikelli knows where we are when the track widens, the engine goes silent, and we start to drift across a pond-size space of open water dotted with lily pads and purple gallinules. I pull off my earmuffs. The humid air is surprisingly fresh, filled with the sweetish smells of hay and peat and the sound of crickets and frogs. Waves slap rhythmically against the boat's metal sides. I peer down: the water is still and clear, revealing a few tiny minnows above a copper-colored algae bottom. Looking more closely, I realize that the water is actually moving, barely, from north to south - the slowest river in the world.

The Everglades were created more than 6,000 years ago, when a receding ocean exposed the vast limestone plain of southern Florida. Inundated by heavy rainfall, invaded by subtropical plants that favored the low-nutrient limestone soil, the landscape gradually gave rise to a forty-mile-wide "river of grass" that began at the southern shore of Lake Okeechobee and flowed in a gentle curve all the way to Florida Bay, 100 miles to the south. Actually, "river" is a misleading term. Between lake and bay, the land slopes less than a quarter of an inch a mile; before 1900, water moved so slowly that a droplet leaving Okeechobee would have evaporated and returned to the marsh as rain perhaps a dozen times before reaching the bay six months to a year later. Nor did the river always flow. In the dry winters the river would drop, its waters receding into millions of shallow pools that teemed with trapped fish and were a haven for wading birds, which nested on the temporarily dry ground. In the wet summers the Everglades would again be waterlogged, soaking up trillions of gallons of rainwater like a natural reservoir, filtering it, and slowly discharging to Florida Bay. Oscillating on this extreme hydrological cycle, the Everglades offered a particular environment, amenable to a narrow band of plants and animals and utterly contemptuous of nearly all other life forms.

Especially sugar. For all its association with the swampy Everglades, sugarcane is actually a dry land crop requiring constant irrigation yet intolerant of flooding, growing best when the water table lies two feet below the soil surface. In the Everglades the water table is two feet above the soil. Or was, before the mid-nineteenth century. That's when Congress handed twenty million wet inland acres to Florida lawmakers, who saw the Everglades as the main obstacle holding their new state back from a rightful, prosperous destiny. "Reclamation" became the rallying cry, a righteous crusade complete with glorious visions of an evil swamp giving way to vast orderly rectangles of cotton, rice, oranges, and, of course, sugarcane. "The statesman whose exertions shall cause the millions of acres they contain, now worse than worthless, to teem with the products of agriculture industry," warbled one booster, "will merit a high place in public favor, not only with his own generation, but with posterity."

... Slowly, expensively, crews dredged the muck, and by 1920 four massive canals had been carved from Okeechobee to the Atlantic Ocean, draining the swamp just south of the lake and raising in its place a fertile crescent of new farmland. The floodgates were now literally open. Between 1900 and 1930, southeastern Florida's coastal population jumped tenfold, and with postwar sugar prices sky-high, sugar wasn't far behind. Even as realtors were selling northerners swampland "by the gallon," backers of sugar ventures were promoting the Everglades as a cane-growers' paradise. By one consultant's reckoning, the black saw-grass peat, or "muck" soil, was so rich in nutrients that, properly drained, the region's "fertility will be established, practically forever" - without costly fertilizers. Investors came running like children to sweets, among them Charles Stewart Mott, the former General Motors magnate and philanthropist. Civic hopes were stratospheric. In Clewiston, city fathers laid out plans for a sprawling lakeside metropolis of 20,000 souls, complete with a massive street grid and new moniker - "the Chicago of the Everglades."

They were a little ahead of themselves. Even after drainage the only thing to grow on the unfertilized saw-grass peat turned out to be . . . more saw grass. Not only was the soil less fertile than advertised but the climate of south Florida lacked the warmth that cane is accustomed to. By the time sugar farmers solved that small problem - by breeding new strains of cane and, more to the point, by massive applications of phosphorus and nitrogen - the inevitable oversupply of sugar, followed by the global Depression, pushed prices to a few pennies a pound. Many ventures, including Mott's, were driven into the muck. Even after Congress came to the rescue, stabilizing prices by limiting imports and controlling domestic production - and even after Mott relaunched his venture as U.S. Sugar Corporation - the Florida sugar industry remained tiny.

Then came the 1959 Cuban revolution, and overnight the state's fortunes were made. Having embargoed all Cuban sugar, U.S. trade officials filled the gap by encouraging domestic production of sugar through massive incentives. The results were swift and predictable. U.S. Sugar Corporation and its smaller rivals expanded as fast as they could acquire land and get it planted, while engineers drained more swamp. By the mid-1960s, Florida's cane acreage had jumped tenfold; the state's sugar industry now was a real player, with big money and an absolute stranglehold on Florida politics, especially in matters of water and drainage.

The post-Castro opportunities also drew outsiders, among them Alfonso Fanjul, heir to the Fanjul-Gomez-Mena sugar empire in Cuba, a sprawling enterprise that, before Castro "stole" it, included 150,000 acres of sugarcane and ten mills. Forced to flee Cuba, Fanjul had no intention of quitting sugar. Moving to Palm Beach in 1960, he and some fellow exiles raised \$640,000 to buy Osceola Farms, which boasted a 4,000-acre parcel of drained farmland in the EAA. By the time of Alfonso's death, in 1980, the eldest of his four sons, Alfie and Pepe, were doing \$30 million in annual sales. Five years later, in a move that confirmed Alfie's strategic touch, the company leveraged \$240 million for the sugar holdings of an ailing rival, netting the Fanjuls 90,000 new sugar acres in Florida plus 110,000 acres of sugar in the Dominican Republic. By 1990, the company, now known as Florida Crystals, had not only surpassed U.S. Sugar as America's biggest cane grower but had become the dominant force in sugar politics, pouring money into election campaigns, flying lawmakers around in company jets, even hosting a Bush Administration official at its posh Dominican resort, Casa de Campo. In nearly every way, the Gomez-Mena empire had been reborn.

