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GREENING THE GHETTO

Can a remedy serve for both global warming and poverty?

by Elizabeth Kolbert January 12, 2009



Van Jones: building an “everybody movement.”
Photograph by Phil Toledano.

A few months ago, Van Jones, the founder and president of a group called Green for All, went to visit New Bedford, Massachusetts. His first stop of the day was the public library, where someone had assembled an audience of about thirty high-school dropouts. They leaned back in their chairs, hands in the pockets of their oversized sweatshirts. A few appeared to be stoned.

Jones, who is forty, is tall and imposing, with a shaved head and a patchy goatee. He wears rimless glasses and favors dark clothing. On this particular day, he was wearing a black turtleneck, black jeans, black boots, and a charcoal jacket. He was introduced by a community

organizer and aspiring rapper, who described him as “a leader with answers,” a “genius from the hood, similar to our own,” and a youthful version of Barack Obama. When it was his turn to speak, Jones rejected the lectern that had been set up for him, saying that it reminded him too much of college.

“I love Barack Obama,” he said. “I’d pay money just to shine the brother’s shoes. But I’ll tell you this. Do you hear me? One man is not going to save us. I don’t care who that man is. He’s not going to save us. And, in fact, if you want to be real about this—can y’all take it? I’m going to be real with y’all. Not only is Barack Obama not going to be able to save you—you are going to have to save Barack Obama.”

Jones went on to discuss the crisis on Wall Street, the federal budget deficit—“We’re going broke by the second”—and how annoying it can be to listen to people who use a lot of fancy words. “People who know a lot talk weird,” he said. “So you can spend a lot of time listening to people who are educated, and all you get is frustrated, because what they’re saying doesn’t actually land with you. Well, boohoo. Get over it.”

A hundred and fifty years ago, New Bedford was the whaling capital of the world. “Nowhere in all America will you find more patrician-like houses; parks and gardens more opulent, than in New Bedford,” Melville wrote. Today, the town is filled with empty factories. Its long list of problems—failing schools, high unemployment, gang violence—make it just the sort of place Jones

likes to work in. The logo of Green for All, which is based in Oakland, California, is a sun rising over a crowded cityscape. The group's goal is to broaden the appeal of the environmental movement and, at the same time, bring jobs to poor neighborhoods. Jones often says that he is trying to "green the ghetto."

In the library, a few of the kids had started to lean forward in their seats. Others had taken their hands out of their pockets. Some were still staring, dazedly, into the middle distance. Jones brought his talk around to the subject of energy.

"I don't want to offend anybody. I might be too radical for you. Are you with me?" he asked.

"Just being real," a young woman called out.

"They can now put up wind turbines—almost like a windmill, but this is not your mama's windmill, it's like a big jet engine sitting up there—and make power," Jones said. "Somebody's going to make a billion dollars deploying that technology. I think it should be you.

"They have this thing called solar panels," he continued. "A solar panel is a piece of glass almost. Right now wealthy people can put that on their homes. And it costs money to put it up there, but once it's up the sunlight hits it and it turns it into electricity and powers the house. So you're paying electricity bills, but somebody else is kicking it. Somebody's going to make a million dollars figuring out a way to get those solar panels made and deployed in our hoods. I think it should be you."

After he was through, Jones made his way out into the nearly empty downtown. "That was my street rap," he told me. "You get to hear my elite rap later on."

The modern environmental movement is sometimes said to have begun in the eighteen-nineties, when John Muir founded the Sierra Club, and sometimes in the nineteen-sixties, when Rachel Carson published "Silent Spring." Muir and Carson saw themselves fighting narrow, private interests on behalf of the public in the broadest possible sense—all people, including those who had not been born. But stop by a meeting of any of the major environmental groups, and you will see that the broad American public has yet to join up. Chances are that most of the attendees will be white, and the few who aren't will be affluent and middle-aged. A 2006 study commissioned by Earthjustice, a nonprofit environmental-law group, found that the "ecological base"—defined as Americans who report the environment as being central to their concerns—is "nearly ninety percent white, mostly college-educated, higher-income, and over thirty-five."

