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Reclaiming the Spirit of Reclamation

It is astounding to me, watching the divided society we live in, that an earlier society situated on the same land could have come together to build Hoover, Glen Canyon, Flaming Gorge, and scores of other major dams. We today are like barbarians left with something a higher order, or at least a more organized and cohesive society, built. The society that built those machines agreed on what they were for, and put them to work to produce food, fiber, and electricity and water for urban areas, with flat-water recreation thrown in.

Now, decades later, we have 50 ideas about what they are for. Some of us want them to be used exclusively for their original purposes. But others want them to be used to create floods to build beaches and to provide water for rafters, raptors, or fish that are barely hanging onto their changed environments. And always there is the tug of war between rural uses of water and urban uses of water. That rural-urban conflict does not include only the diversion of water away from irrigation and into cities' water treatment plants; this conflict also includes the environmental uses of water.

So, the Reclamation Era, which opened with the last century and declined well before it had ended, is both a rebuke and a challenge to us: a rebuke for being so quarrelsome, without even having the excuse of being liquored up, and a challenge to come together and use these machines to serve our collective needs.

We are at the moment like the tribe in the movie *The Gods Must Be Crazy*. The tribe discovered a Coca Cola bottle, which they found endlessly useful—so useful that they fell to quarreling with each other over how to use it and who was to use it. Should it be a container to carry water? To store grain? To pound stakes in the ground?

We have found dozens of wonderful Coke bottles, left to us by a civilization that has all but disappeared, and whose vision and drive have certainly disappeared. We are fighting each other over those bottles. In case you didn't see the movie, at its end, the tribe's leader took the bottle, traveled a long way to a city, and returned this gift to whence it had come.

There are those who suggest that we, too, return the gift, which they see as a curse: that we breach the dams and let the rivers run

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through them. The most organized, cohesive, and middle-of-the-road of these groups, the Glen Canyon Institute, has this as a mission statement: "The Glen Canyon Institute's mission is to provide leadership toward restoration of a free-flowing Colorado River through Glen Canyon and Grand Canyon."

So far as I can tell from its web site, the keeper of the traditional vision, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, has this for a mission statement:

Through leadership, use of technical expertise, efficient operations, responsive customer services and the creativity of its employees, Reclamation continues to manage, develop, and protect the water resources of the West for economic, social, and environmental purposes. Over the past 95 years, the Reclamation program has emphasized development of safe and dependable water supplies and hydropower to foster settlement and economic growth in the West.

Reclamation will continue to increase productivity to carry out its mission more efficiently. This requires Reclamation to provide the opportunity and means for its employees to excel in their work, thereby ensuring that Reclamation can effectively and efficiently carry out its mission and provide high quality customer services at the lowest possible cost. Reclamation intends to achieve a diverse workforce to promote excellence, innovation and responsiveness to the needs of our various constituencies.

The Glen Canyon Institute may or may not succeed in implementing its audacious vision, but there is no doubt what its vision is. By comparison, it is clear that the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation has no vision.

In a few places, dams have been dismantled or steps toward such dismantling are well underway, as in Olympic National Park on the Elwha River in the State of Washington. I don't want to take sides on the question of wholesale dismantling of dams, because I don't think that's the core issue. I don't think the West would become a wonderful place if all of our dams disappeared tomorrow. Nor do I think our world would collapse. What we are up against is how to change our Hatfield and McCoy approach to water matters. Our challenge is how to achieve the unity of purpose that allowed the Reclamation Era to be an era.

I don't like everything the Reclamation Era achieved. I think it overshot, but I do admire its unity. I do admire the fact that the people of that time came together with a purpose they believed in, and they did it democratically, for that time. The Reclamation Era, I believe, was not a product of despotic forces. I think there was as much democracy in

Reclamation as we can reasonably expect in this world. I think the evidence of that democracy came in the 1960s and 1970s, when the building of dams in places that the nation held sacred—like Dinosaur National Monument and the Grand Canyon—was stopped. The nation's values changed, and dam building was stopped even though the top levels of government and most organized economic interests wanted to continue building dams.

