



Spring 2005

Water and American Government: The Reclamation Bureau, National Water Policy, and the West, 1902-1935, by Donald J. Pisani

John Walton

Recommended Citation

John Walton, *Water and American Government: The Reclamation Bureau, National Water Policy, and the West, 1902-1935*, by Donald J. Pisani, 45 Nat. Resources J. 509 (2005).

Available at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nrj/vol45/iss2/12>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Law Journals at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Natural Resources Journal by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu, lsloane@salud.unm.edu, sahrk@unm.edu.

settlements are reached and barristers depart. From a legal standpoint, Fortun's work calls into question normative perspectives of jurisprudence and traditional forms of conflicts of law theory. Scholars of law and society, as well as those of the critical schools of jurisprudence, may find Fortun's work of interest.

Key ethnographic questions permeate throughout *Advocacy After Bhopal*, with Fortun asking the reader to consider what double binds called advocates to speak, and how advocates strategized and developed their own roles in dealing with the Bhopal Disaster (p.21). In many ways, Fortun's work demonstrates how societal symbols, norms, and values can be greatly influenced during the various stages of a global tragedy. Through examining the Bhopal Disaster from various levels of concept and description, Fortun has created very interesting and thought-provoking work in the emergent area of disaster studies and discourse.

Joseph F. St. Cyr, M.P.A., J.D.
Director
International Society for Justice & Safety Research
Winter Park, Fla.

Water and American Government: The Reclamation Bureau, National Water Policy, and the West, 1902-1935. By Donald J. Pisani. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press. 2002. Pp. xviii, 394. \$49.95. (This review copyrighted by the American Historical Association. Reprinted with permission.)

This volume is the second in a series of three by Donald J. Pisani that began with *To Reclaim a Divided West: Water, Law, and Public Policy, 1848-1902* (1992); the author plans a concluding work taking the story from the New Deal to the 1980s. As the titles and dates suggest, Pisani has undertaken the most comprehensive survey to date of water policy in the United States. Focusing on the reclamation era, this volume is informative, painstaking, firmly rooted in archival sources, by turns both analytical and descriptive: in short, altogether reliable. It is a book for specialists in the field of water policy, yet copious detail is also relieved by engaging case study comparisons and cogent political interpretations. Underpinning the whole is a bold demonstration of how an ideologically inspired and politically constructed policy regime results in abject failure judged by standards of equity and efficiency.

Prevailing scholarship interprets federal reclamation and related programs for western development at the turn of the twentieth century as exemplars of a new and progressive era dedicated to administrative reform and personified in Teddy Roosevelt. Pisani demurs. "The thesis of this book is simple. Historians have portrayed federal reclamation as a

sharp break with the past—as a symbol of modernization But it makes more sense to see the Reclamation Act of 1902 and the events that followed as evidence of the persistence of ‘frontier America’...the nineteenth-century vision of an America built on the striving of autonomous individuals, the agricultural model of 1800 or 1850” (p.xi). Reclamation policy envisioned a set of infrastructure works that would help to resettle on small farms a growing urban immigrant population, convert the arid West into economically productive homesteads, civilize the Indians, and imbue settlers with imagined rural virtues. Reclamation was recommended as the solution to a variety of America’s social problems (slums and tenements, wage slavery, political radicalism) by “Back to the Land” and “Homecroft” movements whose reform ideals were publicized in the official *Reclamation Record*. Behind such ideological justification, however, lurked another diverse set of political motivations that drove policy and administration: western competition for federal spending on water works to match eastern investment in ports and canals; Roosevelt’s plan to capture the new and growing western states for the Republican Party; a professional movement of “new engineers” ready to bring technical solutions to the problems of government; and spectators intent on grabbing up improved government land to hold, lease to a growing class of tenants, and resell for a publicly subsidized profit. The Reclamation Service embodied a welter of conflicting agendas, a complex blend of planning idealism, political calculation, and profit motive.

How, then, did federal reclamation become simultaneously “the boldest public-works scheme ever undertaken in the United States [and] a failed dream” (p. xvi)? Pisani’s book develops compelling answers to this question. The Reclamation Act itself was flawed. Political considerations written into the law required that 51 percent of the funds for reclamation works raised through the sale of public lands in a given state be spent in the same state, whether or not cost-effective projects existed there. Dams and canals were distributed as patronage. Government engineers were compromised in the ability to select projects on technical grounds. No soil analyses were performed, for example, to determine whether land that would be irrigated had the potential to support commercial crops. Once undertaken, projects proved far more costly than originally estimated, and the prescribed means for recovering costs (beneficiary payments, more land sales, taxes on improved land) failed to meet expectations. Small farmers required material support in addition to regional irrigation systems: “laterals” to feed their fields, farm roads, market centers, and technical assistance. Few succeeded owing simply to their inclusion within the ambit of reclamation works. Indeed, ideological justifications aside, federal reclamation benefited

very few of the landless and poor. It did stimulate land speculation, driving up prices where irrigation combined with fertile soil and market access and generally leading to greater concentration of ownership. When bestowed on Indian reservations, reclamation improved lands that were subsequently sold to whites while increasing the costs and reducing the size of Indian holdings. In the end, government works effectively reclaimed a relatively small amount of land by contrast to the efforts of private land, power, and canal companies. By the 1920s, costly reclamation projects moved ahead in the West despite a growing surplus of arable land in other regions. When the depression arrived, Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal administration recast the Reclamation Service as an unabashed jobs program and showcased projects like Boulder Dam as symbols of hope.

Pisani draws from this experience a number of lessons about the consequences of ill-considered efforts to dominate nature, promote social engineering, or maintain centralized control over public policies that rely on local conditions and collaboration. He ends by drawing a provocative parallel between his study and James C. Scott's *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (1998), quoting Scott to the effect that both are "making a case against an imperial or hegemonic planning mentality that excludes the necessary role of local knowledge and know-how" (p.295). In abundant detail necessarily excluded from this short review, Pisani identifies a good deal of local knowledge among Indians, dirt farmers, canal diggers, dam builders, and the occasional clear-eyed legislator that might have informed an alternative history.

John Walton
University of California, Davis

Floods, Droughts, and Climate Change. By Michael Collier & Robert H. Webb. The University of Arizona Press, 2002. 160 pp. \$17.95 paper.

Floods, Droughts, and Climate Change, by Michael Collier and Robert H. Webb, offers an overview of the global environmental forces underlying and affecting weather's daily mechanisms. Until relatively recently in history, humans had generally perceived only the immediate patterns of weather without appreciating such slower-moving and less detectable long-term processes as oceanic and atmospheric currents or shifting land masses. In this enlightening book, the authors blend natural and human history, meteorology, geology, and climatology to offer an accessible introduction to these enigmatic climate patterns and the imperceptible forces that cause them.

The authors demonstrate that nature's dramatic events are often related and result from larger, hidden processes. Floods and droughts,