"Your goal has to be to get the greenest solutions to the poorest people," Jones told me. "That's the only goal that's morally compelling enough to generate enough energy to pull this transition off. The challenge is making this an everybody movement, so your main icons are Joe Six-Pack—Joe the Plumber—becoming Joe the Solar Guy, or that kid on the street corner putting down his handgun, picking up a caulk gun."

After leaving the New Bedford public library, Jones went to talk to Scott Lang, the city's mayor. Lang began the meeting by tossing a few sheets of what looked like plastic on the table. These turned out to be thin-film photovoltaic cells, of the sort that could be sewn into a backpack and used to power a laptop. The Mayor explained that the company that manufactures the cells had recently decided to open a factory in New Bedford, and that the factory could eventually provide a hundred jobs. Jones brightened.

"This could really be something that brings people together, across the lines of class and color," Jones said. He suggested that Lang set up some sort of program to take teen-agers like the ones he had

just met and guide them into some of the jobs at the factory. (Many of the teens were working toward high-school-equivalency degrees as part of a program in which they were also supposed to be learning carpentry skills.) Lang, a former prosecutor, said, “Anything we try and do in the city right now is geared toward everyone being involved.” But he didn’t seem terribly keen on Jones’s idea of a program exclusively for teens. Jones pressed him. The teen-agers, he said, “feel not seen. I think they need special encouragement. I would love to see a mayor’s initiative to get those young people into this green economy.” The Mayor tried to steer the discussion in a new direction. Jones pressed him again.

“I’m willing to meet people halfway or more,” Lang finally said. That evening, at another event, Jones ran into the young man who had introduced him at the meeting in the library. Jones told him that the Mayor was interested in working with him. When I mentioned to Jones that this was not my impression of what the Mayor had indicated, he said, “I’m not looking for the points of difference. I’m looking for the points of commonality. I’ve trained my mind so that people can say twenty-seven things that might be objectionable, but as soon as they say one, that twenty-eighth thing, that’s in the right direction, that’s where I’m going to go in the conversation. I think that’s really important in a country as diverse as ours, to listen. So this guy, he says, I don’t want this, I don’t want that. But he says, I want everybody to be included. Well, that’s all I need. *Dayenu*.”

Van Jones, born Anthony Jones, grew up in Jackson, Tennessee, a small town about ninety miles east of Memphis. His father was a junior-high-school principal and his mother was a high-school teacher. His grandfather was the leader of the Christian Methodist—formerly Colored Methodist—Episcopal Church. As a child, Jones was, by his own description, “bookish and bizarre.” When his parents gave him Luke Skywalker and Han Solo action figures, instead of arranging them to fight he would have them run for imaginary public offices. His twin sister, Angela, remembers him as “the stereotypical geek—he just kind of lived up in his head a lot.” During the summers, Jones accompanied his grandfather to religious conferences, where he recalls sitting “in these hot, sweaty black churches,” listening to the adults talk, all day and into the night.

After high school, Jones enrolled at the University of Tennessee at Martin. The first day of his freshman year, he decided that he needed a new identity, or, at least, a new name. Anthony Jones was dull. He chose Van because, he told me, “it has a little touch of nobility, but at the same time it’s not overboard.” Jones majored in communications and political science and, thinking that he wanted to become a journalist, interned for a couple of newspapers. The experience convinced him that he was on the wrong career path. In 1990, he enrolled at Yale Law School.

While he was living in New Haven, Jones saw a lot of things that disturbed him. One was the video of the Rodney King beating, which took place during his second semester. Another was crime. “I was seeing kids at Yale do drugs and talk about it openly, and have nothing happen to them or, if anything, get sent to rehab,” he said. “And then I was seeing kids three blocks away, in the housing projects, doing the same drugs, in smaller amounts, go to prison.” Upon graduating, Jones moved to San Francisco and set up the Bay Area PoliceWatch, a hot line for complaints of police misconduct. It was soon receiving fifteen calls a day.