But by then the thirty-year post-Castro bubble was ready to burst. Health experts were again denouncing sugar. Alternative sweeteners, such as HFCS, were eroding the sugar market while

Congress was threatening the sugar program. Labor lawyers, meanwhile, claimed that Florida cane growers routinely, and profitably, abused the thousands of cane cutters brought in each year from the Caribbean - claims that resulted in multimillion-dollar lawsuits and forced the U.S. industry to convert to mechanical harvesting.

But the most serious threat came from environmentalists, who argued that phosphorus runoff from cane farms was slowly poisoning the Everglades and that the government's system of canals and dikes had destroyed the swamp's crucial flooding cycle - all as state officials looked the other way. In 1988, the U.S. Attorney in Miami filed suit against Florida for failing to enforce its own water-quality standards. For the sugar industry, it was a systemic shock that would, in the parlance of B movies, either kill it or make it much, much stronger.

Part 7

"We're talking phosphorus here, not mercury or heavy metals." In the small conference room at Florida Crystals' packing plant, Jorge Dominicus, the Fanjuls' spokesman, is tutoring me on the finer points of environmental science. Through a cooperative P.R. deal with U.S. Sugar, Dominicus has joined my media tour and for the last hour has used maps, charts, and a steady stream of gee-whiz comparisons to demonstrate just how overblown the pollution issue really is. "We're talking parts per billion," says Dominicus. "It'd be like taking ten drops and putting them into a backyard swimming pool." Across the room, Malcolm S. "Bubba" Wade, Dominicus's counterpart at U.S. Sugar, reminds me that phosphorus is necessary for all life; why, the bottled water you buy in the store has more phosphorus than is allowed under federal water standards in parks and refuges. Adds Dominicus: "You'd have to drink 1,400 gallons of the stuff to get your daily recommended allowance."

Like much else with sugar, the issue isn't so clear-cut, nor is it simply about the toxicity of a single chemical. When engineers turned the upper third of the Everglades into farms, they effectively severed Lake Okeechobee from the swamp and reversed its natural water cycle. Where the Everglades had been too dry for farming in the winter and so flood-prone in summer that hurricanes wiped out entire towns, engineers could now irrigate farms in winter and drain them in the wet season. City dwellers benefited, too. Engineers built a massive north-south levee to keep Everglades waters out of the narrow coastal strip that runs from West Palm Beach down to Miami, home today to 5 million people. And to supply those thirsty urbanites, engineers sealed off huge tracts of Everglades just south of the farms - essentially, the middle third of the swamp - as million-acre reservoirs, or Water Conservation Areas. Almost as an afterthought, in 1947 the bottom third of the swamp was reserved as a national park.

From the window of U.S. Sugar's corporate aircraft, five thousand feet up, the signs of so much alteration are unmistakable. South from Okeechobee, the Everglades Agricultural Area unfolds like an enormous emerald checkerboard, its fields perfectly rectangular, neatly scribed by dikes, roads, and rails. Just below the farms lie the water-control structures - huge floodgates and some of the world's biggest diesel-powered pumping stations, each of which can move 2 million gallons a minute from the farms into the highway-size canals that run south and southeast, toward the coast.

From this height, it's also clear why the orderly layout doesn't work. In the dry season, the EAA essentially dams up Lake Okeechobee, diverting water that once flowed into the swamp and sending it instead to sugar farmers or urban users. But in the wet season, to keep farms and suburbs dry,

canals in and around the EAA carry away the rainwater as fast as it falls. Some is pumped into the Water Conservation Areas, often faster than the swamp can absorb it, drowning out bird and wildlife populations there. The rest - several hundred billion gallons a year - is simply sent down the main canals "to tide" (where this unnatural flood of fresh water is destroying Florida's delicate saltwater estuaries). Not enough water remains to filter down to the last pristine sections of swamp in Everglades National Park. In other words, while the lower glades are starved of water, the upper glades are drowning - a bizarre and ugly situation that has nonetheless allowed sugar officials to insist that the real Everglades problem isn't water quality as much as water quantity.

In fact, the sugar industry knows good and well that water quality and water quantity are inseparable. By draining the saw-grass muck, engineers exposed underwater soils to the air, allowing fertilizers and natural nutrients to oxidize, thus freeing them up to blow away as dust or float off in rainstorms. Over time, up to six feet of phosphorus-laden topsoil has washed from the farms into the Everglades. Granted, phosphorus isn't particularly toxic, and farm runoff concentrations were relatively tiny - 200 to 500 parts per billion. But keep in mind that the original Everglades vegetation developed in the nutrient-poor limestone soils, and that even a little phosphorus goes a long way. In the pristine parts of the park, water contains only a few parts per billion (ppb) of phosphorus. But research shows that as concentrations rise even slightly, native plants, such as saw grass, react - first by growing to monstrously unnatural sizes, then by dying off and giving way to phosphorus-loving species, such as cattails.