The trouble is, we stopped Reclamation without replacing its vision with another. We were against, but we were not clearly for something. What was Reclamation's vision? Initially, it was an agrarian, Jeffersonian vision: to make the desert bloom by putting water and tens of thousands of small farmers on the land. In places like the west-central Colorado valleys where I live, that vision can still be seen in place today. It is what makes our areas special, I believe.

But far more typical is a place like California's Imperial Valley, which uses something like three million acre-feet of water a year to raise a huge percentage of the nation's vegetables, as well as huge quantities of sudan grass, alfalfa, and cotton. The Imperial Valley is being squeezed today, like a reluctant sponge, as California tries to figure out how to water its 33 million people while skinning down to its 4.4 million acre-foot/year allowance out of the Colorado River.

Imperial Valley agriculture has created as close to a feudal society as you can find in the United States today. The valley has a few large growers, tens of thousands of workers, 25 percent of its population living under the poverty level, and many, many workers migrating daily from the Mexican city of Mexicali to work in the fields. This poverty, these immense land holdings, and the drying up of the Colorado River Delta are all a result of the Reclamation vision gone awry. We built the Hoover Dam and the All American Canal so that the people who produce our food can live as if they were vassals of some knight in England or France. The desert is blooming in the Imperial Valley, but the society is not.

Reclamation completely abandoned the vision of small farmers creating a Jeffersonian society in the West after World War II. That vision was replaced by a vision of growth, progress, and technological mastery. It is the vision that is at work in Southern California as that region tries to meet its Colorado River Compact quota. California and the entire seven-state basin are proceeding as if they face only a technical problem of reallocating water. I think we face a deep social problem, which is easiest to express by pointing out that we have never replaced the lost visions of making the desert bloom, settling small farmers on the land, and, finally, creating growth and progress.

What we have today, if we have anything, is the growth and progress vision: a vision of a smoothly running, ever-growing machine. I think people expect more from their society and even from their government than simply efficiency. America is a wonderful place because, periodically, we think and dream with large, impractical strokes. If we did not do this, we could not have built the Hoover Dam in the midst of the Great Depression. We could not have built Glen Canyon Dam, Flaming Gorge, or Blue Mesa. The West had a vision for itself, and the nation bought into that vision.

But that vision has played itself out, and we are living among monuments whose technical workings we understand, but whose spirit we do not understand. And so we divide into different camps: those who still want to keep the deserts and mountain valleys blooming, those who want to divert those waters to metropolitan areas to grow houses and malls, and those who want to tear down the dams and make the rivers live again.

I would like to see us recapture the Reclamation Era not by building more dams—where would we put them? and what would we put in them?—but by recapturing the spirit of Reclamation, a vision that would unite us in pursuit of a more fulfilling future. Much as I admire the simplicity of the mission statement of the Glen Canyon Institute—to breach Glen Canyon Dam—I don't think it is a sufficient vision for society. We need and deserve more.

The future will require the merging of two large forces: environmentalism, which I define as a desire for a more natural and less paved world, and sprawl, which accepts as inevitable a paved world but which demands a bit of fenced and private green space within that paved world. Both are intent on natural space, but they are after that space in different sizes.

The immediate tragedy—and you can see it here in the Gunnison area—is that caught between these two pincers are people who depend on large expanses of cheap land: ranchers, loggers, farmers, oil and gas drillers, and miners. They are people who depend on nature for their livings, people who experience nature in a much different way than environmentalists or suburbanites.

I should say here that if we Americans had a lick of sense we would be perfectly happy with our material state, happy with our politics, and we would thank the Lord each day that we live here and not elsewhere. We would bless our dams and dammed rivers, and we would bless our undammed rivers, and we would kiss our children and relax and cut our work weeks to ten hours or so.