In 1996, Willie Brown became San Francisco’s first African-American mayor. Most of the city’s black leaders had spent years working with Brown, and wanted to support him. Jones, as he put it, “didn’t know Willie Brown from a can of paint, and didn’t care.” Sensing an opening for someone

“young and entrepreneurial,” he founded a civil-rights organization, which he named for Ella Baker, who helped form the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

In its early years, the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights consisted of a closet-like office and a computer that Jones had brought from his apartment. John Anner, who later became the chairman of the center’s board of directors, recalls going to visit the operation one day and discovering that “it was really just Van.” The first case the center took up was that of a young black man named Aaron Williams, who had died in police custody. (Williams, a burglary suspect, had been kicked and beaten by a group of cops.) One of the officers involved in the incident had a history of complaints against him. Jones led the fight—eventually successful—to get the officer fired.

Looking back at that time, Jones describes his modus operandi as “traditional activism, the politics of confrontation and outrage. I was proud to be hated by the city fathers on both sides of the Bay.” He was constantly seeking an opportunity to hold a news conference or stage a protest, and, more often than not, managed to find one. California has a sprawling—and, by many accounts, inhumane—juvenile-incarceration system; Jones argued that the state should be putting more money into schools and community programs, and less into prisons. His arguments were compelling enough that by 2000 the center was able to hire five more full-time employees.

That year, Jones learned about a plan to construct a five-hundred-and-forty-bed juvenile-detention center some twenty miles east of Oakland, in Dublin. The new center was being billed as a way to improve conditions for youthful offenders; Jones thought that it would simply result in that many more (mostly black) teen-agers being locked up. The official name for the project was the Alameda County Juvenile Justice Center. Jones concluded that the way to block the project was to give it a new name. He began to call it a “superjail for kids.” The campaign to “Stop the Superjail” soon took off. A meeting of the California Board of Corrections was derailed by several dozen teen-agers who performed raps opposing the project. Another meeting, of the Alameda County Board of Supervisors, was disrupted when a group of teens sat down in front of the dais and refused to leave. (“If I hear those kids one more time chanting ‘Books not bars,’ I’m going to scream,” one member of the board complained.)

Gavin Newsom was elected mayor of San Francisco in 2003. He remembers meeting with Jones and other community leaders shortly after he took office, to discuss recent incidents of police brutality. Jones left the meeting early, but before doing so he told Newsom off. “I will never forget being infuriated by him—totally outraged—and completely mesmerized,” Newsom recalled. “It was quite a performance. Arguably, that’s his genius. He’s successful at getting into the minds or under the skin—depending on how you want to analyze it—of politicians. And the only way you can do that is there’s got to be some truth in the critique.”

Around this time, as Jones was winning the “superjail” fight, he began to suffer a crisis of confidence. The crisis was not just professional; some days, he felt barely able to get out of bed. “Nobody does this stuff for pure reasons,” he told me. “You may eventually wind up with a more pure outcome, like a Gandhi or a Mandela, but no young radical is running around with pure motives. I certainly wasn’t motivated only by love for the people. I was trying to find some kind of community, or some kind of sense of belonging, or some sense of redemption through heroic deeds. I wasn’t being honest with myself about it, and it all just proved to be incredibly fragile.”

One day, in this bleak mood, Jones learned about an appearance by Julia Butterfly Hill. Hill had spent two years trying to protect a giant redwood tree by living in its branches, and she was going to speak at a San Francisco bookstore. By this point, Jones had been living in the city for almost a decade, but he realized that, except for the places where he had held protests, he didn't know where anything was. He left himself an hour and a half for the trip to the bookstore, which turned out to be a few blocks from his office.

Listening to Hill that evening, Jones found his gloom lifting. "She was just radiant," he recalled. "She talked about seeing all these trees cut down. She talked about the helicopters they put up, trying to blow her out of the tree. She talked about the timber workers whom she befriended from her perch. And how she won. And what was remarkable was there was not a trace of bitterness in her for these people who had destroyed this forest, and whom she had to spend two years of her life—not two weeks, not two days—putting her body on the line to fight.