Part 8

.... Exactly how much phosphorus the swamp can tolerate before changes occur is, naturally, a subject of ferocious debate. Ron Jones, a microbiologist at Florida International University and a veteran of the Everglades controversy, claims that 5 ppb to 7 ppb is the natural level, with a maximum of 10 ppb. Sugar scientists say it's higher - as much as 50 ppb. Regardless, changes are occurring. In the national park, for example, cattails are almost nonexistent. But move north and cattail density rises, until, in the upper parts of the Water Conservation Areas, where farm water discharges, cattails have completely replaced saw grass and caused a ripple effect through the Everglades' ecosystem. Cattails grow so thickly that wading birds - the wood storks, white ibises, great egrets, and others - have no place to land. They also have nothing to eat, since all this new plant life sucks oxygen from the water as it dies and decomposes, killing algae and the fish that feed on it. The process is known as eutrophication, and the numerical impacts are staggering. As feeding and nesting sites have dwindled, the annual breeding population of wood storks, for example, dropped from 20,000 in 1960 to 1,800 today. The Cape Sable seaside sparrow, dubbed by ecologists an indicator species for the swamp, has dwindled from the tens of thousands to roughly 3,500. Similarly severe declines are reported for American crocodiles, snail kites, and other birds and animals - declines that usually presage outright extinction. "Cattails are the grave marker," says Jones. "But the first sign that things are amiss is saw grass that has had too many nutrients and is fifteen feet high. Wading birds don't care if it's fifteen-foot saw grass or fifteen-foot cattails; they can't land. It's a mess."

Nearly everyone involved in this debate agrees that saving the Everglades requires two basic actions: reducing phosphorus and restoring some or most of the swamp's historic water flow. Both are far easier said than done. It costs many millions of dollars to remove each additional part per billion of phosphorus, and the preferred method - building huge, artificial filtration swamps just downstream from the farms to cleanse the runoff - has had mixed results in tests. Similarly, the only

feasible means of restoring water flow is to tear out all the dikes and canals, elevate the bisecting highways, and, above all, convert a sizable chunk of sugar's precious acreage back into swamp in order to reconnect Okeechobee with the Everglades. Not surprisingly, neither approach has much appeal to an industry accustomed to guaranteed profits and an ever-expanding landbase. So for the last decade, sugar makers and their political allies - including a sizable congressional contingent, dozens of Florida officials, nearly the entire state legislature, and, with depressing regularity, the Clinton Administration - have done all they could to ensure that the Everglades problem remains unsolved.

The U.S. Attorney's suit offers a dramatic case in point. After failing to get it dismissed, sugar companies and state officials, including then - governor Bob Martinez, lobbied the Justice Department to remove the U.S. Attorney, a Republican named Dexter Lehtinen, from the case. Justice refused, so sugar spent millions of dollars on private research to discredit Ron Jones, Lehtinen's star expert. (During discovery, the state's lawyers were forced to produce a folder labeled "More Dirt on Jones.") Then, after the state broke with the industry in 1991 and agreed to cut phosphorus levels by building expensive filtration marshes, sugar lawyers filed three dozen lawsuits to keep the deal from being implemented. One Justice Department attorney called it "the most aggressive and skilled stonewalling I have ever seen."

Part 9

.... Sugar hadn't even begun to fight. Stymied in court, the industry wooed friends in higher places, pouring millions of dollars into the 1992 campaigns. The traditionally Republican Fanjuls, for example, played both sides: Pepe vice-chaired the Bush-Quayle Finance Committee, while Alfy joined the Clinton-Gore team, hosting a \$120,000 fund-raiser and smoothing Clinton's way into the staunchly Republican Cuban-American community. "Alfy Fanjul became a Democrat because he has an empire to protect," one state Democratic activist told Miami's Daily Business Review. "He's developing his own way to be heard."

And heard he was. In March 1993, Alfy Fanjul met privately with Bruce Babbitt, Clinton's new interior secretary, presenting him with an Everglades restoration plan drawn up by Florida Crystals' scientists. And lo! When Babbitt unveiled the administration's restoration plan at a July ceremony, it bore an uncanny resemblance to Fanjul's plan - stipulating, among other things, that state taxpayers would pick up more than half the estimated \$700 million for the filtration marshes. Babbitt denied any link between Fanjul campaign dollars and the administration's plan, but Alfy Fanjul himself made no such protestations. Speaking directly after Babbitt at the ceremony, Fanjul held up the new plan as proof that "the Clinton Administration delivers."

Clinton would keep delivering. In 1994, Florida Crystals persuaded Babbitt to turn the Everglades matter back over to the state legislature, thus bypassing the federal courts in favor of a political body over which sugar had enormous sway. Exploiting the home-court advantage, sugar recruited an all-star lobbying team, including two former state house speakers and Governor Lawton Chiles's former chief of staff, then launched a media blitz to downplay the phosphorus problem. "We're talking parts per billion," and "drops in a swimming pool" became standard industry tropes, as did dark hints that development might replace sugar if regulations forced growers out of the EAA.