But we don't have a lick of sense; I know I don't. We live as if saber tooth tigers were still at our heels, and adrenaline still courses into

our systems at the slightest provocation. Individually and as a society we are addicted to adrenaline, so we will keep on churning. We will keep busy. We will keep organizing. We cannot stop. I accept that. The only question is, in what direction should we try to direct our churning?

At my age, and at this point in my career, I feel like Nez Perce Chief Joseph: "I am tired of fighting....From where the sun now stands, I will fight no more...."

What I want instead of fighting are colleagues and allies, especially if they look at the world very differently. I am no longer a very good ideologue. I don't believe in large, overarching ideas or in the charismatic characters who preach those ideas. I don't believe in big technological fixes. I don't believe wind energy, or the hydrogen economy, or the fuel cell, or even the dismantling of dams will save us.

I believe instead in pragmatism. I believe in working away at a knot in many different ways, with many different hands and minds and approaches, until it finally unravels. I want to be involved with people who have the patience and temperament to work away at the many knots that confront the western United States: the cattle-and-public land knot, the dam and rivers knot, the logging and old growth forest knot. Those are my people. Those are my soul mates.

Chief Joseph came to his decision to fight no more out of honorable defeat. My war was against rural, extractive uses of the Interior West. I ran an environmental newspaper, and, for most of the 1980s, I ran that newspaper as if only the environmental movement could save the West from ranching, mining, logging, and dam building. I consider that we, the green folks, have won that war. After all, we live in a state and in a region where urban uses now trump rural uses everywhere, including the most remote county.

But for me at least, the victory is proving hollow, for much of what I loved about the West was rural in nature. This isn't a new conclusion. For much of the 1990s, I tried to run the newspaper as a vehicle of reform rather than of revolution. I became especially attached to the idea that ranching, properly done, could lead the way to a New West, and I have been appalled for years at the efforts some of my fellow environmentalists make to drive ranchers off the public land.

Where did this war within the West come from? I can describe it in terms of a personal evolution. We city people came here out of an alienation with how urban America was being run. We idealized the rural West, and we ran head on into the people who were living here and who did not idealize the rural West. They understood it was a great place to live. But they knew it was also a tough place to make a living, and that it was a left-behind part of America, with everything stacked against it. They knew the rural West was living off the crumbs of the

American economy, producing commodities at rock-bottom prices for relatively well-off city people.

Of course, they were enraged when the newcomers, and city people working through national environmental groups, interfered with the production of those commodities, and also interfered with the subsidies that larger economy chose to send to the rural West. Led politically by the environmental movement, and squeezed economically by free trade, by a reaction against subsidies and regulation, and by the increasing price of land and labor in rural areas, natural-resource based economies have come under increasing pressures.

What does this have to do with Reclamation? We should see Reclamation as a spirit rather than as a set of dams. The West came together back then—it buried enough of its differences to get a job done. Unless we can now adopt that spirit, we will be locked in endless warfare. Nothing will work well, and those things we care about, the land, the wildlife, the economy, and the things a healthy economy enables us to do, will all deteriorate.

The following books are helpful in understanding the spirit, if not the purpose, of the Reclamation Era:

High and Dry: The Texas-New Mexico Struggle for the Pecos River, by Emlen Hall. A University of New Mexico law professor describes how Reclamation really works in the Southwest.

Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas, and *The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy's View of History*, by Isaiah Berlin. What does a now-dead Oxford philosopher have to tell us about the West? Plenty. Berlin is the apostle of a society that uses seemingly clashing ideas to find a workable middle.

Cadillac Desert, by Marc Reisner. A wonderful, from-the-heart book about the failures of reclamation. The wonderful thing about Reisner is that he went on to work with rice farmers and others to enhance rural economies. His death was a tragedy, for he was that rarity: a thinker and activist capable of growth.

Big Trouble: A Murder in a Small Western Town Sets off a Struggle for the Soul of America, by J. Anthony Lukas. If you like your history to be well plotted, this story of the murder of the former governor of Idaho, around 1900, is for you.