"It's great to win these things," he went on. "But there was no guarantee she was going to win, day after day. I was always looking for clever things I could game out, and she just stepped out on faith, and did it. And I was, like, This is a remarkable person. I made a commitment in my own mind that I wanted to do my work like she had done her work. Before that, I was, like, Dr. King? Wimp! But I thought, She's right. That's the only thing that's going to work. And I also knew I had no clue how to get there. I didn't have the internal capacity. So she became this possibility out there."

Jones and Hill eventually became friends. "We fit together like pieces of a puzzle," said Hill, who, after saving the tree, founded a nonprofit group called Circle of Life. "I brought the piece that we are not separate from this planet. His piece was we need to uplift everyone. We were committed to seeing how those pieces fit together." First, the two spoke together in private; then they began to appear together publicly. Sometimes, when Hill was invited to lecture at a college campus, she would ask Jones to come along.

"We could see underneath all of it was the idea of disposability," Jones told me. "The idea that you've got disposable people, a disposable planet. We would just kind of go around and talk about this. People would listen and they would come to one conclusion: they must be sleeping together. We weren't, but it was the only thing anybody got out of it. It was very frustrating."

A few months ago, Jones published a book titled "The Green Collar Economy: How One Solution Can Fix Our Two Biggest Problems." In it, he argues that the best way to fight both global warming and urban poverty is by creating millions of "green jobs"—weatherizing buildings, installing solar panels, and constructing mass-transit systems. A percentage of these jobs—Jones is purposefully vague about how many—should go to the disadvantaged and the chronically unemployed. "The green economy should not be just about reclaiming thrown-away stuff," he writes. "It should be about reclaiming thrown-away communities." Jones's book was slated to appear in 2009, but during the Presidential campaign, when several of the candidates began talking about "green jobs," he decided to advance the publication. The jacket of "The Green Collar Economy" features endorsements from, among others, the talk-show host Tavis Smiley; House Speaker Nancy Pelosi; the journalist Thomas L. Friedman; and former Vice-President Al Gore.

"I love Van Jones," Gore told me. "I love his work. I love his heart and his commitment and his intellect. I love his mission. He has wisely picked a part of this set of interwoven challenges that should have been addressed much more forcefully by me and others long ago."

“Van is a visionary,” Smiley said. “My grandmother had an old saying, ‘It’s just too much like right.’ What Van is saying is just too much like right. It just makes too much sense for us not to do it.”

“I think Van Jones is a big part of the future of environmentalism,” Gus Speth, the dean of Yale’s School of Forestry and Environmental Studies and a co-founder of the Natural Resources Defense Council, told me. “He, more than anyone else, is bringing together a concern about the environment and a concern about social justice. And, if I had just one thing to say, it is that we in the environmental movement cannot fail Van Jones.”

Jones lives in Oakland with his wife, Jana Carter, an employment lawyer, and their two young sons. About half the time, though, he is on the road, trying to build support for his organization and, more recently, his book. A couple of weeks after the trip to New Bedford, he took the red-eye to Washington, D.C., to speak at the Center for American Progress, a liberal think tank founded by John Podesta, who heads Obama’s transition team. More than a hundred and fifty people—mostly white and middle-aged—had showed up to hear him; the room wasn’t big enough, so many had to stand in the hall.

Jones began by talking about the financial crisis. “The floor has been torn out from under the American people,” he said. “That’s the bad news. People are losing their jobs, their homes, their pensions, their 401(k)s. But I know from my personal life sometimes something really bad has to happen before something really good can happen. It’s when you get dumped or fired or fail that test that you have to look at yourself and figure out, What am I going to do now? And we’re at that moment. Sometimes a breakdown can lead to a breakthrough.”

When Jones gives a talk, something he does at least two or three times a week, he likes to begin by checking out the crowd; if he can, he will sit in the audience beforehand, absorbing the mood. He spends a lot of time listening to speeches—the way most people download Coltrane or Mozart, he’s got Churchill and Martin Luther King on his iPod.