Victory was never in doubt. At a May 1994 ceremony in Everglades National Park, with Babbitt looking on, Chiles signed the Everglades Forever Act.³ Written mainly by sugar lobbyists, the new

state law capped industry cleanup costs at \$320 million, obligated taxpayers for the remainder, and suspended state water standards until 2003, at which point state officials, not federal scientists, would determine an allowable phosphorus level. Efforts to restore water flow met a similar fate. When federal scientists suggested reconnecting Okeechobee to the remaining Everglades by buying and converting nearly a third of the EAA into a massive flow way, sugar interests went ballistic. The administration publicly denounced the scientists and their proposal, effectively signaling that the sugar farms were off-limits for any future restoration efforts. Indeed, by 1996, when administration officials began talking boldly about ripping out dikes and restoring natural water flows - a plan known as the Army Corps Restudy - it was understood that restoration would occur south of the sugar farms, even though most technical staff knew that such an exclusion effectively undermined genuine restoration. Editorialists and some environmentalists complained bitterly. But, as he had done with nearly all his liberal constituencies, Clinton exploited divisions within the green community, scolding critics and stroking supporters. By 1996, big groups like World Wildlife Fund and National Audubon Society were not only backing the White House plan but actively criticizing any greens who opposed it.

Part 10

... For many critics, sugar prevailed because it bought lawmakers. Yet the industry's main advantage was to have grasped, earlier than most, how badly Clinton needed Republican - leaning Florida for his reelection bid - and how perfectly the Everglades fit into that strategy. In a trademark Clinton move, the president's team calculated that even a weak restoration plan would still let Clinton look green to urban voters without enraging key contributors, such as sugar and real estate interests, and without undercutting state Democrats - among them U.S. Senator Bob Graham, a Clinton ally and the main architect of Clinton's Everglades policy.

Sugar's presidential aspirations almost backfired. Florida was a GOP prize as well, and by mid-1995 candidates Richard Lugar and Bob Dole had promised hefty restoration packages; Lugar went so far as to propose that they be partly funded through a mechanism sugar abhorred: a growers' tax. To sugar's horror, the White House joined the chorus, dispatching Gore to Everglades National Park to propose a "polluters' tax" and, worse, to promise to convert at least 100,000 acres of sugar farms back into swamp. When Alfy Fanjul made his infamous call to the White House on President's Day, he was apoplectic. "Alfy felt betrayed," says a lobbyist who asked not to be identified. "He'd campaigned for Clinton, delivered a lot of votes, and here was Gore paying him back with a tax. Alfy was actually bitching [Clinton] out. Just yelling." Too late. Although the White House dropped the "polluters' tax," the idea had already gained enough momentum to appear on a statewide ballot initiative in 1996. With \$13 million in funds, much of it from wealthy donors, a group called Save Our Everglades (SOE) campaigned on the theme of sugar's greed: surely an industry with subsidized profits of a nickel a pound could spare a penny to fix its own mess. The Fanjuls made especially plump targets, with their sumptuous Palm Beach lifestyle, their crass campaign spending, and their foreignness. With months to go till the election, polls showed the industry twenty-five points down and headed for a slaughter.

But again, opponents had misjudged sugar's adaptive powers. In *Striptease*, when the Rojo sugar empire is threatened by a blackmailer, the brothers simply hire hit men and have the body thrown into Lake Okeechobee. In real life, sugar's hired guns were strictly political, but they attacked the environmentalists with the same single-minded intensity. Armed with \$23 million in PAC money, sugar companies launched a sophisticated media campaign that painted the initiative as a radical

move that would kill jobs and raise everyone's taxes. Latino newspapers and radio were filled with ads comparing one of the initiative's wealthy backers with Castro. Jesse Jackson was brought in to tell black voters that the tax was "a showdown between alligators and people." Seniors and condo dwellers were bused to the cane fields for "informational" tours and a free lunch. Voters heard how the measure would raise property taxes throughout the state, even though the sugar tax applied only to sugar farmers within the EAA. But no blow was too low. When sugar executives learned of a \$1,000-a-plate SOE fund-raiser at Miami's Fairchild Tropical Garden, U.S. Sugar announced plans to bus in a thousand workers for a \$1-a-plate hot-dog dinner on an adjacent lot, forcing environmentalists to cancel. In the final three weeks, sugar outspent its opponents seven to one with a \$5.2 million ad blitz. On Election Day, voters crushed the initiative in what a Fort Lauderdale Sun Sentinel editorial called "a triumph of disinformation" and "voter confusion, most of it deliberately created by the two largest sugar growers."

Part 11

... With less than twenty-four hours till the refinery opening, Clewiston's atmosphere grows positively manic. Tear-shaped, candy-colored rental cars from West Palm Beach and Miami fill the streets. Upstairs in a conference room of the Clewiston Inn, a white-columned treasure where U.S. Sugar puts up visiting dignitaries, I sit down to an enormous platter of sugar cookies with a crowd of sugar-industry officials. Among them are Moira Saucer and Dr. Charles Baker, of the Sugar Association, Inc., a trade group devoted to defending sugar's nutritional reputation from zealots, which, apparently, is a full-time job. The previous week a consumer group reported that American teenage boys drink twenty-eight ounces of "sugary" sodas every day. Saucer is affronted. "There's no sugar in soft drinks - it's all high-fructose corn syrup now," she says, indignantly. "But no one's bashing corn syrup," adds U.S. Sugar's Judy Sanchez. "Reporters skim a book, write a sensational headline, then move on to the next story," continues Saucer. "You tell people that sugar gives you an insulin spike, without ever telling them that that's a normal reaction," says Sanchez. "And it's not even a spike," interjects Dr. Baker. "It's really more of a curve."

