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OP-ED GUEST COLUMNIST

Final Days Fire Sale

By **TIMOTHY EGAN**

Imagine if President Bush, on his last day in office, invited his friends to lift the Lincoln portrait from the White House Dining Room, take the 18th-century furniture from the Map Room and — for good measure — poison the Rose Garden on the way out.

In essence, he is doing the same thing this month with land that belongs to every American — the magical redrock country of the Southwest.

Well before it was a bumper sticker and a chant at Sarah Palin rallies, “drill, baby, drill” became the overriding mission of the political hacks who oversee more than 200 million acres of public land for Bush. At a frantic pace, they have opened up to oil and gas leasing canyons of golden slickrock, mesas once known only to hunters and pronghorn antelope, and little hideaways near the open-aired art galleries of the Anasazi.

Take what you want, they said — and get while the getting is good. It was a plunderfest that produced a gangster culture, with dozens of high-level Interior Department employees exchanging sex, cocaine and gifts with the industry they were supposed to be doing arms-length business with, according to a scathing and quickly forgotten report this year by the agency’s inspector general.

At the time of the report, with gas reaching \$4 a gallon, many people shrugged and said we need the oil — drill, baby, drill. Now gas is selling for a pittance, but that hasn’t stopped the fire sale. Everything must go!

On Election Day, the Bush administration announced it would open 360,000 acres of public land in Utah to oil and gas leasing, including about 100,000 acres near Arches and Canyonlands National Parks, and Dinosaur National Monument.

As with the \$700 billion bailout that Bush insisted had to be given to the very bankers, insurance companies and other tassel-loafed failures who got us into the economic meltdown, the president now wants every dead-ender in the energy business to have one last treat.

Solitude and ageless stone may not be commodities as easily quantified as a couple of thousand barrels of oil. But to the American inheritance, they are the equivalent of those first-edition Audubon books and presidential portraits in the White House.

The administration never even consulted with the parks before announcing they would have oil and gas rigs on their borders.

The giveaways went far beyond public land. For the coal industry, the parting gift was a federal rule that

makes it easier to dump mining waste into streams. Anyone who has spent time in Appalachia of late has seen the handiwork — entire mountaintops lopped off in an end-of-days rush for a dirty fossil fuel.

On Thursday, Bush handed out another goodie: a rule that largely frees federal agencies from having to consult independent biologists before constructing something that could lead to the extinction of birds, fish or other endangered species.

Following a storm of outrage by park officials and the incoming Obama team, the government has now backed off from some of the more egregious sales in the Southwest. But on the upcoming Friday before Christmas, it will still auction off more than 150,000 acres near some of the most stunning scenery in the world.

In a concession, officials promised that oil and gas operations would be camouflaged — the rigs and drills painted a desert red so that visitors to the wildlands of Utah would not have industrial clutter marring their sunset picture.

It would be one thing if we needed the fuel. Of nearly 9,000 oil and gas permits approved on public land in Utah, barely a third of them have been drilled. The way this game works is that oil companies buy the leasing rights — in some case for as little as \$2.50 an acre — then wait for Saudi Arabia to force another oil price spike. Then they drill.

And the impact on price or domestic supply? Nothing. Even if all the accessible oil and gas were taken from federal land in Utah, it would have zero impact on prices, according to several studies.

But the loss is incalculable — “geologic architecture that has inspired our American character,” and places where “the curvature of the earth is not only seen but felt,” as the ever-lyrical Terry Tempest Williams wrote in a recent essay in *The Los Angeles Times*.

So why do it? Because they still can. The only urgency is Jan. 20.

Eight years ago, in an act of frat-boy vandalism during their departure from the White House, members of Bill Clinton’s staff ripped W’s off computer keyboards and glued shut some shelves. If only Bush could revert to his college character type, and leave us with such a benign exit mark.

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My column of Dec. 7 incorrectly attributed a quote to Winston Churchill. It was George Orwell who said, “Writing a book is a horrible, exhaustive struggle, like a long bout of some painful illness.”

Maureen Dowd is off today.

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