“Ronald Reagan I admire greatly,” he once told me. “You look at what he gets away with in a speech—unbelievable. He’s able to take fairly complex prose and convey it in such a natural and conversational way that the beauty of the language and the power of the language are there, but you stay comfortable. That’s very hard to do.”

At the Center for American Progress, Jones offered several proposals for creating green jobs. Most were the sort that have been circulated recently in position papers by liberal groups like CAP (where Jones is a senior fellow) and the Apollo Alliance, a coalition of labor and environmental organizations (where he is a founding board member). One proposal involved a federal revolving-loan program to make buildings more energy efficient.

“You have construction workers who are idle, and they’re going to be idle for twelve months, twenty-four months, thirty-six months,” he said. “They’re not going to be able to build anything. Let them rebuild *everything*. We have people coming home from wars, coming home from prisons, coming out of high school with no job prospects whatsoever. Let us connect the people who most need work with the work that most needs to be done.”

Another proposal involved upgrading the nation’s electrical grid, to allow power generated, for example, by wind turbines in the Midwest to be transmitted to population centers in the Northeast.

“You say, We can’t do it,” he observed. “And I’m going to say, *Au contraire, mon frère*, and I’ll prove my case. We used to have a country, allegedly, but you couldn’t drive across it, because all we

had was a bunch of old dirt roads. Somebody, in the name of national security, said, ‘Hold on a sec. What if we get invaded on the West Coast, how can we get troops from the East Coast?’ So we created an interstate-highway system that connected the country to itself.”

He lowered his voice to a grumble: “ ‘Oh, we can’t afford to do it! This is insane!’ We couldn’t afford *not* to do it. Because the minute you did that the economy went through the roof. It was such a good idea that we did it again. In the name of national security, people in the Pentagon said, ‘If we have one big communications tower, and somebody knocks it out, then we’re blind, deaf, and dumb. We’ve got to figure out a way to distribute our information system.’ So they came up with the idea of the information superhighway—for you young people, that’s what we call the Internet. ‘We can’t afford to do this!’ We couldn’t afford *not* to do it. The minute we connected the country to itself, the economy went through the roof. All we’re saying is, let’s do it again. But this time, instead of connecting the country to itself to move bodies and vehicles or data around, let’s connect the country to itself so we can move clean-energy electrons around. Then you’ve got the strongest economy in the world.”

About five years ago, Jones, thinking about the notion of “disposability,” proposed that the Ella Baker Center broaden its agenda. His new idea was for a program that he named “Green Jobs, Not Jail.” Just about everybody else associated with the center opposed the scheme.

“My concern was that it was something that was just wonderful in a speech, but was it anything we could deliver on?” John Anner, who was then the chairman of the center’s board and now heads a foundation that provides aid in Vietnam, told me. “I knew that there was not a soul at the Ella Baker Center that I would trust to build a birdhouse. They were advocates, not implementers. My job was to guard against mission drift: ‘Oh, we’re a civil-rights organization.’ ‘Oh, we’re an environmental organization.’ Well, what’s next? Are we going to also explore outer space?”

Jones refused to be dissuaded. He began contacting environmental groups. Most were so eager to shed their all-white image that, knowing next to nothing about him, they invited him to speak to their members and put him on the programs of their conferences. He also began applying for grant money, which he planned to use to bring green jobs to Oakland. In 2004, he persuaded a New York-based philanthropy called the Nathan Cummings Foundation to give him two hundred and fifteen thousand dollars.

“We called all these community meetings, did these retreats, and at the end of the day we had some great photographs, a couple of pamphlets, and not one job,” he recalled. “It was a complete and utter failure.” Jones went back to the foundation and asked for another two hundred and fifteen thousand dollars, which he got.

“Then we wasted it all again,” he said. “Because we still didn’t know what we were doing.” Gradually, Jones came to see that businesses weren’t going to locate in Oakland because some well-meaning nonprofit asked them to. Instead of doing freelance economic-development work, he began to think that he should focus his efforts on public policy.