Over the next hour I am made to understand that sucrose is good for you, or at least no worse than other sweeteners, at least in moderation, and, in any case, Americans aren't eating anywhere near as much of it as is claimed by the industry's critics, who blame sugar for hyperactivity, diabetes, obesity, and a host of other ailments. The truth is more complex. It's true that sucrose is no different nutritionally from other simple sugars, such as glucose or fructose, or from any of the other "healthy" sweeteners, such as honey. All are simple carbohydrates and provide four calories per gram. And although there are taste differences - fructose, for example, is considerably sweeter than sucrose - all are employed by the body to supply energy. What's more, despite years of insistence that sugar directly causes hyperactivity or diabetes, these contentions simply haven't been borne out in recent, large-scale studies.

Still, the medical community has serious reservations about sugar's nutritional impact. Unlike complex carbohydrates such as breads, simple sugars provide calories without any other nutrients. Moreover, although sugar intake has not been found to directly cause obesity, the role that sweeteners play in food preference and the ways that sweeteners combine with other high-calorie foods, especially fats, suggest that our rising consumption of sweeteners and our growing girth may not be entirely unrelated. In fact, while the USDA recommends no more than 12 teaspoons (48 grams) of sugars daily for adults, Americans consume four times that amount, an increase of 27 percent over 1970. Ironically, after decades of health fads and low- and no-sugar foods, Americans

eat more sweets now than at any time in history - in part because they're easier to get but mainly because, over the past half-century, food companies have steadily raised both the level of sugar in individual products and the number of sweetened products. One fifth of the calories in a can of corn comes from sugars; two fifths in a jar of Prego; one half in Campbell's Tomato Soup; and 94 percent in a bottle of ketchup.

To be sure, food makers add sweetener not simply to entice us with taste but because sugar has miraculous powers as a food additive. It highlights other flavors and gives bulk and texture to cakes and cookies, for example, and viscosity, or "mouth feel," to beverages. Heated, sugar caramelizes, producing a pleasing odor and adding a lustrous, golden-brown color to even the palest microwavable entrees. Sugar blends superbly with fat, reducing its unseemly tendency to coat the mouth.

Of course, sugar's real power is and always has been the almost automatic hold it has on human taste. The higher the sugar content in a particular food, the more we like it, and the more of it we will consume in lab tests - at least until content exceeds 12 percent, which is too sweet for most adults (though not for most children, who happily tolerate concentrations in excess of 20 percent). Craving is so systematic that researchers long suspected a physical mechanism: after observing the way recovering heroin addicts crave sweets, investigators demonstrated that sweeteners stimulate the release of endorphins, the body's painkillers, in rats, and they suspect a similar reaction in humans.

Sugar, in other words, is a mild drug, a natural, relatively safe drug, to be sure, but one whose main effect on humans - causing them to want more of it and to take action to get it - is becoming ever more central to the marketing strategies of food companies. Snack makers, for example, know that products aimed at children can be considerably sweeter than those for adults; bakers know that certain cultures, like the Hispanic, prefer breads with higher levels of sweetener. More significantly, food makers know that once consumers are accustomed to the presence of sweetener in foods not traditionally sweetened, such as corn chips or meat products, the unsweetened version tastes absolutely bland. Whatever else one can predict about the emerging mass-produced, fast-food cuisine that increasingly dominates the Western diet, it will be sweeter. All of which helps explain the smiles among sugar company executives, who can, according to USDA estimates, look forward to a domestic demand that will rise 16 percent over the next ten years - or about twice the rate of population growth.

Part 12

... The day of the grand opening dawns clear and hot, and by 10:00 a.m., the grounds of the new refinery are sweltering. Near the plant the refrigerated circus tent is jammed with industry officials and guests. Snatches of "Sugar Sugar" blare over the PA but are mostly drowned out by the roaring crowd, which swells every few minutes as another group returns from tours of the refinery to join the sugar illuminati under the tent. There, by a table of cookies, for example, is Republican John Thrasher, new speaker-elect of the state house and one of sugar's most important allies.

Hobnobbing with Thrasher is Democrat Alcee Hastings, an impeached federal judge and current south Florida congressman who has received \$42,250 in sugar money since 1991 and is among its more eloquent defenders. Nearby is Republican Congressman Mark Foley, recipient of \$76,470. Vainly, I scan the crowd for Senator Bob Graham (\$53,450) or the Fanjuls, but I only turn up

Dominicis, who gives me a faint smile. Taking a seat next to a smirking news cameraman, I resign myself to one of America's most cherished cultural forms - the factory-opening ceremony.

To a suddenly hushed crowd, the beautiful Sarah Scheffler, a former Miss Sugar, stands and belts out the National Anthem. Scheffler's voice is smooth and sweet, the perfect preface to the saccharine rhetoric to come. One after another, company executives, lobbyists, and congressmen extol the virtues of family, farming, and, above all, teamwork, whether in the cane fields or in the capitol. At one point, company lobbyist Robert Coker nearly swoons while describing sugar's part in the just concluded legislative session in Tallahassee - "the most pro-business legislature in twenty-five years." But the prize goes to Fairbanks, the company's gritty, scripture-reading CEO, who, without the least hesitation, boasts how the sugar industry has entered a new era of competition, unfettered by "government subsidies or intervention."

Even here, in this intensely partisan crowd, I'm astonished by the claim. As everyone in the big tent today surely knows, America's sugar industry is among the most subsidized on the planet, enjoying a domestic price of 22 cents a pound while producers in much of the rest of the world get about 8 cents. Each year, critics say, the federal sugar program not only adds \$1.4 billion to consumers' bills but funnels some \$560 million of it back to domestic producers, who then funnel some back to Congress, which ensures the program's reauthorization under the once-every-six-years Farm Bill. It's a classic political love triangle, obscenely lucrative for the big corporate farms - Florida Crystals makes an extra \$64 million annually under the program, followed closely by U.S. Sugar, at \$55 million-but also sweet enough to keep even smaller farmers on marginal lands in business. By one congressional estimate, one sixth of Florida's cane farms would fail without the program - a point not lost on those who think sugar should never have come to the Everglades in the first place. No surprise then that critics, like Senator Charles Schumer of New York, have long targeted the subsidy as "one of the most invidious, inefficient, Byzantine, special-interest, Depression-era federal programs."

Part 13

... Sugar companies insist that the sugar program isn't really a subsidy per se, since it costs taxpayers nothing. They reject critics' estimates of added consumer costs, and it is true that even though the program adds \$1.4 billion a year to consumer food prices, that's only about \$5.19 per consumer. Sugar companies also point out, correctly, that most of the program's biggest critics are also the biggest buyers of sugar - food makers like Hershey, Kraft, Mars, Nabisco, Proctor & Gamble, and Wrigley's - companies that hate the high domestic price of sugar but would be very unlikely, in its absence, to pass along the savings to consumers. As for the program itself, we're told, sugar makers need protection from underpriced imported sugar, which is either heavily subsidized by foreign governments or simply costs less to make overseas because foreign planters face fewer environmental or labor laws. "The so-called world price of sugar," argues Dominicis, "is nothing more than a spot market for heavily subsidized dumped foreign sugars." As such, sugar companies argue, the federal program protects sugar jobs - 420,000, by industry accounts - and consumer pocketbooks: both times the United States abandoned its sugar program in recent history, 1974 and 1980, world prices skyrocketed to the highest levels ever.

These are lame arguments. Yes, food makers hate the program, and yes, the program costs consumers little, at least directly. Yet the notion that the program protects us from price spikes is boldly disingenuous. In both 1974 and 1980, the price spikes were caused by worldwide shortages

and occurred before Congress killed the sugar program, which it did because, with prices so high, U.S. sugar makers needed no protection. When prices fell, lawmakers quickly restarted the program. Furthermore, although foreign sugar is heavily subsidized, these handouts don't distort the world price nearly as much as the industry claims. When analysts factor in all sugar programs worldwide, the adjusted world price is around 16 cents a pound - or about a nickel less than American consumers are forced to pay.

Granted, many foreign growers also benefit from lax regulations. But often their biggest advantages are nothing more "unfair" than a warmer climate, like Brazil's, or a more efficient industry, as in Australia. For when all is said and done, America, even semitropical southeastern America, is simply not the best place to grow cane sugar, and it shows. Whereas U.S. cane producers spend \$375 producing a metric ton of raw sugar, Australians, with their better soils and climate and greater investment in breeding, milling, and shipping technologies, spend just \$255 per ton. "Paying lavish subsidies to produce sugar in Florida makes as much sense as creating a federal subsidy program to grow bananas in Massachusetts," quips James Bovard of the virulently anti-subsidy Cato Institute. "The only thing that could make American sugarcane farmers competitive would be massive global warming."

In fact, the sugar program was created to defend sugar growers not just from unscrupulous foreigners but also from their own greed and miscalculations. The current program, for example, was created after the 1974 price spike encouraged farmers to plant too many new acres, which ultimately flooded the market and killed prices. To rescue overextended U.S. growers, Texas Democrat E. "Kika" de la Garza, chair of the House Agricultural Committee, pushed through guaranteed loans for sugar farmers. Under the program, government financed each year's crop, basing the loan amount on the projected sale price. If government pegged future sugar prices at, say, 13.5 cents a pound, farmers were guaranteed that rate for their crop. If market prices fell short, the farmer could forfeit his crop to the government instead of paying off the loan, leaving the government to recoup its losses by selling the sugar when prices improved. But this sweet deal had a bonus: when forfeiting, the farmer paid the government neither interest nor the expense of marketing the crop - costs that typically add 2.5 cents a pound. Thus, if the guaranteed loan rate were 13.5 cents, the market price would need to exceed 16 cents before the farmer had any incentive to sell his own sugar. Anything under 16 cents, and a farmer made more money forfeiting.

The deal gets even sweeter. Lawmakers initially set loan prices too high, forcing the government to buy several hundred thousand tons of forfeited sugar in 1977 and 1978. But rather than reduce the loan rate - a political impossibility - the government tried instead to keep the market price above the forfeiture level via an even more brazen protectionist move: restricting sugar imports. This, too, proved disastrous. Trade officials routinely misread the sugar market. In 1985 trade officials let in too much foreign sugar, killing domestic prices and prompting the forfeiture of 430,000 tons of sugar - which the government eventually had to sell, to China, for 5 cents a pound. When Reagan then slashed imports to help American producers, he starved American refiners, who depended on raw-sugar imports, driving half of them out of business.