In February, 2007, Nancy Pelosi, who had recently become Speaker of the House, scheduled a meeting in San Francisco to discuss measures to combat climate change. Jones was one of forty or so people who were invited to attend. A few days before the session, he received an e-mail about the agenda. Everyone, it said, would be given a chance to briefly introduce himself. “It was like capital-letters ‘briefly,’ bold, italics, underlined—‘briefly’ introduce yourself,” he recalled.

At the meeting, Jones was seated near Pelosi, and he was the first person asked to speak. “My introduction was ‘My name is Van Jones. I’m from the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights. We work to get kids out of jail and into jobs,’ ” he said. “I figured, that’s pretty good. It would be very hard to get more brief than that. Then the next person says, ‘Madame Speaker,’ and I think, I kind of left that part out. That’s not so good. He got me. That’s probably better. And then he just starts talking and talking. The guy talks for two or three minutes. I’m looking around like, this guy can’t read or something. And then the next person talks for five minutes and each person is talking longer and longer, and by the time we get back around the meeting’s over.” Jones could see that Pelosi had a sheet of paper in front of her with all the attendees’ names listed on it. Next to every name except one, she had taken copious notes. Next to his name, the sheet was blank.

“I knew I had to do something to get the room back,” Jones told me. Pelosi said that they had to leave for a press conference. Were there any last questions? Jones raised his hand. “I said, ‘My question is: Will you say four words at the press conference?’ And she just kind of looked at me. So of course at this point everybody in the room started to lean away from me.

“I said, ‘If you say these four words, I guarantee you that you’ll keep the Democratic majority in the House for the next twenty years. If you say these four words, you’ll expand the coalition around global warming in a way that nobody even thinks is possible. If you say these four words, you’ll give help and hope to people who haven’t had any for a long time.’ Finally, she said, ‘Well, what are the four words?’ I said, ‘Clean Energy Jobs Bill.’ ”

A little while later, at the press conference, Pelosi called Jones up to the microphone. “We’ll say it together,” she said. “Clean Energy Jobs Bill!”

From that point, the Clean Energy Jobs Bill progressed much along the lines of, as Jones put it to me, “an after-school special.” Jones had had only a vague idea what the four words meant; Pelosi’s interest inspired a rush to get legislation drafted. In June, 2007, a measure authorizing the U.S. Department of Labor to spend a hundred and twenty-five million dollars to train workers for green jobs was introduced in the House. The bill, now called the Green Jobs Act, provided targeted funds for low-income trainees. A few months later, the bill was incorporated into a much larger piece of legislation, the Energy Independence and Security Act, and was approved by Congress and signed into law by President Bush in December, 2007. Around this time, Jones left the Ella Baker Center to found Green for All. The organization now has a staff of twenty-five and an annual budget of four million dollars.

Since Pelosi’s meeting, the notion of green jobs has become a commonplace. Not only did it keep coming up in last year’s campaign but it has been embraced by a growing number of unions (in December, the Service Employees International Union announced that it was joining a coalition of labor and environmental groups called the Blue Green Alliance), by the heads of many major corporations, and by an ever-expanding list of politicians. Obama has said that as President he wants to generate five million such jobs, and his stimulus package is expected to contain billions of dollars for this purpose.

Still, the mechanics of creating green jobs—or even what jobs should qualify for the title—have yet to be worked out. At the same time that the President-elect has said that he wants to promote “green” economic growth, much—perhaps most—of the stimulus package is likely to be devoted to projects, like highway expansion, that will have precisely the opposite effect. In the days that I followed Jones around, I heard several people who ran training programs in green professions

complain that once their students had graduated they couldn't find work. (Jones's response was that they ought to lobby for more federal support.) And though Congress approved the Green Jobs Act, no money for job training has been appropriated.

Meanwhile, the basic premise of Jones's appeal—that combatting global warming is a good way to lift people out of poverty—is very much open to debate. Economists generally agree that the key to addressing climate change is to raise the cost of burning fossil fuels, either directly, through a carbon tax, or indirectly, through a cap-and-trade program. Low-income families are the ones that would be hardest hit by such a cost increase. They could be compensated through some kind of rebate, or a cut in other taxes; it's been proposed, for example, that revenues from a carbon tax could be used to reduce the payroll tax. But it's not at all clear that the number of jobs created by, say, an expanding solar industry would be greater than the number lost through, say, a shrinking coal-mining industry. Nor is it clear that a green economy would be any better at providing work for the chronically unemployed than our present, "gray" economy has been.