None of this pain was felt by sugar growers. Of the 430,000 tons forfeited in 1985, for example, some 300,000 came from Florida Crystals and U.S. Sugar, for whom forfeiting sugar was simply more profitable than selling it. That same year Florida Crystals was able to buy out a rival sugar company's holdings in the Dominican Republic. The deal netted the Fanjuls half of the

island's sugar lands and, significantly, half of the island's U.S. import quota, which meant that the Fanjuls could grow sugar on the cheap but sell it in the high-priced U.S. market. In other words, after complaining about how foreign producers exploited cheap labor and lax environmental laws, Florida Crystals would be doing exactly the same thing itself.

Part 14

... The federal sugar program is, without question, liberalism at its worst: a well-intended venture that has outlived its usefulness, warped the political system, and is helping to destroy a unique environment. And yet each time reformers try to remove or even reduce the program, they're outmaneuvered by a political entity that is willing to craft alliances whenever and with whomever it needs to. Tobacco and peanut farmers support sugar because sugar always comes to their aid. Corn farmers defend sugar because a high price for sugar means fantastic profits for makers of more cheaply produced high-fructose corn syrup. Unions support sugar because labor believes that without the program sugar jobs go overseas. Together, they and their congressional representatives form a voting bloc that no reformer, committee chair, or even president can afford to cross. When Reagan tried to limit the program in 1981, sugar interests, led by Louisiana Democrat Congressman John Breaux, stopped him cold by threatening to scuttle the Gipper's budget. "I can't be bought," Breaux cackled later, "but I can be rented." And when Senate opponents tried again in 1990, Florida's Bob Graham, in a deft bit of environmental blackmail, convinced his colleagues that without the loans Florida's cane growers would not be able to honor an earlier commitment to pay for half the cleanup costs in the Everglades. (Six weeks after Graham saved the program, sugar companies backpedaled, insisting they'd pay only a tenth of the cleanup costs. Graham later claimed that the industry's promises had been "informal.")

All this pales in comparison to the antics during the Farm Bill of 1995 - a year that, by conventional political measures, should have seen the sugar program's death. Environmental anger over the Everglades had merged with the antigovernmental zeal of the newly Republican Congress, which targeted "corporate welfare" and farm subsidies as major evils. Sugar refiners had also broken ranks with sugar growers, joining with candy makers, free-traders, and environmentalists in a large, well-funded coalition to defeat the sugar program. By May 1995 two of sugar's biggest critics - Democrat Schumer of New York (whose then congressional district contained a refinery) and Republican Dan Miller (from a caneless district in Florida) - had recruited forty-seven Democrats and seventy-one Republicans to cosponsor a five-year phaseout of the program, then persuaded Pat Roberts, House agriculture chair, to add their amendment to that holiest of political holies - the Farm Bill.

Sugar didn't blink. Companies poured \$2 million into congressional coffers, then launched a brilliant, no-holds-barred P.R. campaign. At congressional hearings, lobbyists shamelessly trotted out charts showing the bogus link between program cancellation and the price spikes of 1974 and '80. They hired Bonner & Associates, a Washington-based firm that specializes in defending distasteful issues with phony, or "astroturf," grassroots campaigns. Bonner bombarded lawmakers with scripted calls and letters from "voters" urging support of the sugar program and even claimed, in many cases falsely, that the program had support from civic groups and churches.

Over the fall of 1995, reform fizzled. In the House Agriculture Committee, sugar's farm allies threatened to sink the entire Farm Bill unless sugar was exempted. Such a prospect horrified Republicans, who were desperate to give presidential candidate Bob Dole at least one

legislative accomplishment going into the primaries. Faced with revolt on his own committee, agriculture chair Roberts caved, exempting sugar from the Farm Bill and forcing a separate vote. On February 28, 1996, the Miller-Schumer bill lost by five votes. Humiliatingly, six of the nays came from Miller-Schumer's original cosponsors.⁹ Miller blames sugar money, but he also criticizes Clinton, who - perhaps still smarting from Fanjul's phone call ten days earlier - didn't lobby House Democrats. According to Miller, House minority leader Dick Gephardt even pressured Schumer "to stay away from the issue in order for the Democrats to pick up more seats. I don't think the White House had much interest in reforming the sugar program."

Miller was crushed. The sugar program had escaped with only minor modifications, and industry was not feeling especially magnanimous in victory. When the two-term Republican congressman returned home for his own successful reelection bid, he found his office picketed by growers, then heard rumors that the industry was offering any politician who would challenge Miller \$500,000 in campaign funding. Sugar's allies, meanwhile, were shameless. "I ain't no Johnnie Cochran," crowed Republican Senator Larry Craig of Idaho, who received \$59,602 from sugar that congressional session, "but I can defend the sugar program."

For the time being, such defense seems unnecessary. The next Farm Bill isn't reauthorized until 2002 at the earliest, and reform efforts in the meantime seem unlikely. Even after paring back their reform measure, Miller and Schumer saw bills in 1997 and 1998 defeated by even larger margins, as erstwhile allies mysteriously lost interest. "It was blatant," says one reform staffer who asks not to be identified. "We would be talking to a member and be told that, because the anti-sugar coalition hadn't been very generous with contributions this time, they were going to vote with sugar."

In Florida, it's the same story. In 1998, sugar lobbyists hammered through a variety of pro-sugar bills, including one to give state lawmakers line-item control over all future restoration efforts - in essence, handing the issue once again to the one legislative body most in sugar's pocket. In the end, Governor Chiles vetoed the bills, but only after weathering yet another phony grass-roots call-in campaign. At the time, Chiles's office reported receiving hundreds of calls from people "who sounded confused or uncertain, and [our operators could hear] people in the background coaching them." When questioned, callers admitted that they were cane-field workers, adding that "they had been told by their employer they would lose their jobs" if the bills were vetoed.

Whether newly elected governor Jeb Bush will continue the tradition of sugar toady is yet to be seen. This summer, Bush surprised environmentalists by arguing for a phosphorus standard of 10 ppb - lower than industry had asked for. At the same time, however, Bush has fought to keep all enforcement of that standard at the state level. And as for the sugar growers themselves, although the new refinery signals that U.S. Sugar is here for a while, Florida Crystals' long-term strategy has never been as certain. The topsoil on its farms was thinner to begin with and thus far more vulnerable to subsidence. That, say critics, makes it far more likely that the family will farm until the land no longer supports sugar; then they will sell their acreage to developers and move offshore, a threat the Fanjuls have been making for years.

Part 15: Conclusion

.... The swamp itself has no such escape clause. Although a federal judge is expected to rule sometime this year on a deadline for the state to issue a phosphorus standard, it's not clear how such

a standard will be met. In tests small filtration marshes have cut phosphorus levels in outflow waters down to 20 ppb - still twice the recommended level - but federal and state scientists expect the effectiveness to drop sharply as the superexpensive filters saturate with phosphorus.

Even gloomier are prospects for a restoration of historic water flows. Despite all the bravado Gore displayed as he presented the administration's plan to Congress in July - "after three years of work, we now have a final plan that is terrific for the environment, terrific for communities, terrific for business, and saves a world and national treasure" - the plan gets poor marks from Everglades scientists. Researchers praise the goal of removing some 240 of the 1,800 miles of levees and canals. But because the plan would convert just 50,000 acres (rather than the recommended 150,000 to 200,000 acres) of sugar farms into rain reservoirs, scientists say it fails to reconnect Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades, or reverse the cycle of drought and flood that have pushed the swamp into a coma. As a result, the various chunks of the remaining pristine Everglades - the national park, several state preserves, and the lands owned by the Micousoukee tribe - now exist in a kind of eco - competition, fighting to get enough water in the dry season and avoid it in the wet season. In a report last year, the science staff at Everglades National Park rejected the plan because it "largely retains the fragmented management and compartmentalization characterizing today's Everglades." The staff found "insufficient evidence" to suggest that the Clinton plan would bring "recovery of a healthy, sustainable ecosystem" and, in fact, found "substantial, credible and compelling evidence to the contrary."

Still, if the plan is not exactly what doctors ordered for a sickly ecosystem, it truly is, as Gore notes, "terrific for business." In a deftly timed move to help the struggling presidential contender woo Florida's politically powerful development lobby, the Clinton plan guarantees the urban southeast coast enough water for roughly twice its current population - even while depriving the Everglades of sufficient water in the dry season. "They've turned 'restoration' into a huge water-supply project," gripes Joe Browder, Washington environmental consultant and a longtime Everglades advocate. And, of course, sugar companies just love the Clinton plan, since it won't cost them a dime, doesn't interrupt their irrigation or drainage regimens, takes only a small chunk of farmland, and, best of all, makes it considerably easier to sell the public at large on the concept that the Everglades "problem" is being taken care of. This summer, less than two weeks after Gore sent his \$8 billion restoration plan to Congress, President Clinton wrapped up his inner-city tour by jetting down to tony Coral Gables for a \$25,000-per-couple Democratic fund-raiser. The host was none other than Alfy Fanjul, who was probably in a cackling good mood, knowing that all the talk of a substantial change in the Everglades status quo had been just that - talk - and that, at least for America's sugar barons, it would be business as usual for the foreseeable future. During a newspaper interview, Fanjul opined that Bill Clinton had been "a great president."

Out in the swamp Freddy Fisikelli points his airboat northward. We pass an old fishing camp - essentially, a mobile home on stilts, with two airboats tied out front and four men sitting on the deck, drinking beer and staring at us. No one is fishing. Fisikelli waves and cruises by, moving slowly, keeping the big V-8 quiet enough for conversation. He tells me how he used to want to be a cowboy, back in the 1930s and '40s, when cattle, not cane, was king in the Everglades. He talks about hunting for duck and deer and boar, and how he first began to notice the changes - the dwindling numbers of birds and animals, the bizarrely huge vegetation, even the way the swamp had begun to smell. Fisikelli falls silent for a moment. Up ahead, still out of sight, is a massive floodgate known as S-10, which lets out water from the farms into the Water Conservation Areas.

Phosphorus around S-10 has been measured as high as 500 ppb, and the closer we come to the floodgate, the more the saw grass gives way to cattails, many of them incredibly tall from the overly fertilized soils below. Fisikelli eases back on the throttle and lets the boat drift on the molasses-slow current. I peer over the edge of the airboat. The water is murkier here, and the minnows are gone. "Smell that?" he asks. The once-fresh breeze is now tainted with the slightly sulfuric scent of rot, as the overabundant cattails die and decompose. Fisikelli shakes his head, then slowly turns the boat around, and heads back south, toward cleaner water and away from the smell of money.