When I presented Jones's arguments to Robert Stavins, a professor of business and government at Harvard who studies the economics of environmental regulation, he offered the following analogy: "Let's say I want to have a dinner party. It's important that I cook dinner, and I'd also like to take a shower before the guests arrive. You might think, Well, it would be really efficient for me to cook dinner in the shower. But it turns out that if I try that I'm not going to get very clean and it's not going to be a very good dinner. And that is an illustration of the fact that it is not always best to try to address two challenges with what in the policy world we call a single-policy instrument."

Matthew Kahn, an economics professor at U.C.L.A.'s Institute of the Environment, noted that public-works programs have a history of inefficiency. Why would an environmentally oriented public-works program be any different? "How do we make sure this isn't just a giant green boondoggle?" he asked.

Jones's response to such critiques is, in effect, to do them one better. Yes, it may be difficult to address climate change and poverty at the same time, he says, but it's even harder to do so separately. "You've got to have a holistic, integrated set of solutions or you're going to wind up with half your energy being used up to fight 'Drill, baby, drill!' " he told me. "People say, 'Oh, we'll take a shortcut.' Well, those shortcuts are a lot longer than they look."

"I know as much as anybody what a long walk this is," he said at another point. "We have a long way to go. You can pass all the bills you want to; you can appropriate all the bills you want to. You can even start retrofitting buildings. But if I go there and the people who are doing the retrofits are just the people who used to have jobs anyway, and they're mostly all one color and mostly all one kind of people, then I'm not going to be satisfied. So I'm going to be the last person in America who's happy. Everybody's going to win before I do."

The day after Jones appeared at the Center for American Progress, he flew to Boston for a conference known as Greenbuild. On the way, he stopped at Boston's city hall for a meeting with Mayor Thomas Menino, and then at a job-training agency that was offering a fourteen-week course in hazardous-waste remediation. Several students in the course had copies of Jones's book open in front of them; one, I noticed, had highlighted practically every passage in bright yellow. The student, Luis Santos, told me that he had done time, and was looking for a career that would allow him to make a positive contribution. "This man is great," he said of Jones.

“Van is the Martin Luther King of the green-jobs movement,” the agency’s executive director, Gary Kaplan, said. “You need a leader who convinces people we’ve just got to do this, because there are always going to be a lot of obstacles.”

By the time Jones got to Greenbuild, at the Boston Convention and Exhibition Center, it was lunchtime. Crowds of people were milling around the cavernous exhibition hall, eating sandwiches and peering at displays of water-saving toilets, recyclable carpets, soybean-based insulation, low-energy lighting, and counters made of reused concrete. Greenbuild, which is held every year in a different city, is part trade show, part educational seminar; the program included sessions on straw-bale design, building-integrated wind turbines, and “high-performance renovations.” Jones was ushered into a meeting room where nearly a thousand people—architects, engineers, construction managers, city planners—had gathered to hear him.

Jones started out by speaking about the election—“It’s not that we have a President who’s black; it’s that for the first time we have a President who’s green”—and soon moved on to the idea of a revolving-loan fund to retrofit buildings.

“It may be very hard for many of you to build all the things you want to,” he said. “We may not be able to build anything, but we can rebuild everything. And you have knowledge. You have the wisdom to take the biggest bite out of carbon and to fuel the job creation that we need.”

He went on, “If we come together and get this done, we will have achieved something quite extraordinary. We will have achieved something greater than Barack Obama has. What gave him the audacity of hope? You did. Even when the government wasn’t interested in green buildings, even when your local city council didn’t know what you were talking about, you had the audacity to keep pushing anyway, to keep raising standards anyway, to keep trying to make a difference anyway. He saw that audacity in *you*.”

After the speech, the audience rose to its feet, clapping. As Jones left the hall, dozens of people trailed after him, all wanting to talk. _